

Sermon preached May 18, 2014
Year A, Easter 5 – Jesus is the Way of Love
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's a story about a man named Tom who was walking over a bridge and saw another guy ... about to jump. Tom said, "Don't do it!" The guy said, "Nobody loves me." Tom said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." Tom said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." Tom said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." Tom said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." Tom said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." Tom said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." Tom said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." Tom said, "Me, too!" Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." Tom said, "Die, heretic!" And pushed him over.¹

This joke gets at the heart of one of the challenges of this week's gospel: do we have to believe in Jesus in just the right way in order to be saved? In our increasingly pluralistic world, we bump into people who are faithful Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, who have a genuine relationship with God. How are we to reconcile this with what Jesus seems to be saying?

¹ Emo Philips, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>.

The gospel today takes place during the Last Supper, the night before Jesus is crucified. After three years of teaching, this is Jesus' last chance to share his message with his followers. He tells them he is going away, but not to worry, that they will follow him because they already know the way. Doubting Thomas, ever a man who appreciates the concrete, claims he doesn't know the way and wants a map or GPS or something. You can almost see Jesus smiling while shaking his head. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In other words, the "place" where Jesus is going is not a physical location but union with God. Jesus tells them "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." If you are in relationship with Jesus, you are by default, in relationship with God the Father. Heaven, the afterlife, is not about wings and harps, but about union with God. Since the disciples already have union with God by virtue of their relationship with Jesus, they don't have to worry. They know what that entails because they have already been living it during their earthly existence. They know "the way" because they are already there. Jesus tells them this as a means to comfort them, to prepare them for his death the next day, that death is not the end, either for him or for them.

In addition, when Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," he's not saying merely that by following him we achieve life in the hereafter, but that we achieve a new life right now. When we live "the way" that Jesus taught, we are already tasting of the glory of God. There's an old saying that "All the way to heaven is heaven." Salvation is not simply about going to heaven when we die. The journey itself is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Of course the disciples know "the way" – they have been watching Jesus model it for three years.

Life with Jesus isn't a destination so much as a way of being and becoming. Jesus feeds the hungry, comforts the troubled, heals the sick, forgives the sinner, finds the lost, welcomes the stranger, and lifts up the lowly, all while praying daily. This is the way of life. This is truth. This is Jesus. Jesus is God, and God is love, and "The Way" is the way of love. Love is manifested in this existence by "being" a certain way. The Way is not a "belief" but an "action." It is incarnational. It is loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. When Thomas asks, "how can we know the way to this place you are going to when you die?" Jesus answers by essentially saying, "You have watched me for three years. You see what I do. How I inclusively love everyone. This is the path, the way, you must follow. It is the truth. I am God and God is in me. So if you want to know how to follow God, how to truly live, look at what I do and do likewise. In this way you will be with me in the Kingdom of God both in this life and the next."

But what about the even more troubling passage where Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." It's often been used as an example of how Jesus is exclusive and that non-Christians are not saved. But if we again understand "The Way" as a way of being, and not right belief, then it makes perfect sense. A faithful Muslim, or Jew, or Hindu, or anyone who strives to love God and love neighbor are following the Way, the truth, and the life. They don't apply the name Jesus to what they do, but they do follow his path. And in doing so they know God the Father.

The Harvard theologian Harvey Cox wrote about Jesus' encounters with other religions. He writes, "The key to Jesus' approach to any religious perspective was, 'You shall know them by their fruits.' He, seemed singularly uninterested in the doctrinal content or ritual correctness of the different religions he encountered. He was, however, terribly concerned about the practical

outcome of their practitioners' commitments. He once told a pagan Roman that he had not found such a faith as his anywhere in Israel.”²

Some may argue that you have to get the name of God right. You have to say you believe in Jesus, not just God. When considering this we must remember again that Jesus IS God. And if we have to get all the names or attributes of God straight in order to reach the heavenly Kingdom, it begins to sound a lot like Gnosticism. If we have to have a correct understanding of God to be saved, then we're all sunk. If knowledge is what saves you, how much do we have to get correct in order to pass the test? No one has a totally correct knowledge of God; it's beyond human knowing.

When I was in seminary I took a wonderful class called “African Religions.” I was curious about other faiths and how people outside the Judeo-Christian framework understood God, the world, and themselves. The class was taught by Professor Lamin Sannah, a fascinating man in his own right. Professor Sannah was born and raised in Africa as a Muslim. His parents were Muslim; his grandparents, however, were animist. They believed in one of the native African religions. As a young man Professor Sannah studied in Europe and eventually came to accept Christ. He is now a practicing and faithful Roman Catholic. Yet with his personal and family background, he's in a unique position to compare and contrast Christianity, Islam, and native African religions.

During the course I was impressed, as were all the other students, as to the sophistication of the Nuer religion, a faith of the Nuer tribe in Africa. It's easy to think that people with what

² Cox, Harvey, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=150>, 5/17/14

we consider a primitive lifestyle would also embrace a primitive religion, but that is not the case. God is a vibrant part of their life in profound and complex ways. In fact, many Christian scholars have studied this particular tribe because their understanding of God and sacrifice are very close to that of the Old Testament. As the course progressed, all the students became increasingly uncomfortable with the belief of some Christians that Christianity is the only way to know God. We asked Professor Sannah, “If Jesus in the gospel of John says, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ how is it that we see evidence of God in the lives of the Nuer people?” Professor Sannah always answered, “Years ago when Christian missionaries brought God to Africa, they were surprised to discover that God had arrived before them.”

There is a passage in Romans where Paul writes, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:13-15a). In other words, knowing God is not about what you believe, but what you do, and what is written in your heart.

And scripture itself tells us of faithful people who are not Christian. Moses speaks with Yahweh and has a profound relationship with God, but he’s not Christian. Adam and Eve also talk to God, and they’re not even Jewish.

In our own Prayer Book there is a prayer, “for all who have died in the communion of your Church, and those whose faith is known to you alone” (BCP p. 391). Not everyone’s faith

will be like ours. This matches what Jesus says earlier in the gospel of John, “I have other sheep not of this fold.” Jesus calls who he wants and it’s not for us to say who is in and who is out.

There are those who are part of Jesus’ flock who look very different from us.

God created all humans to be spiritual beings. We are hard-wired to be in relationship with God. This is true whether we are Christians, Muslims, Nuer, or Spiritual But Not Religious. We all have the capacity to journey on the Way of love, know God now, and live with the Almighty in the eternal. Yet the difference we experience as Christians is we know that God didn’t just talk about The Way, but through the incarnation lived it. God walked alongside us, and continues to walk alongside us today. Jesus embodies for us the way, the truth, and the life, both in this world and the next.

Amen.