

Easter 5A08

The Universal Love of God

One of the things I love about being an Episcopalian is the fact that as a member of this church I am not only given the permission, but am encouraged to wrestle with scripture. We are somewhat unique among Protestant denominations in that way. In fact, interestingly, the tradition that I find most closely follows the path that we follow in our approach to scripture is Judaism. In the Jewish tradition, scripture is holy not because it is word for word the testament of God uttered through humans. But rather, scripture is holy in the Jewish tradition because it is the door into the holy. Through the process of reading and interpreting and re-interpreting and wrestling with and becoming part of scripture a holy process takes place. It is the holy process of coming to know and see and feel and hear and experience God in our lives. In this tradition (this approach to scripture) the text is holy not because it is "perfect" -- something to be sealed for all time -- but because it becomes, through the interpretation of it, a living testament to God's presence in the human experience. Scripture is more like a key that opens a door into our lives. And the great thing is, that key opens many doors for many different lives. That is what makes it holy.

Opening doors into people's lives is an apt metaphor for this morning's gospel reading from John. Because in it, Jesus makes reference to another metaphor . . . the household of God, in which Jesus says there are many rooms or dwelling places. I love that image.

Here is Jesus, speaking to the disciples, giving them this wonderful image of the household of God with many, many rooms for all the many kinds of people that God welcomes into the kingdom. But then Thomas, who speaks for so many of us, asks the question, “how can we get there? We don’t know the way.” And Jesus replies with those beautiful words that Christians have echoed for 2 millennia . . . I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the way . . . follow my path. I am the truth . . . and the truth will set you free. I am the life . . . because knowing that God is in your life brings an appreciation and awareness of the wonder and blessing of life that cannot be compared with anything else.

But then comes the next phrase. It is the one phrase that has been a stumbling block for me with this passage. Because then Jesus says, “No one comes to the father except through me.” “No one comes to the father except through me.” Every time I read John 14, whether it’s at a funeral, or at a Sunday Eucharist, or in a Bible Study I just love it until we get to that line. “No one comes to the father except through me.” In fact, that line has been such a barrier for people that some churches now leave it out of their lectionary reading. . . “No one comes to the father except through me.” Those 9 words have been used by extreme fundamentalist Christians more than any other passage from scripture to claim that unless you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, unless you accept him into your heart, unless you are baptized and become a disciple of Christ, you cannot enter God’s kingdom.

There is just one problem. It is the problem I have always had with this interpretation of that verse. It contradicts everything else Jesus said or did throughout his entire ministry. Everything. Because if there is anything that is clear about what Jesus' life and ministry was meant to convey to us, it is that in God's eyes we are *all* welcome in God's kingdom. Gentile or Jew, Man or Woman, Slave or Free, Rich or Poor, Young or Old, Gay or Straight, Righteous or Unrighteous, everyone in every condition, is loved by God and welcomed by God into whatever that universal gathering of souls is that we call heaven.

So, of course, this passage has presented me with a dilemma. How can everyone be welcome, everyone be loved, everyone be accepted by God if the only true way to God is through belief in God's son? It's a dilemma many of us have faced. If I am to stay true to what I believe my Christian faith is and says, how do I reconcile this passage with the fact that many of the most caring, most giving, most compassionate, most upright, most holy people I know are not Christian? What do I say about my Jewish or Muslim, or Buddhist, or Pagan, or Atheist, or Agnostic friends who are truly good people? I mean, does it make any sense to say that well, you're an amazing person but, sorry, you just haven't done this one thing. . . you haven't become a Christian and, therefore, well, you're damned to hell. No. I'm sorry. That just doesn't work for me.

But, ya know, the providence of God is a constant throughout scripture. And I do believe, as the psalmist says this morning, that God is my crag and my stronghold, and I believe that God will and does lead me and guide me. Even if it takes a lifetime. And so I have remained faithful and continued to search for an understanding of this passage that rings true. Because giving up and just ignoring this passage doesn't work for me either. That would be a cop out. So, what do I do? Well, for those of you who like to cook, I have a way for you to think a little about scripture and how to live with scripture passages like this in your life.

Have you ever found yourself trying to perfect a recipe? You know, you've got a pretty good recipe and every now and then you think, "there's something just not quite right." There is something missing. When I lift that fork to my mouth and taste the final product, something is just not right. So, what do you do? You experiment. You try a little of this. Next time you try a little of that. You bake it a little longer at a lower temperature. Or you change how much you whip the ingredients before you bake them. Well, that's how it is for me with scripture. I wrestle with it. I live with it. I gnaw at it until something about it rings true for me. I actually believe that that is the way to invite the work of God's Spirit into not only my process of growing in wisdom and understanding of scripture, but into the whole of my life. And last year, after so many years of wrestling with this passage, I came across an interpretation of this passage that rang so true for me that it has changed my whole theology of the meaning and purpose for Jesus' life and ministry among us.

The interpretation came from an unlikely source. It came from an African American Evangelical Preacher named Carlton Pearson. And here is what the Rev. Pearson says about this passage.

When Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me” he does not say “and oh, by the way, you have to believe in me for it to be so.” Jesus never says that we must *believe* that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He simply states it as a fact. He IS the way the truth and the life. He does not say that you must believe that no one comes to the Father except through him. He simply states it. Or, to put it another way . . . EVERYONE comes to the Father through him . . . whether you believe it or not.

Pearson makes an interesting analogy between what Jesus says in John 14 and what he calls “the doctrine of air.” You don’t have to believe in air to be a beneficiary of its existence . . . it simply IS. So what Pearson proposes is that it is the same with Jesus. You don’t have to believe in the efficacy of Jesus’ saving acts in history. It’s simply a fact . . . for you, for me and for all of humanity.

When I read that for the first time it was as if a light bulb went on in my head. I thought, now this makes sense! This speaks to my heart. It rings true with my soul. And it gives me peace. Because viewing Jesus’ life and ministry in this way does nothing to diminish who he is in my life. Jesus is still every bit of the Lord and Savior he has been and, God willing, always will be in my life.

It's just that now I don't have to sacrifice what my heart tells me about people of other faith traditions in order to have full faith in the life and witness of Jesus the Christ. What a blessing.

In the conclusion to a book he wrote, Pearson says the following: "Life is good. Life is God. God does not reside in a church, a Bible, a doctrine, or a sermon. God resides in you and me and every one of us. We are each a church. Christ resides in each of us, if we can find the wisdom to see Him.

My prayer for us this morning is that we may each come to know the Christ in us. And by that experience, may we come to see the Christ in every person we meet on this journey that God has blessed us with.

Amen.