

Fifth Sunday in Easter
May 10, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:20-21
John 14:1-14

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

There's a lot that might distract us this morning.

First of all, it's Mother's Day in America. I remind you that's Mother's Day is not on our church calendar, but it's a big deal in the popular culture. And it's an important day for many of us, even as it is more "complicated" for other. So it's a bit of a distraction.

And then there's the irony that even as some of us are thinking about Mother's Day our gospel reading this morning is chock full of references to God as "Father" – 13 times in just 14 verses. It's a powerful image for some, but this metaphor for God obscures the experience for others. So that's another distraction.

Of course, God is not man sitting on a cloud with a long white beard, but it's hard to translate Jesus' sense of intimacy today. "Parent" is, I think, too abstract. If "Mother" works better for you, try it out in your prayers. Or you could replace "Father" with something like "intimate loving Creator," but that's a mouthful – and probably a distraction all on its own.

On top of these other distractions, the biggest distraction this morning may be when Jesus tries to reassure Thomas (and the others), saying:

*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father – the Mother ...
the intimate loving Creator ... no one comes to God except through me.*

I think a lot of us are distracted by those words.

They seem to say – and to say it explicitly – that only our tradition, out of the thousands of religions that are (or ever have been), is correct, and that we are the only ones not going to hell.

And some Christians hold that claim proudly, while many of us – myself included – hold that the "way" and "truth" and "life" of Jesus must be more expansive than that.

There are a few problems with hearing these words as if Jesus is telling us that our religion is the only one that gets us into heaven. The fundamental problem, I think, is that it takes the whole passage out of context – out of the immediate context of this passage in John's gospel account and out of the wider context of everything we know about Jesus.

As for that wider context of Jesus' life and mission, it seems clear – to me, at least – that Jesus cannot possibly mean to say that only those with the correct belief system get to heaven. If we want to know who God is ... if we want to see that God is always for us, Jesus reminds the disciples – and us – to look no further than Jesus himself.

Consider 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!

Don't get distracted by a few words taken out of that wider context. Jesus shows us that "there's a wideness in God's [love and] mercy."

And that wider context holds true in the immediate context at hand this morning. Listen again to how this morning's gospel began:

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled ..."

Everything we heard this morning flows from Jesus' reassuring words.

We might miss the point, so let me remind you of what's going on. Here in church we're five weeks into the Easter season, but these words of Jesus from this morning's gospel go back to Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus' crucifixion. That's the immediate context.

Jesus washed his disciples' feet that night, telling them to love one another in that same way. Judas left Jesus and the others, setting out to betray Jesus into the hands of those who would kill him. Peter promised to remain true, come what may, but Jesus told him the hard truth that he wouldn't be strong enough or brave enough, that Jesus would face death alone.

Our reading this morning picks up from there. In the midst of a confusing and terrifying night, Jesus says to them:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled ..."

That's where our gospel begins this morning. And that's where we might find an entry point for ourselves. Our response is so much like the disciples. They're confused, so they ask questions. Where are you going? Why can't we go with you? "Show us God," Philip says, imagining that a little more information will satisfy his insatiable need to know, to understand, perchance to get some handle on an untenable situation.

And that sounds kind of familiar to me ... and perhaps to you, as well. We struggle to make sense of what's going on in our world. We're confused (and very possibly overwhelmed) by our current circumstances, so we ask questions. We want to know why this is happening, how this is going to play out, what's going to happen. We watch too much news, I suspect, imagining that a little more information might satisfy an insatiable need to know, to understand, perchance to get some handle on an untenable situation.

And if I'm right about all this, then maybe Jesus has a word for us this morning. In the midst of that confusing and terrifying night, Jesus said to his nearest and dearest:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled ..."

And then he told them:

"Believe in God, believe also in me."

Take some care here, though. "Believe" is a weak translation of what Jesus is saying here. It's not a head trip; Jesus isn't telling them to formulate the correct theological understandings about God. (That's part of what distracts us, imagining we need to get our theology right.)

No, just about every time we read the word "believe" in the Bible, we should point to our hearts more than to our heads. We'd be far closer to the point here if we hear Jesus speaking in terms of "trusting" all that is sacred rather than correcting our "beliefs" about God.

Even now, in the midst of our confusing and trying times, and out of a deep and abiding concern for us, Jesus says:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God ... and trust in me."

When Thomas asks Jesus how they can get to a place of safety, Jesus says:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life."

And when Philip asks Jesus to be more clear, Jesus says:

"Whoever has seen me has seen [God]."

He doesn't give them what they want. But he gives them what they need. He tells them they don't need more information, techniques, directions, or instructions. They don't need better theological understandings they can use to demonstrate they've got God figured out. They need nothing more – or less – than to trust all that they've come to know from knowing Jesus.

I think it's like something I came across this past week. It's a couple of letter boards – the signs where you take letters out of a tray and place them on a board to spell out a message.

In this case, imagine a letter board *prayer*. You can tell it's a prayer because it starts out, "DEAR GOD," and ends with "AMEN." But the prayer is everything in between. And everything in between is just a jumble of letters, making no sense at all. That's the prayer: an incoherent mess.



There's a companion letter board, this one the answer to the incoherent prayer. It's clean and crisp and to the point. It reads simply:

DEAR CHILD,
I KNOW.
I LOVE YOU.
- GOD



That's God's answer to the muddled prayer of the disciples. And that's God's answer to all of our muddled prayers, as well: "I know. I love you. God."

The answer to their prayer – and ours – is love. That's the way of Jesus. That's the truth of Jesus. That's the life of Jesus.

We don't need to know more about God than what we know already. Jesus has shown us all we need. Everything else is but a distraction.

That's what Jesus is telling us, what Jesus is showing us, in this morning's gospel. He isn't offering a pedantic lesson in comparative religion, he's offering a pastoral word to those who are confused and anxious and muddled and afraid.

None of us need look elsewhere. There is nothing more we need to do. There is nothing more we need to know.

Based on all that we know about Jesus – from the whole of the gospel record of his life and witness, and from his concern for his wavering friends on the night before his death – we need not worry about the love of God.

There is much about life in these strange days of ours that leaves us confused and uncertain, but the one thing we need never fret about – not for ourselves and not for our world – is the love of God. That may not tell us everything we want to know. But we get what we need.