

Fifth Sunday of Easter; Year A; May 2014
John 14:1-14
The Rev. Devon Anderson

How do you understand the words Jesus speaks in this morning's Gospel? *No one comes to the Father except through me.* These words comprise what many scholars refer to as the most problematic verse in the Christian Scriptures. This is the verse beloved by fundamentalist Christians – their clarion call that proves Christianity is right, and all other religions are wrong. Read alone in isolation, these words do seem pretty straightforward. If you want God, Jesus is the only way.

This past week I attended the Festival of Homiletics – an annual week-long conference during which the best preachers in the country do what they do best – preach! The conference rebooted my battery and I'm feeling brave enough to take on one of the most challenging passages in the Gospel, try to break it open a bit and take a closer look. As I dug deep and looked around I came to the conclusion that this morning's reading is not the divisive, exclusionary distortion that so many interpret to be. Thankfully, narrow interpretations of God's love never hold true for long. Instead it is pure comfort – one of the most inclusive and visionary things Jesus may have ever said, a sort of warm embrace from God. I want to tell you two stories.

Several years ago – in the dead of winter – I was driving east on 94 when the clutch went out. It was rush hour and my car stalled right in the middle of the bridge heading over the Mississippi. Here I was in the middle lane with no safe shoulder in sight, looking in my rearview mirror as cars and buses came careening toward me, swerving at the last minute once they realized I was stalled. I called the 911 operator who ordered a squad car. "Under no circumstances get out of my car," she said, "someone was killed there last month after their car stalled." I was pretty sure I was going to get hurt whether I stayed in my car or not and bending over my steering wheel I began to cry, too scared to watch the oncoming cars in my mirror. A few minutes later someone knocked on my window and there stood a young man. He didn't speak much English – he looked like he might have been from Somalia – but somehow he conveyed that he was going to help me. Somehow – using hand motions and his voice – he managed to route traffic around the left side of my car. He then pushed my car to the right side of the bridge out of harm's way. He stayed with me, not speaking but standing on-guard at the side of my car, until the police arrived. As they approached he gently took my hand, said something I didn't understand about Allah, and then: "It is going to be okay." And then he was gone.

I have thought about how deeply grateful I am for the deep kindness of that man. I marvel at how his first gut response was to jump out of his car and help someone he didn't even know as other people looked the other way and drove by. It's true that the face of Christ comes to us in surprising, unexpected ways. God's presence among us isn't very interested in confining itself to certain kinds of people or dogma or religious affiliation. God appears and is present wherever love is, wherever compassion rules the day, where kindness and mercy manifest themselves.

A second story, this one about 10 years before the first when I was a first-year student at Harvard Divinity School. HDS is an interfaith school – meaning, it is not comprised solely of mainline Christian students preparing for parish ministry! My freshman orientation section consisted of a Coptic nun, an evangelical from the Bronx who had started 7 storefront churches, two rabbinical students, and a former sound techie for Bruce Springsteen. In an attempt to create an Anglican-Episcopal community within the school, I organized a Stations of the Cross service in the school chapel during Holy Week. The service would be for the HDS community, yet run by the Anglican students. I invited Episcopal students to choose a particular station gave everyone who signed up a stretch canvas. They had several weeks to create some sort of art – anything that would reflect their interpretation of their station. It was during the planning stages that I was contacted by a fellow student and friend, a Muslim. He wanted to create a station. I remember feeling surprised by the request – why would a Muslim be interested in Jesus’ last steps and participating in a service like this? We were close enough friends that I actually asked him this question directly. He told me that he really wanted to create a station for Simon of Cyrene – the man who had compassion on Jesus, and who – despite the risks – helped Jesus carry the cross. “I just get him,” he said, “I get Simon. He wasn’t a disciple, probably didn’t even believe in Jesus’ kind of religion, but he recognized persecution and injustice and suffering and God called him to do something about it – to do what was right. And because he was faithful he did it. That’s what the practice of Islam is about.” He went ahead and created the most thoughtful, beautiful station – one that provoked a fresh understanding this little-known character in the Passion.

My friend would tell me later that he had been given an image of God once as the great underground stream. All religions, he said, are like wells down to the underground stream. There is one God, and many paths to that one God. And each of these paths share common markers – a thirst for justice, a value of compassion, a striving for truth, and a confidence in the primacy of love. It is through these common values that people of many wells can see God in one another.

So if experience tells us that there are many wells, many paths, that people of all religious beliefs have access to the living God – why these words from John’s 14th chapter: *No one comes to the Father except through me?* It is important to remember that Jesus was saying these words to his friends at the Last Supper – on the night before his death. He was preparing them for his departure. He is giving them farewell words, assuring his disciples that even though he is leaving them, they will all be together again someday. Immediately before the troubling sentence he tells them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” But their hearts are troubled, their hearts are breaking. They are full of terror and uncertainty and anxiety and Jesus is trying to comfort them. “I’m going ahead to prepare a place for you,” he tells them. But when Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know the way,” he is really saying, “Please show me the way.” And this is when Jesus replies, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”

One of the presenters at this past week's Festival of Homiletics, Barbara Brown Taylor, gives some clear guidance about what's going on here. She tells us that Jesus is not addressing some interfaith conference with Hindus and Buddhists present. Jesus is talking to his close friends at a tender farewell moment. This language then is "confessional language – love language...Jesus is up to his eyelids trying to speak loving words to his brokenhearted and terrified friends. He was giving them everything he could think of to help them survive without him, and he used the singular, exclusive language that people who love so often do. And when John wrote it down, he used that same language too. It's absolute language like we use in our tender and teary moments: "You are the best mother in the whole world. You are the only man for me. No one has ever loved a child the way I love you."

"This extravagant language, love talk – not objective language to judge other religions or people from other faith traditions. This is language from the depths of relationship, spoken only for love to grasp. In that moment Jesus might have said, 'Friends, God is your only true home. I am one way among many paths to God. You must decide for yourselves which way is best.' Would those words have been comforting? If Jesus had said that, these grieving people may have died on the spot from anxiety! He did not say that. He used love language instead: 'I am the only one for you. You have made the right choice. No one can lead you to God better than I.'"