

May 14, 2017

(John 14: 1 - 14)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here is an old joke, but it is still true.

A man died and was ushered into heaven, which appeared to be an enormous house. An angel began to escort him down a long hallway past "many rooms". "What is in that room?" the man asked, pointing to a very somber-looking group of people chanting a Gregorian Mass. "That is the Roman Catholic room," said the angel. "Very high church." "What's in that room?" the man asked, pointing to a group of half-naked dancers gyrating their hips and occasionally shrieking out loud. "That's the Balinese group," said the angel. "Very lively." "What's in that room?" asked the man, pointing to a group of bald-headed people meditating to the sound of an enormous gong. "That's the Zen group," said the angel. "Very quiet. You would hardly know they were here." Then the angel stopped the man, as they were about to round a corner. "Now, when we get to the next room," said the angel, "I would appreciate it if you would tiptoe past. We must not make any sound." "Why is that?" asked the man. "Because in that room there's a bunch of very fundamentalist Christians; and they think they are the only ones here."

If you ever wanted a text with which to hit your unbelieving friends over the head, or that will help you make a few Muslims or Jews or Hindus feel bad, have I got one for you.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

"I am the way. Me. You want to get to heaven? You do it through me. Are we clear?!"

Is not the way that we have heard that scripture interpreted? Is not that the way the world hears us?

Now, right at the start, this very familiar passage was probably meant to bring a note of comfort to a group of Christians struggling to maintain their identity around the close of the first century. The author, the apostle John, or more likely a disciple of John by the time this was written, was attempting to give courage and hope to people who found themselves in the midst of a very nasty fight with their Jewish neighbors in the synagogue. Their survival as a community of faith and their individual security and safety were very much on the line; because we all know what can happen to people of faith - any kind of faith - when that faith becomes passionate.

When that happens, only one thing matters: being true to the faith that is ours and resisting anything else. We cannot read a book like the gospel of John without keeping such circumstances in mind. John was writing to people who were frightened, vulnerable and defensive. When the world seems to be closing in, people do not seem to hear much of anything that is being said. Wondering what is going to happen to them.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. "Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's

house there are many dwelling places.... I go and prepare a place for you.”

Why did he say that? Because it is a comfort to know that the person you have bet your life on can be trusted. Because it is a source of deep relief to know that the people who have shared that faith with you will be taken care of in the end.

Do not we all want to know that there will be room for us one day? That we will not be left on the outside, or in the “dark”? That we know the way in?

To give John the benefit of the doubt, we should first assume that his aim was pastoral, an attempt to comfort those who were afraid. Those who needed assurance. That is all.

On the other hand, we have all heard arguments supporting this interpretation: "I am the way because your way is not! Jesus is the only way to God! It is our way or the highway, friend!" There is no question that is the sermon being preached somewhere today, even in Rome, NY.

Christians have used this text to say things just like that. Not to comfort one another, but to make people who are different feel on the outside. Those who do not believe in Jesus the way they do, or do not read the Bible the way they do, or do not talk about their faith the way they do. Using such a text, in other words, as a weapon...the kind of 'Christianity', in other words that gives Jesus a bad name. "There is only one way to heaven and that is our way!"

We hear in John's gospel that Jesus said these statements to people like Thomas and Philip and the rest of the disciples. People who said, "But we do not know the way... Show us the way." People who had been with him all along, who had watched his every move, heard every word and still did not get it. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

Well, Philip was...and is...not alone. Try as we might, Jesus is not as easy to get all figured out as Christians have often thought. And we, as a historical church, have been inclined to think we can wrap him up in a theological opinion or a three-point sermon....which other people better agree with if they know what is good for them. The truth is that, as the greater church for 2,000 years, we have been with him all this time and still do not get it. Do not get the way he is always moving on. Moving out to people who are on the outside. Encountering those who have not found the way in yet. Always leaving the ninety-nine in the fold and going out to endure all the indignities of the search just so that he can find the one that is lost.

"I am the way, the truth and the life." There is something comforting about this....that “the way” into wherever all of us need to be....the only way in....is a lot broader and wider....a lot more welcoming and expansive than any of us have ever imagined. Perhaps we should start imagining this passage in a different way. We are used to seeing this scripture like a funnel. A meat-grinder. A doorway on a railway car in Japan or in India...watching everyone get pushed and smushed through. Something to be squeezed through. Is Jesus a funnel, the only funnel, which we have to squeeze through to get to God? That is how many preach it.

Maybe we need to see this in a different way. Perhaps “I am the way, the truth and the life” means, “the

more, the merrier". That more is better than less. Does not that seem more plausible within the vast expanse of holy scripture's description of God's desire for us, love for us, forgiveness of us?

That as "Followers of the Way"...the name for the earliest Christians...in following the way and truth and life means being able to see and live into the inclusiveness of Jesus...the way he ministers to the sick, the dying, the most marginalized, the most oppressed. There is room enough for everyone!

How did he do it? How DOES he do it? How does he become the Christ, the Anointed One of God?

How do we, in turn, become the very Body of Christ?

"No one comes to the Father but except through me." How does that happen for anyone? How can we come to the Father in the way that he did and does?

I wonder aloud if it is really all not just as simple as following the way of Jesus through the wilderness, when he was tempted and encountered by distractions, but stayed on course to discern his ministry among all. That "following the way, and the truth, and the life" really, really means doing what he did out in that wilderness, and every day, every moment of his life, particularly at the point of desperate conflict in the Garden of Gethsamane and finally on the cross: That he surrendered himself, and gave himself and his life to God. That he said, over and over and over again, in effect and in prayer: "Dearest Father, I give myself to you. Make me the person you would have me be."

It is a gauntlet thrown down alright. His lead is the world thrown over on its head. His heart and his life became transformed by the power of God so as to become the very witness of God's desire, and design, and direction for all of creation. This way, this truth, this life were and are a challenge to every theology and religious practice that tries to exclude. Or be-little. Or reserve "room" for itself alone. Every life-style that presumes to think that only some have a right to what they need, and that those who do not are expendable.

It is not much of a surprise and wonder that we still have trouble seeing a world like that. Seeing the way he was and is and the way all of us still need to become. It is normal to admit being in line with Philip and Thomas and the rest, saying "But we do not know the way... Show us the way."

Show us, Lord Christ, that "the way" means coming with the courage of steady faith and open hearts to our loving Father. That "the way" is welcoming all as children of God...so that here on earth your kingdom will burst forth...showing us that "the way" you lead us into reflects the greater love of the holy embrace of the Trinity revealed to us in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.

Amen.