

ACTS 7:55-60
PSALM 31:1-5, 15-16
I PETER 2:2-10
JOHN 14:1-14
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

A Way Out of One Way!

Over the course of the last two weeks, questions and conversation have arisen by the eager students who gather for our Wednesday evening Bible Study. One of their most poignant questions involves the uniqueness of the cosmic Christ of faith as revealed in the person of history in Jesus the man from Nazareth. In the interest of full disclosure this journey has been the way for this group from the outset, “way” being the operative word this morning. Participant inquiries by members of the class formulate the very questions with which the early Church wrestled, struggling mightily, as they looked back on the life of the human one, the historical man from Nazareth, and attempted to make sense of the Jesus story. Was Jesus really divine and human? Was the rabbi the long-awaited Messiah prophesied of old? If God sent Jesus into the world, why did God send him to a specific, a particular, people? What about all the other cultures of the world? To my knowledge, only the Mormons (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) in their beliefs and readings have tried to address that chasm, at least partly filling the gap. As the early Church grappled with what have become timeless questions, leading to first century disagreements, controversies, and fights, all of which ensued as a result of rapid growth, schisms and splits became an eventual and inevitable outcome. Official doctrine was developed, then codified in the ancient creeds, required recitation of converts if they were to be considered among the faithful, rubberstamped as true blue believers. Fidelity to doctrinal purity was required, verification necessary and mandated to participate in liturgical gatherings, the worshiping community seeking conformity and uniformity, Christian clones all, a convenient means by the third century

developed to not only weed out heretics, but to burn them at the stake for daring to think outside the box or color outside the lines. It was important, essential, to keep people in line, the risk of heresy an ever-present threat in keeping the evolving male hierarchy in charge and in power with both governance (polity) and theology. Leadership frowned on creatively curious critical thinking which was always met with swift and stern reactions, including a heretical martyr's execution, a mentality reflecting the way that angry fundamentalists have always viciously and violently operated to some degree. **Today we explore a challenging but comforting, a most disconcerting and disturbing, yes, truly a troubling line, from John's Gospel, pun intended, a verse attributed to Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life! No one comes to the Father except through me?" No one, by God! It is a capstone scripture, a cornerstone masquerading as a millstone, and yet it has historically defined traditional Christianity, providing a clear paradigmatic framework, a sobering structure, determining belief and practice for more than two thousand years! Did Jesus say it? Did he mean it, literally, if he said it? How do we interpret words that seem exclusively narrow, restrictively sectarian, rather than "extravagantly welcoming," affirming those whose religious, whose spiritual, pathways are different, some would say inferior, from our own? How do we embrace this text and engage interfaith dialogues? How do we think? What do we do? To use a cliché, and I hate clichés, especially religious ones, is there, wait for it, "a way out of no way?" Is there a way out of one way? Yes, I believe there is! Inquiring minds want to know. Intellectually curious, critically thinking, theological thinking, spiritually intuitive, people want to know.** This sermon is for everybody who has wondered about these mysteries and is dedicated to our dedicated Bible Study class, enthusiastic students who challenge me every week about my biblical assumptions and theories, even pushing me to rethink, to reconsider, some of my most assured ideas. These serious students of the Bible impress me, inspire me, stimulate me, and remind me that this is a very intuitively engaged congregation, a faith community that indeed, thinks theologically! Is there only one way to God? Inquiring minds want to know! **The answer is pivotal!**

Today we read a most familiar text, a lection that is normally reserved, hardwired, for celebrations of life, funeral, or memorial services. Unfortunately, that deathly emphasis tends to be the only way this narrative gets framed and

imagined, our minds not allowing it the breathing room necessary for other interpretive possibilities. The fact that these verses of scripture are found in the Gospel of John is a strong indicator telling us immediately that there is theological import embedded in these words, that as with all the musings gleaned from the Johannine community in about 100 CE, John's neighborhood, this version of Jesus' life is characterized through the lenses that are commensurate with the heavy lifting of theologically laden content. Theology saturates each word in John's Gospel. From the very beginning, pun intended, of the fourth Gospel, we see a theologically creative mind at work, a writer seeking to systematically connect the humanity and divinity of Jesus, seeking to synthesize the temporal and earthly realm with the eternal heavenly sphere, Christ as Word claimed to be present at the very moments of creation. Yes, this creatively thoughtful writer believed that the Word was mysteriously made flesh and dwelt among us. That is why we read in the Nicene Creed that Jesus, the Christ, the Word was incarnate, "begotten not made, light of light, true God from true God!" It makes for a great verse often ignored in the familiar and popular Christmas carol "O Come All Ye Faithful," but is a most incredulously challenging, almost ludicrous, idea. The most creative writer or writers of John's Gospel accepts the linguistic challenge, a most arduous task, but by golly, almost manages to pull off this impossible assignment, this absolutely incredible analytical feat. **Today's lection begins with what Gayle Landis says "seems like a pretty tall order," "Do not let your hearts be troubled!"** A brief primer here about a quote attributed to Jesus, words that were intended to be a message of comfort might be helpful, certainly seems in order. John is the oldest, by far, of the Gospels, written about 67 years following the death of Jesus. The early Church was being persecuted beyond degree, martyrdom no doubt a daily occurrence. The "followers of the way," who had become known as Christians at a summit at Antioch in 34 CE had been painfully thrown out of the Temple and the synagogues. These trailblazers had quickly assimilated and had begun to morph into a new faith expression, a brand, spanking new religion. These faithful now found themselves encountering a vast unknown and untapped populous, competing with divergent religious views reflecting a multicultural landscape, traditional Judaism on one side and all the pagan gods emanating from the gentile world they had discovered, including Rome and the Hellenistic enclave of Greece. Hello Aphrodite! Hello Zeus! Hello every deity in between!

