**Easter 5, Year A**

May 18, 2014

John 14:1-14 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”*

Today’s Gospel is a tremendously comforting passage which has been used at funerals and memorial services down through the centuries – it was the Gospel reading Deeann chose for her mother’s service this past week. And rightly so, for in these words, Jesus reassures his disciples as they anticipate their own grief at his leaving them. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

The words exude love and comfort and acceptance. The thought of Jesus returning and taking us into God’s own home, close to God’s heart, where there are plenty of rooms for everyone, is immensely powerful and encouraging! The passage goes on, as Jesus continues:

“And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

Jesus reassures Thomas in his doubts; and in the *next* verses he reassures *Philip* in *his* uncertainty. This whole Gospel passage exudes comfort and reassurance.

But some Christians have taken one-half of one verse from our Gospel passage out of context, and thereby have turned the whole passage into a passage, not of comfort and reassurance, but of threatened exclusion. They have taken “Nobody comes to the Father except through me” and have applied it – not to Jesus’ closest disciples, to whom Jesus is actually speaking – but rather to people who have never heard of Jesus, or who are of another religion. And so the question becomes, as David Lose so aptly puts it, “Is this passage a promise or a threat?”

Unfortunately, some Christians have taken the passage as a threat. They focus not on its grace and comfort, but instead on that word “except”. As Richard Rohr says, we humans are so quick to say, in response to the Gospel (and Life as a whole), “Yes, but…” rather than “Yes, and…”. “No one comes to the Father **except** through me” has been variously interpreted to mean, “You’re going to hell if you don’t get baptized (and baptized in the right way, at the right age). “Except through me” has been interpreted to mean “except through my body and blood”; therefore one can’t get to the Father except through the sacraments (and only sacraments that our particular group considers valid, of course). It has been interpreted to mean “except through the body of Christ, the Church”; therefore if you are not a member of the right church, or don’t attend church, you don’t make the cut. It has been interpreted to mean, “except through giving your life to Christ” or “accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior”, or reciting some formula, or believing the right doctrine. And before we know it, the whole passage changes from comforting promise to frightening threat.

“I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” perhaps simply means that Jesus and the Father are so linked together that it is impossible to come to the Father and not go through Jesus. “You’ve seen me, so you have seen the Father,” Jesus reassures his disciples. “So do not let your hearts be troubled!”

Edward Bouverie Pusey, the Oxford scholar and priest who led the 19th-Century revival in the Church of England called the Oxford Movement, made this comment on Jesus’ statement, “I am the truth”:

I am the truth. The title absolutely excludes the existence of any other truth, except what [Jesus] is. But, then, since this title, “***The*** Truth”, **ex**cludes the being of any *other* truth, it **in**cludes and claims all [genuine] truths for His own. All scattered rays of truth, ***wherever*** they are found, are from Him.” (quoted in *Synthesis*, 1996, p.2)

Following Pusey’s reasoning, any real, genuine truth is part of THE Truth, and therefore is identical to that Truth found in Jesus. Any real truth which the Jews or Muslims possess, any genuine truth which the agnostic possesses, must be found in Christ, since he is the only Truth.

Professor Alexander McKelway notes that Jesus, the Good Shepherd of his sheep, said: “And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold” (John 10:16), and again, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21-23). McKelway writes:

Our creeds and confessions give us no “hold” on Jesus. In fact, we do not possess Jesus Christ, he possesses us—and *others unknown to us*. What can Jesus’ reference to “other sheep” mean but that the picture of him available in the New Testament does not foreclose other possibilities of encountering “the Word made flesh,” and that *our perceptions* of Christ do not delimit faith? … [Jesus] turns up in unexpected places. “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee to drink?’ ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’.” (Mt 25:39,40). We can never discount the possibility that the Christ can and will be known in ways quite different from our own. (*source lost*)

When a Hindu prays, does “our” God listen? When a Muslim prays, does the Risen Christ listen? Does God close his ears to the prayers of **any** of his children?

Those of you who attended our Lenten Studies will remember what Billy Graham said when he was interviewed by Hour of Power and Crystal Cathedral pastor Robert Schuller in 1997. Graham said: “I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, *whether they’re conscious of it or not*, they’re members of the Body of Christ. …

‘[God is] calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the nonbelieving world, they are members of the Body of Christ, because they’ve been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they’re going to be with us in heaven.” (quoted in *THE LOVE WINS COMPANION, A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*, Rob Bell, edited by David Vanderveen, Chapter 1. Portions can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= TNCnxA91fHE)

Don’t misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that following in the Way, the Truth, and the Life is easy. Look what it did to Jesus – and to Stephen, in our *first* reading today! Walking in the Way is difficult; living in Truth at all times requires a great sacrifice of ego self, false self, and this is painful. What I am saying is that Jesus’ statement, “No one comes to the Father except through me” does not exclude, out of hand, seekers of Truth and Life who may never have heard of Jesus. There are seven “I AM” statements which Jesus makes in John’s Gospel. If this one – I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life – were not gracious, life-giving, and inclusive, then it would be totally different from all the other six. I believe that this is not the case.

In this passage, Jesus is saying farewell to his closest followers, and they are, understandably, upset, frightened and confused. He wants to comfort them. Are they afraid that they don’t know the way? Jesus tells them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. I AM the Way.” Are they still uncertain about the character and identity of God the Father? Jesus tells them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. If you have seen me (and you have), you have seen the Father.”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about a doctrine, a philosophy, or a creed; it is about a person. Jesus did NOT say, “I *point out* to you the way, I *teach* you the truth, and I *show* you life”; rather, he said “I **am** the way, the truth, and the life.” “Believe in God, believe also in me.” He does **not** tell us to believe *about* God, but to believe *in* God. To believe *in* Christ requires more than simple intellectual assent; it requires incorporating his life into our lives – and I, along with Billy Graham, believe that living into the life of Christ can be done even if a person has never heard of Jesus. It is not a creed or a set of rules he gives us; it is his life. When His disciples Thomas and Philip ask him to show them the way to the Father, or to tell them the truth of the Father, can we not detect the note of hurt in Jesus’ voice? “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me...? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?”

Is it not the same mistake *we* make, over and over again? We want to be shown “the way” in an impersonal, conceptual sense: we want the path pointed out, printed off from Google Maps, or programmed into our GPS. We want the truth given to us in writing, in black and white – not in flesh and blood. We want the sure-fire, 100% guaranteed formulaic secret of life revealed to us.

And Jesus tells us that we are looking in the wrong place. The Way, the Truth, the Life has poured out his life for the whole world, and returns to take us into his Father’s house of abundant rooms, that where he is, we might be also.

AMEN