

5 Easter, Yr. A
May 14, 2017
John 14:1-14

Our reading from John's Gospel this morning contains those verses of reassurance that are often read at funerals. This is part of Jesus' Farewell Discourse – those final words to his disciples at the Last Supper. And he recognizes that their hearts will be troubled when he leaves them. He tells them that he will not be with them in the same way, and that he's simply going ahead to prepare a place for them in his father's house which has "many mansions." That word can also be translated as "dwelling places" or as "abiding places" – so you can hear the connection to other parts of John's gospel where he tells his disciples to abide in him, to stay connected with him, both now and for all eternity. And he offers further reassurance that he will be there with them. It's an image of ultimate reassurance - that God will never abandon us, but will welcome us to that true home where we'll be known and loved forever. Thinking about it a bit more theologically, one could say that at the Incarnation, God moved in with us through God becoming human; and in the end, we'll move in with Him.

But later in the passage there's another verse, this one around Thomas asking Jesus how they can know the way to the place he's going and Jesus replying by saying, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What's Jesus saying here? That there's room, but only for Christians? That's a literal and surface understanding of the text. Some years ago the book, *The Purpose Driven Life* was very popular and the author picked up this line and argued just that. Not Christian? Sorry, no room for you! This sentence has been historically problematic because it's often been used to argue for exclusion, not just by this one author. But like most everything else in the Bible, it's necessary to put this verse in context. You may remember that John's community was living in a climate of persecution and competition. They were competing with a sect of followers of John the Baptist and with a group of Pneumatics who were opting for the excitement of life in the Spirit without bothering about the all-too-human Christ. Perhaps even more important, they were being expelled from the synagogues. As a result, John was drawing boundaries. Scholars today interpret this text as having nothing to do with God's relationship with non-Christians, certainly not saying that God has somehow left all those billions out of his plan of salvation. Instead it has to do with John's community, saying that FOR US, as faithful followers of Jesus, there's only one way to the Father and that's through our relationship with Jesus Christ. And that makes perfect sense when you think about it. When John was writing, he would have known absolutely nothing about Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims. And so that line needs to be read as addressed to just this community, written in a language of reassurance and not as an absolute truth claim valid for everyone everywhere, for all time. And the way we read and understand these things and the language we use makes a great difference.

As most of you know, I just got back from my first visit to NYC. The itinerary was set by my 12-yr. old granddaughter and included the Empire State Building and the 9/11 Memorial. It's the latter that I'd like to talk about this morning. The museum there is well-done and very moving. Part of our visit included stopping at St. Paul's Chapel, which is only a block or so from where one of the twin towers stood. On that infamous day, Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of

Canterbury, was visiting at St. Paul's. He wrote a series of meditations about that day in a small book called *Writing in the Dust*. One of those meditations was about religious language. He compared the overtly religious language used by the terrorists to try to mask their crime against humanity by cloaking it in the language of martyrdom with that used by those people in the planes and towers who, in the midst of confusion and anguish and fear, made time to call loved ones to express their love and to try to ease the pain of those they knew they were leaving behind. That, he said, was the true religious language, the language of love and faithfulness. He reminded his readers that religious language can be used as a tool to reinforce a diseased perception of reality, teaching us not to see the human agony that's right in front of us. It can be used to make brothers and sisters into "others" against whom violence is not only permissible, but, even worse, can be seen as a "blessed" action.

Williams also wrote about the nature of heroism. Al-Queda had promised the terrorists that their actions would give their deaths immense significance; that they would be heroes. Instead, Williams pointed to what he called the "ordinary heroism" of the firefighters and police and volunteers that day. As I mentioned, he was at St. Paul's and he talked about the enormously careful calm of the volunteer firefighter who told them the practical things they all needed to do to survive and of the staff of the day care center in the chapel who were able to put their own fear "on hold" to reassure the little ones in their care and to get them safely away. Heroism, he said, comes down to doing what is needed for the well-being of a community – for its health and safety. He didn't know it then, but the members of that church showed on-going heroism when, for the next 9 months, they offered 24-hour/day care to those at the site, which included meals, a place to rest, counseling and prayer.

So, what did Jesus mean when he said that he was the way? He's certainly making a truth claim, but I suggest that it's about the truth that's revealed in his life. He's asking those who follow him to live in our time as he lived in his; he's asking us to live as a sign and servant to the Kingdom of God, just as he did; he's asking us to make the coming of the Kingdom our life project, just as he did. And, when we look at his life, what can we say about his way?

- First, Jesus is not about abstract principles. He's concerned with actual people. It's how people are treated that matters
- The second point is similar. Jesus' life and teaching was always more concerned about practical outcomes than about doctrinal correctness, e.g., the Sabbath was made for men and women, not the reverse.
- And then, Jesus recognized that God was already present in the people he encountered, even when they were "other" – remember the Roman centurion and Jesus' comment that he had not seen such great faith in all of Israel.
- Jesus' life and teaching were all about healing and reconciliation, about compassion and love. We can always sum it up by remembering the two great commandments to love God and neighbor and that says it all.

In the passage from Peter's letter that we heard this morning, we hear Peter telling his listeners that they are like living stones being used to build a spiritual house, built upon the cornerstone that is Christ. He goes on to tell them that they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy

nation, God's own people. That's a pretty amazing job description – what does it mean for us? That, as priests, we're called to see and name the blessings God has showered on all of us, to be bridges from the world to God, to show the face of God to the world, to teach, guide and walk in the way of Christ. We're called, in other words, to be saints. Joan Chittister, in writing about this, cautions us to not confuse that vocation with an outward cloak of holiness:

“When it's all over, when we have said our last rosary, made our final trip to church, made our last retreat, fasted every day of our last Lent and hung by our nose from the steeple of the church as a sign of our eternal commitment to God, will it have been enough to qualify us as saintly? Only...if we have spent our lives taking care of those who could not take care of themselves. Why? Because this is the Way that most echoes the life of Jesus... We follow Jesus who walks from Galilee to Jerusalem curing the sick, raising the dead and contesting with those along the way who would say that keeping the Law is greater than addressing the needs of the people. But who are they? Who? They are the old woman across the street too weak to cook her own dinner. Who? The child with no family at home to take care of her after school. Who? The mother whose son is in jail for murder. Who? The cold who live on the streets during the winter. Who? The poor women in jail who have no money to get a lawyer. Who? The abandoned. The lonely. The destitute. Anyone who needs us over and over again because there is no one else there to care for them. That...is holiness. It is that holiness that ought to be the fruit of all our religious practices....The fact is that the only purpose of the spiritual lifeis to begin to see the world as God sees the world. It is about becoming the self that sees life through the eyes of Jesus and then, like Jesus, bends to become the miracle the world awaits.... (*In God's Holy Light.*) Amen.