In her discussion of what reveals itself as a “one way” theology, at least that is the way it has come to be understood, Landis tells an interesting story about some family dynamics. She says, “When our children were very young, my husband and I moved away from our extended families for the first time. We were suddenly far enough away not to see them every week, and also far enough that a visit required an overnight stay. Visits with three young ones were infrequent and happily anticipated. I worried, though, about bringing three kids into my mother-in-law’s house for a few days, instead of a few hours. It was a lot to ask. Usually we left home after work on Friday and arrived very late, long after Grandma and Grandpa’s normal bedtime. I was troubled for nothing. On that first visit and every one that followed our place was prepared. One of my favorite memories of those days was coming into the house as Dave’s mom was spreading blankets out on guest beds and the couch. The time of night did not matter, nor the fact that we were far from home. It was about her love for us, not about distance or trouble.” Landis then makes a most salient point about this story. She observes, “I think this is part of what Jesus means when he tells them that the only way through the Father is through him. The only way home is not about going to a place, wherever that may be and whenever they will need it, because he already loves them.” In other words, a place is not a place, a place is allegorical vernacular, metaphor, symbolic language imaging a mystical oneness with God, yes, existential mystery. This ethereal imagery is the very speak that is the sum total of John’s Gospel. In these graciously loving words of succor, the early Church was being given the reminder that their home was not among the terror and torture of Caesar’s not-so-divine Roman occupation, but rather was with the God who lamented their hideous fortune but graciously awaited their glorious arrival. One commentator notes that Jesus’ seemingly exclusive comment about himself and his being the only way, a very unlike Jesus thing to say, I might add, was that “Jesus’ response amounts to this: *You already know the way! You know the Way we’ve been traveling, the Truth we’ve been learning, the Life we’ve been living – so just keep going, and when you do, I’ll be right there with you, because I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I’m not merely your guide; I am the Way. So keep going and learning and living toward God, and we’ll be together as you go . . .*” In other words, Jesus was not making a commentary about those who were not “followers of the way,” but was using

some insider speak about those who had signed on the dotted lines to be his disciples, following in his footsteps, huge footprints to fill indeed. It is an inclusive declaration, not an exclusive one! As Chuck Queen articulates this mystery, “We can read this to mean, Jesus is the way that leads to truth and life. The point is that Jesus has been living out this relationship in their midst, he has embodied and modeled what it looks like, what it involves.” These declarations are all very positive images, imagery that is hospitably welcoming and inviting to those who choose this specific but inclusive pathway, yes, a pathway, then and now, that existed among many wonderful pathways allowing humanity to experience the elusive mystery of God-presence.

Many of us grew up learning that John 14:6 was the “my way or the highway” text, reminding the fearful that the road to perdition is paved with bad intentions, leading the lost and straying straight to hell, yes, using other Gospel images, that the path is narrow but the gate is wide and that many are called but few are chosen. Strung together as a perversely disconnected biblical litany of nonsensical psychobabble, this verse was cited as an evangelistic witness warning of the risk of not being “born again,” “saved”, “washed in the blood,” and that the unquenchable burning fires of hell’s eternal brimstones were real and gladly waiting the unrepentant sinner. It was a stick masquerading as a carrot! These threats not even remotely perfumed as promises were and are used to proclaim that Christianity alone was and is right and all other religions, all other expressions of faith, all other spiritual pathways, were and are wrong and that there was and is only one way to experience God, the monotheistic deity intimately named Yahweh, among other monikers, in the Hebrew Bible, this God further, fully, and some would say finally, revealed in the person of Jesus. We have all heard it before. In 1981, Southern Baptist evangelist, the late Bailey Smith, rocked the American religious landscape when he told the worst off color and antisemitic joke at a religious right gathering. He noted that at many meetings like the one he was attending, that it was often the protocol to invite a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jew to offer a prayer. He then referenced those “dear people,” arrogantly assuming the mind of the Holy One, declaring that “God almighty does not hear the prayer of the Jew.” I do not even need to refute that nonsense here and now! Some days I can still hear the old Gospel Song “Old Buddha” haunting me, its lyrics

condemning every major religion as inferior, apostate, tricking the fools who fall for them.

