

Parting Words
John 14:1-14
4-20-08

If one is a “my way or the highway” type of Christian, then today’s scripture readings would seem to be right up that alley, where there is room for no other way but mine. The language used: “I am the way, the truth, the life...no one comes to the Father but through me” all seem to prove exclusive rights to salvation for those who accept and believe in Christ.

If one is a “many roads lead to God” type of Christian, then today’s scripture readings raise a lot of questions: how can it be that God who loves the world would seem to make it possible only for those who accept and believe in Christ to receive salvation?

Let us explore these questions. As we begin to dig into this passage, I would like to start by inviting you to think of the kind of instructions you leave behind when you are getting ready to leave, temporarily, your family, children, pet or in someone else’s care. That list of instructions might include things like, pick up child A from soccer practice at 4 and deliver Child B to basketball game at 5, bring in the milk on Tuesday, remember to walk the dog, water the plants every other day. It takes a lot to keep life running smoothly when one takes his or her leave, even for just a couple of days.

To take this a step further, I invite you to consider what it is you want to leave behind, when you depart this world in a more permanent fashion. I’m asking you to think about this because the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to John starts what is called the “Farewell Discourse,” in which Jesus begins to explain to his disciples what is to come; that he will leave them to die, and then to live and then to live eternally, but no longer in their presence. This passage is where he seeks to impart understanding to them so as to be able to leave them not in despair, but in faith. That’s a pretty big task.

So, let’s look at what happens when he does this. The discourse starts with Jesus telling them not to let their hearts be troubled; and the imagery is used here, that in his Father’s house there are many dwelling places and he will prepare a place there for them. While this is a scripture that is often used at funerals and memorial services, and which I’ve heard referred to as the “there are many cots in heaven” passage, we need to look even deeper into its meaning. It goes beyond simply saying that when we die we will go to heaven. You may remember that John, of all the gospels, is deeply theological and has a particular focus on the relationship of Jesus with God. Its very opening says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” While the word, “dwelling place” used here means “rooms,” in this context of John, it is derived from the verb “remain,” or “dwell.” The importance of this is that there is a unity of God and Jesus; that Jesus is God and is with God, and that the disciples may dwell and remain in God. Thus, in saying that he goes to prepare a place for them, Jesus is inviting the disciples and welcoming them into this relationship; into God, for right now! The gospel of John portrays what scholars call an “emerging horizontality;” that God is in us; that the incarnation is in us; and that, in us, is the future for the world.

Now it's no wonder that the disciples were confused. They are still thinking about those "cots in heaven," rather than remaining in God even as Jesus departs. Jesus says I am going and you know the way. What? "Lord, we really don't know where it is that you're going and we most certainly can't know the way." And it is here that Jesus responds in really a most amazing way. The Greek is "ego eimi:" "I Am." "I Am," which is followed by, the way, and the truth and the life. Think about where you've heard "I AM" before...it is the divine name revealed to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM." "You shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM' has sent me to you." It is the name of God, and it is used many times in the gospel of John: "I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus has used the name of God for himself, because "In the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God." It is a different light that is shed on the sentence when we read it as, "I AM; Yahweh, is the way, the truth and life."

And then we must look at that troubling sentence in verse six: "No one comes to the Father except through me." Make no mistake. There is much to think about and to try to understand about this scripture. As a congregation that is inclusive and respectful of the beliefs of others, I think it is helpful to look at this passage through the lens of the Johannine context, which is a first century religious minority in the ancient Mediterranean world. This is not, as it would be now, the sweeping claim of a major world religion. Nor is it meant to be part of a battle over the merits of the world's religions. It is about a people who believe in God, who was revealed to them in Christ. Jesus says to them, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

I have appreciated the words of well respected pastor, Fred Anderson, who, about this passage said, "We as Christians belong to Jesus Christ, having been joined eternally to him in the waters of baptism. However, that does not mean that Jesus belongs to us. We are his, he is not ours! That is something all too often forgotten by many a well intended evangelist. We are the Lord's to be sure; God's promises are for us. And we are to share this good news with all who will receive it. But we don't control it nor have the authority to place limitations on it. Where did we get the notion that Jesus' statement that he is the way, truth and life pertains exclusively to Christians, especially when earlier in the gospel Jesus said, 'I have other sheep not of this fold.'"

At the heart of Christianity is God revealed to us in Jesus. Our Christian identity is given to us through him and we are distinguished from peoples of other faiths through him. It is through Christ that we understand and believe and live our lives. We rejoice in this, as with the sheep of many folds, we continue to seek in faith.