

## Easter 5A

All Saints, Saugatuck

John 14:1-14

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It's wonderful to know that even after being a parish priest and preacher for more than 50 years, it's possible to discover a new way to understand a passage of Scripture. This has been my experience this past week with today's Gospel reading. People choose the first six verses of this passage to be read at funerals more than any other Scripture. Period. So, it's not unfamiliar. Its choice for funerals is not surprising with Jesus speaking words like, "I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." So far, so good. But then, we come upon the final words of verse six: "No one comes to the Father except through me." The truth is that many clergy, including me, find this statement downright unchristian, and many of us simply ignore it when reading the passage at a funeral.

To be honest, I've never been a great fan of the Gospel According to John's way of portraying Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus tells pithy stories to make his point. The parables, like the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, to name just two of many, convey powerful messages about who God is and how we can live into our vocation as God's children by loving one another and by expanding our understanding of who is acceptable to God.

By contrast, instead of giving us a Jesus who is a story teller, John is prone to put Jesus in the role of theologian, indeed a theologian who delivers discourses about himself. And in these discourses – today's and others – the Jesus of John often makes ultimate and exclusive claims about his identity and his role. "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits...'" Really? Or again, from today's passage, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." These words have been used countless times, down through the ages, to justify anti-Semitism, or to communicate that only Christians are within the realm of God's grace, or even worse, that anyone who isn't baptized or who hasn't confessed that Jesus is Lord, or who doesn't believe what I believe will be consigned to the fires of hell!

Yet, although I remain clear that these passages in John too easily lend themselves to an exclusive interpretation, which is not acceptable, what I've seen this past week is that there is also another way to understand John Chapter 14. During most of Easter Season, we read passages about Jesus' disciples encountering him after the resurrection. But today the Lectionary gives us a passage that takes us back to the night before the crucifixion, back to the Last Supper.

Here, Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for what is to come. And as he tells them that they cannot accompany him on the painful journey he is about to undertake, they, realizing that the one on

whom they have pinned all their hopes is about to take a journey none of them would want to take, they experience a mixture of confusion and despair.

It is from their fear that we need to interpret Jesus' responses that otherwise appear self-aggrandizing and exclusive. When in response to Jesus' saying, "You know the way to the place where I am going," Thomas replies, "We don't [even] know where you're going, how can we know the way?" It may seem pretty obvious to us where Jesus is going, but my guess is that the disciples can't get beyond, "He's leaving us."

So when Jesus comes back to Thomas with, "I am the Way, and the truth and the life," it is to reassure Thomas and the others. "You can trust me. For I am the way. I know what I'm talking about. I know where I'm going." Even when Jesus adds, that troubling, "No one comes to the Father except through me," we can read this as Jesus' offering them further assurance, "Believe me, because I alone have the authority to bring you to my Father. No one else could do this; but I can do it."

Then, in this same passage, Philip makes the incredibly audacious demand of Jesus, "Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied." Jesus' responds, in essence, "How can you be so obtuse, when I have been with you all this time, showing you by my teaching and actions what God is like?" Jesus' repeated words to Philip, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" have always seemed to me just more example of John's determination to make Jesus divine. But when I think that Philip's demand is related to his whole world being about to fall apart, and he is desperate to find comfort and hope, in that situation, I believe Jesus is simply offering reassurance. "It's okay, Philip. The Father is actually right here. The Father is present in me. And whatever you need, all you have to do is ask it of me."

So, the major point I want to make regarding all of this is that Jesus' words of reassurance to the disciples don't just come out of thin air. He isn't just standing up and offering a theological address. He's responding to the angst of his followers. But another crucial observation is that his assuring them that things will work out in the long run comes not in spite of, but *only* after they honestly express their panic concerning what is about to happen.

How this happens is consistent with the whole tradition of the Hebrew Bible. I talked in a recent sermon about how Moses complained when God told him to confront Pharaoh and demand that he set God's people free. "I can't do it. I won't be able to find the words to convince Pharaoh." Yet then, far from Moses' reluctance putting God off, it actually provided the opportunity for God to provide a solution in the person of Aaron, Moses' articulate brother.

The place where we see this tendency to express honest doubt and complaint, followed by relief and acts of praise, appears most often is in the Psalms. Psalm 13 is a fine example of what are called Psalms of lament. Listen.

- 1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?
- 2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?
- 3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
- 4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
- 5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
- 6 I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

Thus it was in the Old Testament witness and in the witness of Jesus, who showed us a God who was far from unmoved or dispassionate, but passionately engaged in our life and responsive to our struggles, so that we might not just live, but have fullness of life in Jesus' name.

We do well to remember Jesus' answer to Thomas. "I am the way." At the same time, we need to remember that the way Jesus comes to the Father is through suffering and the Cross. At times like we are currently experiencing, it's okay to express unhappiness, or fear. We don't have to pretend that everything is fine, because we know even now that Jesus has already traveled whatever road we're on and is walking beside us. For he honestly is the way, the truth, and the life, and following him will lead us to the Father who is the source of life abundant.

Amen.