

Easter 5A 2023

Today we hear one of the more memorable sayings of Jesus:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Taken out of context, this has been used to argue that only those who believe certain facts about Jesus (that have the right Christology, as we discussed last week), will go to heaven.

Let's look a bit more closely at this passage and see what Jesus is really doing here.

The conversation starts on the eve of the crucifixion.

Jesus has finished washing the disciple's feet and has foretold Peter's denial of him.

The disciples are already feeling a little apprehensive, but they have no idea how challenging the next day will be.

Jesus wants to prepare them so that they do not despair when they witness the full brutality of human beings reacting violently to truth.

Those who can face truth are in the minority.

Those who cannot have various defenses against it.

Jesus begins by telling the disciples not to let their hearts be troubled.

How are they to achieve this?

He tells them to believe in God and in him.

The word translated as “believe” here is often misconstrued.

It means to have confidence in God and in Jesus, to trust in them just as when we say, “I believe in you.”

Jesus is not, in other words, encouraging them to believe *that* God exists, but to trust in God and in Jesus despite the challenging events that are about to unfold.

He is urging them to maintain their relationship with him.

When Jesus speaks of going somewhere, Peter asks, “Lord, where are you going?”

Rather than lay out all that is about to happen, Jesus tells Peter that they cannot follow him now, but they will meet again.

Jesus is saying, in other words, that they need not lose heart over the cruelty exhibited by frightened, insecure human beings.

When we see the heartlessness of some, it can be tempting to abandon our trust in God.

Though the coming events will be difficult to bear, Jesus is saying, they need not give up on the relationships they have built.

Fearful people can rage against the body, but they can do nothing against the soul unless we let them.

Even when those who are destructive rise up, the disciples are not to despair and give up on the relationships that sustain them.

The path leads through many difficulties, but all the children of God will meet in God's house.

“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places” for all kinds of people.

Are you a kind of people?

Then there is a dwelling place for you, “so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Heaven is not a place so much as a relationship with the divine, which is available to everyone who wants it.

Jesus wants the disciples to keep this in mind as their rabbi is arrested, mocked, scourged, spat upon, crucified.

Love persists, but hatred brings about its own destruction.

To further encourage them, Jesus tells his disciples that, though they may be separated, they already know the *way* to the place that he is going.

It is, of course, the way of love.

In response, this time Thomas asks the question on behalf of the group: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

In other words, once again, the disciples misunderstand Jesus because they take him literally.

They think that he is going off to Egypt or India without them.

Jesus means that they know the way to be in relationship with others.

Not everyone does.

Just because people know us, maybe are even related to us, does not mean that they are
in relationship with us.

Some people are stuck in relationship with themselves.

They may talk with us, even live with us, but they do not see us.

They do not recognize our independent needs.

When we suffer, it is a nuisance to them.

When we feel joy, they do not share it.

When we open our hearts to them, they do not receive them (unless they see some
advantage in doing so).

That is not what Jesus means.

The way of love occurs among those who can get outside themselves sufficiently to care
about the well being of others.

When the disciples still do not get it, Jesus tries to explain that he does not mean a literal
journey by telling them that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

He is living out, in other words, what it means to have a meaningful relationship with
God and others.

They therefore should know the way because he has demonstrated how to do it.

He has showed them how when he discussed theology with the woman at the well, when he cried about the community's sadness over Lazarus' death, when he washed the disciples feet at supper, and even in the way he now faces his betrayal.

That is how one behaves who is in relationship with God.

“If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

If you truly are able to be present to others, then you will be present to God, also.

The two are part of the same.

They say they have not seen God, but they have seen God in Jesus' behavior.

“I am the way.”

In other words, the only way to have a relationship with God is to treat others as Jesus has done.

“I am the truth.”

Live out of the same integrity with which Jesus has lived.

“I am the life.”

Be truly alive, as Jesus is truly alive rather than cowering in fear, hiding from truth.

Only by doing as Jesus does do we get outside of our own traps.

Philip is the next disciple to voice the group's confusion.

“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

In other words, they still do not get that it is about relationship, still do not understand that they have seen the Father in action in all that Jesus has done.

He truly saw others, truly related to those who were interested.

The disciples want to see God as a distinct physical entity, at which point they can believe in God as a fact, like believing that the platypus exists.

This is the very thing Jesus is discouraging.

One can understand why he would respond to their confusion by asking, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”

He reminds them that we see God in the actions of others, “I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

What does this mean for us?

First, when we, like the disciples, see those who worship power, those who are trapped within themselves, those whose behavior leads to death rather than to life, we are not to despair, because the loving relationships that we build endure.

God is always relating to us.

We need never despair.

No matter how many people we encounter who may have *a* God but no relationship with the living God, our relationship endures.

Second, it is not our job to change others, but to share with those who wish to share.

We are to seek them out in the knowledge that love persists, but hatred brings about its own destruction.