

Sermon Thoughts – Not the Sermon
February 4, 2007

Two Sermons On ...
Jesus 2: The Way, The Truth, The Life

John 14:1-8

Sermon in a Nut Shell

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

This verse is not grounds for urgently converting everyone to Christianity lest their souls perish in hell. It is however, grounds for engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths: What is their “way?” In what manner does their Way lead to the truth that gives life? And, if we are truly in dialogue, we will also be challenged to examine our own beliefs and practices – do they lead to the truth that gives life?

Jesus – The Way, The Truth, The Life

No one comes to the Father except through me.

This brief passage at the end of verse 6 has had an unfortunate and tragic history of shaping the church’s response to people of other faiths.

When taken out of context, the plain meaning of these words creates an awesome and urgent responsibility:

Those of us who have come to the Father through Jesus **MUST** bring others to this same faith lest their souls perish into the eternal hell of separation from God.

The words are clear and unequivocal: **no one** comes to the Father **except** through **me**. Jesus is the one and only gateway through which everyone must pass if they are to come to the Father. There are no exceptions, no other faiths, no other experiences of God that provide access to God. Or, to put the best face on a lost cause, other faiths may have some partial experience of God, but they all lack this one key ingredient that is needed in order to fully and completely “come to the Father;” they lack Christ, and without Christ no one comes to the Father. Thus, other faiths may – and do – contain much that is good, much that we can celebrate and affirm. But because they lack the key and needed element of Christ, they are all tragically flawed, and can only lead their followers into eternal damnation, eternal separation from the Father.

What could be more urgent than saving another person’s soul from eternal damnation?

Unfortunately, it is precisely this urgency that has led Christians – through many centuries and in all parts of the world – to resort to some of the worst forms of violence and coercion in this life in order to save people’s souls for the life to come. Our own church’s involvement

with Aboriginal residential schools is but one example of this tragic – and I believe, mistaken – understanding of these few words from John 14:6.

Let's go back and think about the whole passage again; let's put John 14:6 into its context.

This passage is part of a much longer speech that Jesus makes to his followers on the last night he will be with them before his arrest, torture and execution. He has been telling them what is coming and they are terribly afraid. Afraid for their own lives. Afraid for the excruciating pain of the Roman's favourite form of execution: beating and flogging until near death, and then nailed hands and feet to a cross where it may take several days of unbearable pain before finally suffocating. And even more than this – afraid of being separated from Jesus – their leader; their hope for a new world order – a whole new world in which finally God's justice, peace and love would replace the current reality. How will they go on without Jesus?

And aren't the disciples like us? Don't we, in times of fear and anxiety; fear of death; fear of loss; fear of separation and endings; don't we panic and forget and instead believe we're doomed; that all is lost. We lose our trust and faith in God.

And it is precisely to this fear and panic that Jesus speaks to his followers then and to us now.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Trust in me. Trust also in God.

This is not the final end of the story.

I am not leaving you for ever. I am going ahead to prepare a place for you.

And in a little while I will come and take you there so that we will be together.

And you know the way.

Now isn't it interesting that Jesus says, "And you know the way?" Why does he say that? Especially since Thomas immediately says, "No. We do **not** know the way. How can we know the way?" Who is right here, Jesus or Thomas? Do they know the way as Jesus says, or not, as Thomas says? How about you, do you know the way?

As we see again later, Thomas is a concrete learner. He doesn't accept the testimony of the others that Jesus has risen from the dead, he wants to know it for himself. And he doesn't just want to see the risen Jesus, he wants to touch him. So I suspect when Jesus says that we know the way, Thomas has a failure of imagination. Thomas can't imagine the way to paradise because there is no concrete, "real," touch-it-with-your-hands way to paradise.

Except, of course, as Jesus repeats about a gazillion times in John's Gospel, "I am in the Father, the Father is in me. I am in you. You are in me. The Father and I are one. You and I are one. Etc. Etc."

In other words, to his followers who are experiencing terror and panic, Jesus says do not let your hearts be troubled because with me and in me you have seen a truth that is both hidden and revealed. **In me you have seen the way to live in the truth that gives life.** You know the way because you know me. (You do know me don't you?)

So when Thomas says, "We do not know the way. How can we know the way?" Jesus reminds them – and us –

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

Now listen to what happens if we substitute the "I" who is "the way, the truth, and the life" for the "me" in the phrase "No one comes to the Father except through me."

No one comes to the Father except through ... the way, the truth, and the life.

Thomas was asking for a concrete, "real" answer, but Jesus gives us a poetic and imaginative one. Thomas, unfortunately like many Christians since his time, took the "me" literally, when Jesus consistently throughout the gospel of John is trying to direct his followers' attention away from his "me" and toward the glory of God in him; away from his "me" and toward the way, the truth, and the life.

This verse is not grounds for urgently converting everyone to Christianity lest their souls perish in hell. It is however, grounds for engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths: What is their "way?" In what manner does their Way lead to the truth that gives life? And, if we are truly in dialogue, we will also be challenged to examine our own beliefs and practices – do they lead to the truth that gives life?

I do believe that in Jesus we see a way that leads to truth that gives life. And frankly, I think that learning the meaning and practices of the way of Jesus is sufficient for a lifetime. I rejoice that others may also be pilgrims on a way that seeks the truth that gives life, but in a way that is different than mine. Together, our differences may help each of us to deepen our understandings and our practices. And as long as we acknowledge our human limitations in the face of divine mysteries, we have nothing to fear from each other. For I also believe in a way that is beyond human understanding and imagination – that indeed there is a place prepared for us, so that one day everyone and all of creation will be where Jesus is. In that place, no one will be "Christian," or "Jew," or "Buddhist," or "atheist," or anything else. All categories and distinctions will be removed; along with all tears, all shame and scars, and finally all will be one, and all will be well.

Thanks be to God for the grace and truth and beauty that is seen in Jesus. May we be a place where others may also see a reflection of the glory of God, and find a way that leads to the truth that gives life. Amen.