

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2017
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Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Pity the poor preacher whose task it is to preach this day.

First of all, it's Mother's Day. I know that for many of us gathered here today it's kind of a big deal. We love our mothers. We value motherhood. We want to make sure mothers are respected and shown appreciation.

But I also know that for every one who "celebrates" Mother's Day in any of these ways, there is someone else who confronts this day with at least a mixture of harder emotions. For all sorts of reasons, this is a hard day for many among us.ⁱ

I preached on all of this on Mother's Day last year. This year, I simply ask us all to be aware that this is a more complicated day than we sometimes realize.

And then there's the matter of our language for God. In this morning's gospel, read here on Mother's Day no less, Jesus speaks of God as his "Father" thirteen times!

But if, as it says in the first chapter of Genesis, we are all created "in the image of God," both "male and female" alike (Gen. 1:27), shouldn't our imagery for God make room for a Mother-God as well as Father?

But I'm not going to preach on that either. I simply ask us to notice our language for God. And feel free to imagine God as Mother this morning, if it helps.

No, this morning I want to focus on the larger challenge of what we are to do with what we just heard Jesus say in this morning's gospel:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to [God] except through me.

To many – both inside Christendom and those "on the outs" – the meaning is clear and simple: there is only one way to get into heaven and Jesus is that way. All others be damned. Literally.

I'm reminded of an old story about a person who died and was given a guided tour of heaven, which turned out to be very like an enormous house. The angel giving the tour walked the newcomer down a long hallway past "many rooms."

As they passed along the way, the new arrival pointed to a very somber-looking group of people chanting a Gregorian mass, and asked, "What's in that room?" "That's the Roman Catholic room," said the angel. "Very high church."

Going a little further along the hall, they came to a group of half-naked dancers gyrating their hips and occasionally shrieking out loud. "What's in that room?" "That's the Balinese group. Very lively."

Then, pointing to a group of bald-headed people meditating to the sound of an enormous gong, "What in that room?" "That's the Zen group," said the angel. "Very quiet. You would hardly know they're here."

But before they went further, just as they were about to round a corner, the angel stopped and quietly said, "Now, when we get to the next room, I would appreciate it if you just tiptoe past. We mustn't make a sound."

"Why's that?" the newcomer asked. "Because in that room, there's a bunch of fundamentalist Christians, and they think they're the only ones here."

I suspect that even as we may be smugly amused by the naiveté of it all, we're still a little worried that maybe they're right. After all, Jesus' words seem pretty straightforward.

There are at least a couple of problems with hearing these words of Jesus as they are typically heard. In the first place, it ignores both the immediate context in which Jesus is speaking and the broader context of the whole of his life.

First, there's the immediate context. As John tells it, this all takes place as Jesus' last supper with his disciples. He's been telling them what's about to happen to him and to them. And they're kind of freaking out. So Thomas finally bursts out, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Brian McLaren says that the context makes it clear that

... [Thomas] is not asking anything like, "Will people who have never heard of you go to heaven?" It's clear he's not thinking about Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Zoroastrians, followers of tribalism in Africa or South America, much less modern secular atheists or skeptics of modern or postmodern bent. ⁱⁱ

And Jesus doesn't answer a question they're not asking. They're freaking out, so Jesus offers them words of reassurance. He's not telling them anything they haven't already heard. "Don't be troubled," Jesus says. "Trust God. Trust me." You don't have to look for a secret map or a route or a destination; "I am the Way ..." And you won't need someone else to tell you about life or God; "Whoever has seen me has seen [God]." I've told you everything you need to know.

That's the immediate context in which Jesus spoke to them that night.

And his words of reassurance call to mind the broader context of everything Jesus told them and everything Jesus showed them about God. If we want to know who God is, Jesus is saying, we need look no further.

Consider, then, just a few of the things Jesus had to say about his way, his truth, his life:

A sower went out to sow and scattered seed everywhere. EVERY-where!

A farmer found weeds growing in the wheat field and said, "Leave them be!"

A man had a son who stayed at home and kept all the rules, and another who was a loser and a got busted. And the father loved them both!

I am the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep ... and I have other sheep not of this fold besides!

Based on all that we know about Jesus, from the things he said and taught, as well as the things he did and how he treated others, it seems a stretch (and then some) to twist Jesus' words into a threat that God will reject everyone except those who believe in Jesus in precisely the right way.

In an old article by Marcus Borg that I came across many years ago, he told about a sermon preached by a Hindu professor in a Christian seminary several decades before. The text for the day included this verse about Jesus being the Way. The Hindu professor said:

"This verse is absolutely true -- Jesus is the only way." Then, he continued, "And that way -- of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being -- is known in all of the religions of the world." The "way" of Jesus is a universal way, known even to millions who have never heard of Jesus. ⁱⁱⁱ

I am reminded of another story from another faith tradition. It's a Buddhist story about a woman who, like Job out of the Jewish tradition, lived long enough to see everything she loved taken away. First, her husband died, and then another close family member, and another. All that remained to her was her only son, and then he became ill and he died as well. Wailing in grief, she carried the body of her dead child everywhere, asking for help, for medicine that would bring him back to life. But, of course, no one could help her.

Finally, someone told her the Buddha was nearby in the forest, teaching. She approached the Buddha, crying with grief, and said, "Great teacher, master, please bring my boy back to life."

The Buddha replied, saying he would do so, "But first," he added, "you must do something for me. You must go into the village and get me a handful of mustard seed, and from this I will fashion a medicine for your child." It seemed too easy. Mustard seed, after all, was the most common spice in the land, but then he added these words: "There is one thing more, however; the mustard seed must come from a home where no one has died, where no one has lost a child, a parent, a spouse, or a friend."

So she ran to the village and ran to the first house, begging for mustard seed. "Please, please, may I have some?" And the people, seeing her grief, responded immediately. But then she asked, "Has anyone in this home died?" Has a mother or a daughter? A father or a son?" They answered, "Yes. We had a death just last year."

So she ran off and ran on to the next house. Again, they offered her mustard seed. And again she asked, "Has anyone here died?" This time it was a maiden aunt.

And at the next house, it was the young daughter who had died.

And so it went, house after house, in this village. And there was no household she could find which had not known death.

Finally, she sat down in her sorrow and realized that what had happened to her and to her child happens to everyone, that all who are born will also die. So she carried her son's dead body and buried him with the proper rites. And she returned to the Buddha and asked him for wisdom.

Jesus has wisdom to offer us. But it goes beyond admonishing us to adopt a set of beliefs about Jesus. I think to take in that wisdom, we need only take Jesus seriously enough to recall what we know of him from the gospels, to recall Jesus' way, his truth, his life. And recalling that way, that truth, that life, consider how we might walk in that same way, abide in that same truth, and live after the pattern of that same life.

ⁱ See, for example, Anna Howell @ <https://sulfurfreejesus.wordpress.com/2017/05/10/preaching-mothers-day/> (link shared by Facebook friend Evan Fischer on May 11, 2017).

ⁱⁱ Brian McLaren @ <http://psnt.net/mclaren.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus Borg @ <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2000/08/jesus-the-way-the-truth-the-life.aspx>.