

Easter 5, Year A

May 14, 2017

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 that John Rohde chose for Jocie’s memorial service, and it is the Gospel reading John’s family chose for John’s service yesterday. It is eminently appropriate for a memorial service, 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.

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, taken from Jesus' farewell address to his disciples, exudes comfort and reassurance.

But some Christians have taken one-half of one verse from this comforting Gospel passage out of context, with the result that they have turned the whole passage into a statement, 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 as a reassurance to Jesus' closest disciples, to whom Jesus is actually speaking – but rather they have applied it to people who have never heard of Jesus, or who are of another religion. Jesus is **not** speaking to people of another religion; he is speaking to his closest friends and disciples. (Regarding Jesus' attitude toward those of other religions, we know from recent Sunday Gospel readings that Jesus holds up people of the hated Samaritan religion as exemplary – both in the story of the Good Samaritan *and* in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. And of a Roman centurion, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith [as this pagan centurion].")¹ And so the question becomes, as Professor David Lose so aptly puts it, "Is this passage a promise or a threat?"²

Some Christians have taken it as a threat. They focus not on its grace and comfort and reassurance, but instead on that single word "except." "No one comes to the Father **except** through me" has been interpreted to mean, "You're going to hell if you don't get baptized (**and** your baptism *must* be performed in the right way, at the right age). "Except through me" has also 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 giving your life to Jesus" or "accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior", or reciting the "Sinner's Prayer" or some other formula, or believing the right doctrine. When I moved to Plainview, Texas and was looking for a house to buy, my Real Estate agent was a Southern Baptist deacon. He knew I was an Episcopal priest, a Christian minister, and yet he tried his hardest to "save" me, since he didn't think Episcopalians were saved. We humans are experts and making criteria regarding who is "saved" and who is not.

"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 if a person encounters God she has encountered Jesus, whether she knows it or not.

Professor Alexander McKelway notes that Jesus, the Good Shepherd of his sheep (as we heard in last week's Gospel), 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 God’s children, of whatever religion? Jesus does not say, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places, but only for Christians – and only particular *kinds* of Christians, at that!”

Many of you have heard me quote the words of Billy Graham from an interview with Crystal Cathedral pastor Robert Schuller in 1997. Billy 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.”³

In one of his sermons, Pope Francis said, “The Lord has redeemed all of us, **all** of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ... Even the atheists. Everyone!”⁴ Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner, reflecting on Jesus’ statement, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” writes: “[Jesus] didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could ‘come to the Father.’ He said that it was only by... living, participating in, being caught up by, the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.

“Thus it is possible to be on Christ’s way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God though maybe you don’t even believe in God.”⁵

If Billy Graham, Pope Francis, and Frederick Buechner believe that redemption does NOT depend on being a Christian, why would **we** interpret this passage as exclusionary?

St. John wrote: “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”⁶ Do not atheists and Muslims love? And therefore, are they not “born of God and know God,” who **is** Love?⁷ Maybe “through me” means “through love”?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about a doctrine, a philosophy, or a creed; it is about our entering into the flow of Divine Love between Jesus, His Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit – a love revealed supremely on the cross. Jesus did NOT tell us to believe *about* God, but to believe *in* God. To believe (or better translated, to **trust**) *in* Christ requires more than simple intellectual assent; it requires incorporating *his* life into *our* lives – and I, along with Billy Graham, Pope Francis, Frederick Buechner and many others – believe that living into the Life and Love of the eternal Christ can be done even if a person has never heard of Jesus.

But you and I live so much in our heads; so we, like Thomas and Philip, 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 and spirit. We want the sure-fire, 100% guaranteed formulaic secret of life revealed to us, so that we can follow it – without having to be, ourselves, transformed.

Jesus tells us that we are looking in the wrong place. The Way, the Truth, the Life, the Eternal Word which emptied himself into human form and poured out his life for the whole world calls us into the flow of the Life and Love shared between himself, his Father, and the Holy Spirit. When we enter that divine, Trinitarian flow, whether we know it or not, we are passing through Jesus to the Father. I think that’s what Jesus means when he says, “No one comes to the Father but through me.”

AMEN

¹ *Matthew 8:10*

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3218>

³ 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>

4 From a sermon in May of 2013 at the chapel of the Domus Santa Marta
<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2013/05/29/187009384/Pope-Francis-Even-Atheists-Can-Be-Redeemed>

5 originally published in *Wishful Thinking* then later in *Listening to Your Life* and also in *Beyond Words*.

6 *1 John 4:7*

7 *1 John 4:8*