

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Easter 5A) – May 18, 2014
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Every few years there appears another prediction that the great Rapture is to happen imminently. According to the ones predicting this, the Rapture will precede the end of time by bringing faithful adherents of Christ's Way and Truth and Life into Paradise, while others—even including members of “irredeemably corrupt churches”...I guess that's us?—will be left behind. Well, today we're here in church wrestling faithfully with this gospel passage from John—which is so often misappropriated by those who seem to know just who will be “raptured up,” and who will be “left behind.” As a former professor of mine, Harvey Cox, reflected on today's gospel reading, he mentions that those who look with appreciation on other faiths frequently cite the *second* verse of today's gospel and suggest that the many dwelling places (or many “mansions” in the King James' Version) may refer to the places or the relationship with God that Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and others dwell in, alongside all variety of Christians. And then there are those who insist that all others must accept Christ or be damned or “left behind;” and who prefer to cite the *sixth* verse and declare that Jesus alone is the one, true and only way to salvation. So, what can we say about these seemingly contradictory statements? Could they be telling us about the need to hold the universal and the particular together, and about the central place Christians have for Jesus while engaging in expansive interfaith relationships?ⁱ

Let's look for a moment at the statement, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” At different times these words have become a rallying cry for Christian triumphalism, as proof positive that Christians and the Church have the corner on God, and that those who don't profess their allegiance to Jesus are, at worst, condemned or will be “left behind”, or at best, just don't have it right. Because these words have been used in these ways as a weapon, or as a litmus test or as a trump card, they can be seen by many of us as embarrassingly exclusionary and narrow-minded, and as an example of the serious problems of asserting the Christian Faith in a pluralistic world.

As an alternative, let's look to the first century context of John's gospel in which this saying was placed. For Jesus, these words came not from a speech he was delivering in the public square. Rather, he was speaking to his disciples at his Last Supper, and these are parts of his last conversation with them before his arrest and execution. It's his last chance to form them as a community that would endure after his departure. It is in this context of his imminent departure and death that Jesus assures them that they know the way to carry on; that he and his relationship with them is their way, and that this way, this relationship will lead them to the Father. Note that Jesus does *not* say, “No one can come to *God* except through me;” rather, he says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is not some universal metaphysical claim that the only access to Divine truth and life is by way of Jesus. Rather, it is the particular claim of Jesus and the early church community that in the person and work of Jesus somehow we come to a knowledge and encounter with God in a wholly new and intimate manner:

namely, as Father—not omnipotent, majestic and distant, even unknowable Father which other paths do offer; but rather as Parent, in fact, much more familiar, even intimate than that—as “Daddy.” Jesus’ word is “Abba”—literally “Daddy” or “Papa”—as a little child might experience their daddy or momma. The person of Jesus gives an unprecedented access to an experience of God in a most intimate way—that is what is being affirmed here. This “Abba” experience lies at the heart of this gospel. While many roads might lead to God, only one road leads to God as Abba—Daddy—loving Parent. That road, that way, is through Jesus, in whose face we can see the face of God, as it were. But that is a particular affirmation, not a universal statement about access to God.

Some seventy years after Jesus’ death, the gospel context for these words is that of a recently disenfranchised community in conflict with their world around them. These words, for John’s community, are first and foremost a joyous affirmation of a community which believes that God is abundantly present and accessible to them decisively in the Incarnate God, the person of Jesus. And so, the belief of John’s community that Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God—the fullness of God in human form—gave them the bold affirmation of their access to God the Father through Jesus.

So, for John’s gospel community, in Jesus, the tangible presence of God is realized and anchored in the world as it had never been otherwise. God is not a generic deity here; rather, God is the One whom the disciples come to recognize as Abba in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. So, when we hear, “No one comes to the Father...”, “No one” does not refer to all people in all times, but is more aptly translated, “None of you...”—none of you in the particular Christian community to whom these words are spoken. After all, this new phenomenon of the early Church was just a tiny sect, splintering off from a larger religious tradition, Judaism, and geographically, at the far end of the Roman Empire. This small community was not about the business of making audacious claims over against all other religions—Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Taoist, pagan or whomever. It’s not likely that John even knew any Hindus, Jains, or Buddhists. And this little sect of followers of the Way, as these early Christians were called—this religious minority in this little part of the ancient Mediterranean world—had no power or preeminence in the wider pluralistic society in which they could lord it over others. How were they going to lord it over anybody with their miniscule ecclesiastical clout...have a prayer breakfast at the Forum in Rome?...form some sort of Christian Coalition in Jerusalem? No, this is not the sweeping claim of some major world religion as it would later be put forward wrongly by a more established Christianity, or rather, “Churchianity”, and its imposition of Christendom wherever it went.