I have struggled, and I have no doubt you also have struggled, with this one verse of scripture that seems so out of place in the Jesus story, seeming to welcome confusion, division, and conflict, rather than unity and harmony both within and among various peoples of faith. It is a verse that seems to glorify an insular, a circle your own wagons kind of smug mentality, fueled by an absolute certainty and security in faith matters. I think for more than two thousand years we have misread and misinterpreted the meaning of these musings, making them the very polarity, the very opposite of their open and inviting content and intent. Here is the way I see it, “way” being the operative word here! My take is, that as the early Church put these words in Jesus’ mouth as this amazing Gospel was written, that these would be gate keepers overreached, despite their goal to emulate, to reflect the person of Jesus we have come to know and love well. I believe their true desire was to convey that if you want to know God, to know eternal truth and truths in the way that Jesus had come to intimately know his truth about God, that is, as heavenly Parent, as his Father, his Abba, as close as you can get in this life, that there was only one option available if you were to get to know God in the same way that Jesus did and that means by following, by mimicking, Jesus, our friend, our brother, our mentor and model of our faith. Yes, if you want to hear God, to see God, touch God, experience God, in the way that Jesus did then his way is the only way. Yet in no way does this diminish or cancel any other way!

Yes, there were and are other pathways, all of them valid and valuable in their own right, in their own way, but Jesus’ way is the way, the only way, for those of us who want to know his way in the way that he came to know the way of God. Yes, there is a way out of no way! Yes, there is a way out of one way! It is biblical, but it all comes down to perspective, to interpretation. Folks, the Jesus of history we have come to know in the Gospels, never insulted or diminished the faith traditions of the peoples he encountered, the Gospels naming Samaritans, Gentiles, including a Centurion, a Roman soldier, of all people, Canaanites, and Syrophoenicians. He affirmed their faith, “no matter who they were or where they were on life’s journey,” speaking glowingly of their pathway

that had led them to this special occasion, this serendipitously magical encounter with the rabbi. He admired and honored their intuitively insightful belief, and sent them back to their own with a smile on their face and a story to tell. Ultimately, their decision! Jesus never, to my knowledge, converted an individual from their religious outlook to his! He was open and affirming, hospitably welcoming and inclusive. How dare we take words written long after his death and turn them into the very antithesis of the approach he clearly made during his brief three year ministry. Jesus would never shut out anyone based on what they believe unless that belief could and would bring harm to themselves or another. We all know this to be true! Yes, his way is one way, but surely it cannot be the only way! It would be unlike Jesus, so very un-Jesus-like, to think so! For us, when we see Jesus, we see God! When we know Jesus, we know God! And we experience that sensory awareness, a reality in our spirit that is the Spirit of the Christ, deeply embedded, imbued, in every human being, especially when we see that human being doing, at work, doing the things that Jesus taught us to do. Yes, that is the way! That kind of living, that level of living, is indeed, the way, the truth, and the life!

Several years ago, Progressive Christianity produced a DVD video series called "Living the Questions!" These lessons were recordings employing some of the most prominent progressive theological thinkers who have been doing their thing over the last thirty years or more. The programs have a very simple setup, an informal interview format with these scholars and church junkies who offer their opinions, well informed of course, on a variety of theological issues, specifically addressing traditional doctrinal and creedal assertions, while answering questions about these issues that are important, essential, to those of us who live in the twenty-first century space age world, the intellectually curious and critically thinking postmodern progressives who cannot live in the traditional world of Christendom any longer, no longer finding traditional Christian dogma as relevant or viable. Look around the world today, especially in Europe, Canada, and the United States, and you will see a backdoor revival taking place within Christianity that is unprecedented but may be surpassed. People once of the steeple are leaving in droves and a major part of that equation, to a huge degree, is that they are bored with all of it and their hearts cannot embrace what their minds refuse to believe. Yes, faith is still important but faith is never blind or deaf or dumb! These

are the people who the late John Shelby Spong called the “Church’s alumni association” and the ranks of these graduates are growing by the day. The survival of mainstream, mainline, denominations and their churches, including the likes of us, depends on our willingness to expand our ecclesiological and theological horizons and begin to understand that for many people, the questions are far more important than the answers. Mystery and transcendence, a sense of awe and wonder, *tremendum et fascinans*, matters far more than required perfunctory recitations reinforcing naïve beliefs. Faith and doubt must go hand-in-hand in dialogue, two sides of the same theological coin. Knowing this, it is up to us to give up our insecurities regarding the faith of our fathers and mothers, to tear down walls and barriers, to become non anxious presence, giving up our fears and anxieties about saving the institution and see where the still speaking God will lead. For many, it is a hard pill to swallow, a difficult row to hoe! Jesus has shown us the way, the truth, and the life, a way, a truth, and a life, a way to truth and life, and is still leading this parade into what can and will be, if we dare have the tenacious courage to allow this movement of the still speaking Spirit, a new understanding. Then, and only then, when and if, we will indeed catch a glimpse of an ever expanding consciousness and have a chance at a bright horizon illuminating the dawn of a new day, knowing that God has prepared a place for us, yes, all of us, then and now, and in the forever unfolding future of eternity. Yes, there is a way out of our no way! And, there is certainly a way out of one way!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and indeed is the way, the truth, and the life, at least for us who have chosen to follow his way, his truth, and his life! Makes perfect sense! Amen and amen.