

SERMON BY THE REV. BETSY JOHNS ROADMAN, 4/24/05  
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TEXT: JOHN 14:1-14

When I was a young adult, looking for answers to my questions about God, about Jesus, and about the state of my soul, I found a church that had the answers and was eager to share them with me. This church embraced me and took me by the hand to encourage and guide me in my life of faith. One of the Scripture texts that was used as a foundation for the answers that this church had to offer was today's Gospel lesson. Desperately seeking certainty in my spiritual life, I clung to verse six as though to a life raft: "I am the way, the truth, and the life," said Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me." If the Bible is true, as I believed it was, then I could be assured that through knowing and following Jesus, I would be guaranteed to belong to God. What a sense of security that verse gave me! The flip side, of course, was that anyone who didn't know and follow Jesus was apparently denied access to God. Converting others to faith in Jesus was, therefore, the most important work that a Christian could be involved in.

Many years later, I found myself training for health care chaplaincy in a city hospital with a group of people who had extraordinary pastoral care gifts as well as deep faith. Yet, for many of them, Jesus was not the way, the truth, or the life. Some of my colleagues were Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim. As I worked with them week after week, I experienced their genuine connection with and life in God and the very real fruit of their faith. But the Bible said that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. The Scripture text that had given me such security before now brought confusion and even embarrassment. If Jesus is the only way, what does it mean for devout people who are clearly following God, but who are traveling a different path? And if Jesus isn't, in fact, the only way, then what is the "truth" of Scripture?

We read the Bible in public worship, and we study it in small groups and individually because the writings of the Old and New Testament are, for us as Christians, sacred text. We believe that God is revealed to us through Scripture. The stories written there are our stories, and they're essential for our formation as people who seek to know and to follow God within the Christian tradition. But we sometimes hear or read things in Scripture that sound offensive – even hurtful - to us, or seem contrary to what our own experience has shown us. Our tendency might be, then, to disregard what Scripture has to offer.

When we hear, read, or study the Bible, we sometimes forget a couple of things. We tend to forget that the Bible was written, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by people - about their relationship with God and about their understanding of God's relationship with them. It wasn't written by God as a complete and bound document, tossed from heaven into the waiting arms of the faithful. And we tend to forget that the original intention of the writings of Scripture was not to communicate primarily with 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Each writer whose work is included in the collection of texts to which the church has given special authority was addressing a specific situation at a specific time and place.

This might sound as if it's necessary to have a seminary education to even begin to grasp and apply the truths of Scripture, and that we shouldn't ever expect a passage of Scripture to simply speak clearly and directly to our current need or situation. That's not the case. But enabling an ongoing dialogue between the truths of our sacred text and the complexities of our lives and our culture does require careful intention. So what do we do with the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, for example, which, depending on who's reading it and when, would seem to have very different implications?

The place to start is the context in which this specific text came to be written. The Gospel of John was likely composed by a person or a group of people who had known the disciple of Jesus referred to in this Gospel as "the beloved disciple." CNN wasn't there to record everything that happened to Jesus and his disciples. So the conversations and the chronology and the specifics of the events that the beloved disciple remembered and talked about were reconstructed, based on oral and written traditions, throughout the sixty or seventy years between when they took place and when they were written in the form that's been handed down to us. So by the time that the Gospel of John as we know it had been composed, life for its writer or writers was different than it had been during Jesus' ministry – which is the focus of that Gospel.

The writer or writers of the Gospel of John were first century Jews who had come to believe that in Jesus, it's possible to experience God in a completely new way. The personal experience of those first disciples is captured in the words of this Gospel; the joyful certainty of a completely new reality is communicated clearly – even decisively. Those earliest disciples understood Jesus to be the unique revelation of God.

And those earliest disciples were engaged in a ferocious struggle over religious power and identity with other first century Jews who disagreed with them. After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the religious life of Judaism – the focus of which had been the temple – had to be completely restructured. Various branches of Judaism sought to define themselves in opposition to what the others said and did. The language used in the articulation of their self-definitions, in opposition to other groups' definitions of themselves, could be very harsh. That's why there are so many instances in the Gospel of John and in other New Testament writings (including today's reading from Acts) that speak negatively about "the Jews." One Jewish sect, whose members follow Jesus, is criticizing another Jewish sect, whose members don't. It's an argument within one extended family. As most of us know, arguments within families can be especially mean.

Given such a complex and rich background to this and every sacred text that we encounter, we need to hear, read, and study Scripture with nuanced receptivity. We need to be cautious about taking verses and chapters and books of the Bible purely at face value, especially if our motivation is to justify ourself and to judge another. It's important that we recognize that the text brings to us its own context and history. And we must recognize that we bring to the text our own situation, our own needs, and our own unique experience.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” With an understanding of the context, we, as Christians, can neither use these words as a standard by which to claim unique ownership of relationship to God, nor need we disregard them because they sound exclusionary. One scholar writes, “Jesus does not say ‘No one comes to God except through me,’ but ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ ... John 14:6 is the very concrete and specific affirmation of a faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation. ‘God’ [the Father] is not a generic deity here; God is the One whom the disciples come to recognize in the life and death of Jesus. When Jesus says ‘no one’ [comes to the Father except through me], he means ‘none of you’ [with whom he was speaking at the time] ... This is not ... the sweeping claim of a major world religion, but it is the conviction of a religious minority in the ancient Mediterranean world.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It wasn’t the intention of the writers of Scripture to spoon-feed us the only answers to all questions of faith. It was the intention of those writers to communicate their very real and life-changing experience of God and, in the New Testament, of Jesus. We have so much to learn from the writings of our spiritual ancestors. There’s truth in each of their stories and truth to be discovered as we deliberately bring one story in conversation with another.

As a Christian community, may we take the study of Scripture seriously, not simply ignoring texts when they make us feel uncomfortable, but instead, engaging them. May we intentionally consider the truths of Scripture in relation to our lives, and gratefully acknowledge the questions that arise. As followers of Jesus, we affirm that he is the way, the truth, and the life for us. How is he the way for us? How is he the truth for us? How is he the life for us?

Considering together these questions, and the thousands of others that arise at the intersection of Scripture and our lives, may we go ever deeper – in our relationship with God and with each other. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX, page 744.*