Another important piece of background is, of course, the context of the family fight within Judaism that was the home of earliest Christianity. But in losing that home, the early Church carved out a new home, a new center grounded in their belief in the Incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth. And so, in John’s gospel especially—written later than the other gospels and after the final split with Judaism in 90 CE—we hear a determination and even a defiance to hold on to this central experience of God in Jesus against all pressures from Judaism or pagan Rome to believe otherwise.

So, what is often perceived in these gospel verses as being excessively exclusionary would be better and more accurately described in their context as “particularism.” That is, the claims made in “I am the way...no one comes to the Father except through me,” express the particular knowledge and experience of that post-90 CE Christian community; and membership in that particular faith community for which John wrote did indeed hinge on this claim. This claim distanced them from their prior religious home, and thus it will shape their new one. What this early church for which John’s Gospel was written did was to declare its new home, its new center. Sure, their particular claim in this gospel did, in fact, establish some boundaries. Drawing a line in the sand, these words say that this is who we are; we are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus. Yet this affirmation of a Christ-centeredness, of their home in Christ, of Christ as the way home to Abba, Daddy, the Divine Parent—this is fundamentally the affirmation of a center, not boundaries. It was the later church, the more established and powerful church which turned this affirmation of a center yet without boundaries into an ecclesiastical set of boundaries (of who’s in and who’s out), yet dangerously close to losing its center of the all-loving God in the Risen Jesus.ⁱⁱ

As a former colleague, Mary Haddad, put it, “It’s too bad that over time, following Jesus changed from being a path and a [relationship] to having to know and believe certain things *about* him. Jesus changed from being the Way to being the *what*.”ⁱⁱⁱ The claim of these verses became problematic when they were then used to speak to questions that were never part of the original purview of John’s gospel. To use these verses in a battle over the relative merits of the world’s religions is to distort their theological heart. It is a dangerous and destructive use of these verses if they become the final arbiter in discussions of the relative merits of different religions’ experiences and understandings of God.^{iv} Here, John is proclaiming a particular affirmation. These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community, convinced of the truth and the life it has received in the Incarnation of Jesus. Jesus’ words and John’s gospel affirm a central reality that brings us together as Christians. Again, John’s gospel is primarily concerned to clarify and celebrate this core belief of Christians in Jesus. That central belief expresses the distinctiveness of our Christian belief and identity, and it is as people shaped by this particular understanding that we can take our place in conversations with other religious paths, traditions, ways—what have you—and say who we are while learning and respecting who others and their spiritual paths are. Also, to be a disciple of Jesus means not to imitate or mimic his particular actions nor just repeat his words nor simply to assent to propositions about him; but rather, to follow his “way”—to live in our day the same way he lived in his—as a sign and servant of the reign of God. To follow Jesus’ way means to make his life project our own, namely, to make the coming of God’s reign of Shalom—justice and peace—wholeness and healing, real and immediate. And genuine respect and friendship among the peoples of the world’s faiths—and a nurturing of a reverence for all life on this planet—are certainly indispensable facets of the way, the coming of God’s Reign.^v

If we belong to Christ we belong to no one and nothing else; yet, if we belong to Christ who reaches across all boundaries, and who continues to reveal God’s purposes of wholeness, love and justice, then we belong to everyone else in the human family and

God's creation. Christ came to give us a renewed humanity and to re-build the bonds of our common humanity, more than to establish Christianity. It is God in Christ who will complete us, not Christianity.^{vi} And until that day of completion there is spacious room for many different expressions—and in which, as former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold put it, we as Christ's followers can act as “ministers of reconciliation in a church and a world in which faithfulness and truth wear many faces,”^{vii} and shine forth the rainbow spectrum of God's light to the world. Our journey as followers of Christ is, therefore, not to the exclusion of all other paths. With this understanding, Jesus is the way, not “in the way” to humanity's path to God—and when we put him in the way, that was never his intention.^{viii} So, as much as Jesus is our center, our way leading us home to the heart of God, so then, every major religion is also a path, a way heading to home in the heart of God. In God's house, as it were, there is a spaciousness of spirit—there are many dwelling places and many paths that can glorify God and build the bonds of our common humanity until the day when “God will be all in all.”^{ix}

ⁱ Harvey Cox, Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988)

ⁱⁱ It was the later church that a) set up strict ecclesiastical boundaries—who is in, and who is out; b) that determined that the Church as the sole guardian of the way, the truth and the life; c) that arrogated the qualities of Christ including his divinity to the institution of the church; and d) that replaced the Christ center with a human authority they supposed was infallible, be it a Pope or other hierarchy, or later, an infallible Bible, or in some cases, nothing at all in the center. By making the Church and its hierarchy and doctrine or its scripture the way, the truth and the life—and by creating strict ecclesiastical boundaries and thus losing a Christ center—that set the Church up for serious problems as it then misused these words of Jesus', turning a particular theological affirmation into a bludgeon or a trump card or a theological spitball in interaction with other religious paths.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Haddad, “The Church as showroom floor” (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church, April 24, 2005).

^{iv} John's Gospel is not concerned with the fate of Muslims (who don't even appear for another 650 years), Hindus, Buddhists, nor with a sense of superiority or inferiority of Judaism or Christianity as they appear in all varieties of expression in the modern world. These verses are therefore not a proof-text for Christian triumphalism. Nor do they imply that only Christians know the way or the truth or live the correct life or are loved by God or can access God. Nor do these verses claim that people of other faiths are not only wrong, but condemned as a result. No.

^v Cox, *Ibid.*

^{vi} And in the end, not even Christ will be the One to complete all things; rather it will be God who is “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23). Sure, it's true about Jesus, that, as St. Paul put it, “For *in him* all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” (Colossians 1:19), and also it is also true that the God who took on humanity in the incarnation of Jesus born in Bethlehem did not discard that humanity when Jesus died, or when he was resurrected and ascended. But it is also true about God, as St. Paul put it, that “In him we live and move and have our being,” (Acts 17:28)—God who is the source of every breath we take and every beat of the heart, all of which lie *outside of Jesus*. Yes, our Christian Faith gives centrality to Christ, but we are not “Christomonists”—in other words, we do not reduce all Theology to Christology. As Karl Barth put it, “God is free to be wholly inward to the creature and at the same time as himself wholly outward, *totus intra et totus extra*...This is how he meets us in Jesus Christ” (Karl Barth Church Dogmatics Vol 2.1: The Doctrine of God (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 315). God is totally inside, and totally outside, of Jesus Christ. And so, Christ is the way and the Truth and the Life, and no one comes to the Father/Abba except through him—but it is also true that God acts, in God's freedom, in and through all sorts of ways that create and sustain our lives and universe.

^{vii} Quoted in *Episcopal News Service*, April 19, 2005.

^{viii} Thus, as James Carroll put it, the Jesus of the gospels “is not the source of conflict, but the source of conflict resolution” (James Carroll, “The meaning of monotheism” (Boston Globe, March 16, 1999)). He adds, “There is a unifying paradox. God the great other can be an intimate friend [Abba], [and] God the friend to one people can be friend to all.”^{viii} And we as followers of Jesus and his way can be “ministers of reconciliation in a church and a world in which faithfulness and truth wear many faces,” in the words of former Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold (Haddad, *Ibid.*). John’s gospel is primarily concerned to clarify and celebrate this core belief of Christians of Jesus Christ our center and the basis of our identity. That central belief expresses the distinctiveness of our Christian belief and identity, and it is as a people shaped by this distinctiveness that—knowing who we are in Christ—we can take our place in conversations with other religious traditions and paths, and say who we are, and learn and respect who others are and their spiritual paths, and from that express a “holy envy” at what we discover from others’ religious experience and spiritual journeys. As much as Jesus is our center, our way leading us home to the heart of God, so then every major religion is a path, a way heading to home in the heart of God. In God’s house, as it were, there is a spaciousness of spirit; there are many dwelling places and many paths that can build the Shalom, the bonds of our common humanity as children of God. This gospel in its original context, in its heart of hearts, is not about the business of making an outrageous or offensive claim to have the corner on God over against other ways to God in other religious traditions. When we bracket out the presumptions that Christians have wrongly injected into these verses over the centuries, there is nothing outrageous or offensive about the claims made in this chapter of John. Rather, at the center of Christianity is this affirmation of the full revelation of God in the Incarnation of Jesus. This is the core claim of Christian identity, our center, yet without boundaries, thus distinguishing Christian belief from those of other faiths, as Christians believe in Christ Jesus and that it is through Jesus that Christians have access to God. Yet we also honor what other faiths and ways offer as ways home to the heart of God. And if these words address those not on a Jesus-centered path, it’s not Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, Taoist, or even a humanist or non-theistic path, etc. that these words are directed toward today; nor are they meant to beckon or judge or coerce anyone to change the path they are on towards God and one another whatever religious expression of faith, hope and love that may involve. Rather, it’s those who seem not to have found any way home to the heart of God and to their own hearts or others’ that these words are directed to as invitation.

^{ix} The earliest disciples were confused and wanted to know the way home—the way to the place Jesus came from and where he was going. They wanted directions but Jesus offered himself instead. “I am the way.” he said. The way he lived, the way he loved—even the way he died—that is the way home to our divine Parent. If you want to follow, you will live the same way, Jesus said. And if you lose your way, you can always refer to your maps and compasses. But in the end, it’s a hand—Jesus’ hand—that is there ready to grasp and steady you along the way.