

THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE
Sermon Preached By Elder Barbara Wheeler
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
September 3, 2017

Acts 3:1-10; 4:7-12

John 14:5-6

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Let’s suppose that we could temporarily clear this sanctuary of its fixed pews so that I could invite you all to group in the center of the room. In one corner would be posted signs with key lines from today’s scripture readings: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” “There is salvation only in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” In the opposite corner, the signs would read, “There are many paths to God.” “All religions deserve our respect.” I would then remind you of this summer’s guiding question for preachers, “Finding a way forward: Is there a path to healing?” and I would ask you to move in the direction of the statements that you think are more likely to promote healing—to save (for that is what salvation means) not just individuals but our fractious and fractured country and world.

I don’t think I need to take an actual poll to tell you what would happen. For the time I have been coming here to preach on Labor Day weekend—more than two decades—there have always been loyal participants in this congregation who do not belong to Christian churches. And this summer’s lineup of preachers is testimony to your eagerness to learn from other traditions: You’ve hosted a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew and even a Unitarian, a tradition founded explicitly to make room for people who believe all the truths of Christianity except the claim that Jesus Christ is God. I’m pretty sure that so many of you would be clustered in this corner, under the many paths to God sign, that the Session might have to start another fundraising campaign to shore up the floor and foundation.

So, what does this mean? Is the first step for people like us seeking a way forward amid deep, even murderous, conflict among political parties, and nations, and religions to ignore, dispense with, cross out the exclusive-sounding scripture passages that Cara and I read today? My answer to that question is yes—and no. Let me explain.

Yes, I can’t accept some interpretations of these passages that have been held for a long time and are still widely accepted today. I do not believe that those who live in families, ethnic groups and countries where they have a good chance of hearing about Jesus have a crack at eternal life, and that those who have no such opportunity are out of luck. If the God made

known to us in scripture is anything, that God is just. Such a God would not, could not, favor parts of the world where Christian missionary activity has been successful and leave the rest to burn. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and insightful Christian writer, has strongly influenced my thinking about these matters. He puts it this way: What kind of God “punishes people for not being in the right place at the right time?”

Certainly not the kind of God that those of us who are Christian have come to know in Jesus Christ who “did not count equality with God as something to be exploited...but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:6-7). If the Jesus we know from scripture is anything, it is humble. He took human form, became just like us, died our kind of death, which he seemed to have feared as much as we do. He was not—I’m convinced—a self-promoter who came to earth to plaster his name on everything.

And then there is the Spirit, whose distinguishing characteristic in scripture is freedom. Like the wind, “it blows where it chooses: you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.” Who are we to instruct the spirit of God that only those who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior may occupy one of those mansions reserved for God’s special friends in heaven?

So, exclusivism, the view that salvation is reserved for those who make an explicit Christian commitment, is out of character for the very God we Christians profess—the just Father, the humble Son and free-wheeling Spirit. There is a practical problem with that exclusivist view as well. Jesus’s ultimate purpose in taking human form, dying and being raised from the dead was not to save favored individuals but to bring light and life to the whole world (John 12:12). Christian exclusivism doesn’t support that project; it hinders it. The view that all the tollgates on the path to salvation are under Christian control and all other roads are closed has fueled millennia of religious prejudice and discrimination. It’s been the justification for pogroms, inquisitions and more wars than anyone can count. In extreme and perverted form, it has brought us ethnic cleansing and the Holocaust. Christian exclusivism does not project into the whole world the light of Jesus who came to bring peace to those far off and those who are near (Ephesians 2). It blocks the light. In short, exclusivism is wrong.

Should we then simply blot out passages like John 14 and Acts 4 that Christian exclusivists use to support their case? I say no but before I give my reasons, let’s look more closely at what looks like the alternative, pluralism, captured in those signs in the other corner—“there are many paths to God,” and therefore “all religions deserve our respect.”

On the face, all the arguments I made against exclusivism seem to support pluralism: God would not arbitrarily and cruelly condemn whole continents to perdition because of how Christianity happened to spread; Jesus came not to build monuments to himself but to lift up the poor and the weak; the Spirit has an unconventional streak and does not like to be forced into doctrinal channels dug by human beings. And again, practically, mutual respect among

religions seems to dispose to the kind of peace and fellowship that are marks of a world healed and redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ.

Strongly as pluralism attracts us, however, I do not think that deep down, most of us are complete pluralists. Most of us are doing everything we can to counter and correct the Islamophobia that has spread through this society like an epidemic, but that does not include support for the Islamic State and its atrocities despite claims that the Caliphate is a theocracy governed by Muslim religious law. We respect Hinduism as one of the world's great religions but we cannot condone dowry murders, which occur at the rate of one an hour worldwide even though the phenomenon is rooted in the religious myth of Sita who allowed herself to be banished and swallowed up by the earth to preserve the honor of her husband, Rama. And in our own religious backyard: When Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church show up outside military funerals with signs that say "God hates fags," we are horrified. By the exclusivist standard—those who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior are Christian—the Westboro Baptists are legitimate Christians but by our operating definition they are not. Some religious beliefs and practices do not qualify for our respect. Pluralism has its limits.

It seems that neither strict exclusivism nor wide-open pluralism can be depended on to move us down the path to healing the world. So, is there a way forward? Let's look in greater depth at the two passages I'm not quite ready to snip out of my Bible.

"I am the way, the truth and the life." Scholar Marianne Meye Thompson, an expert on the gospel of John, thinks it is no accident that "the way" comes first and is emphasized in the next phrase: "No one comes through the Father except through me." She suggests that the way of Jesus is the path to truth and life in God. We and the world are saved not by gathering under the Jesus banner and chanting Jesus cheers but by living as he lived.

And what is this way of Jesus? Peter and John accomplish the healing of the crippled beggar at the Beautiful Gate by following the way. Here is what they did: "Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.'" They honored the beggar's dignity by looking at him, and asked him to reciprocate. It was a way of affirming their common humanity, of recognizing that, deep down, the beggar's aspirations were as high and noble as their own—not just to get their money, not just to be healed but to go into the temple with them to worship.

The way of Jesus is to look intently at others, especially those who, like Jesus, are the stones rejected by the powerful builders, and to see in those others the image of God. This is not something that human beings do naturally. I can testify to that.

If you spend time in a city, as I do, you are likely to encounter people begging on every corner, sometimes in front of every store. Experts differ on how to respond. Some say to offer to buy food or health and hygiene supplies. Others say to give money to social service organizations instead of responding directly. I've tried both strategies. Neither feels quite right, so recently I've decided to follow Pope Francis' advice about what to do when street people ask you for money: He says, "Give it to them. It is never wrong to give."

Giving whenever asked hasn't felt quite right either, and I think I know why. As I've handed out quarters or bills, I have to admit: I usually look away, eager to do the right thing but afraid to engage. I went back to the Pope's statement as I worked on this sermon, and I saw that I had failed to read to the end. "Tossing money and not looking in [their] eyes," the Pope said, "is not a Christian" way of behaving.

We do not naturally look intently at the dirty, disheveled, strange or threatening other. But we can, with the help of God's grace. We Presbyterians are often attacked for ideas about predestination and total depravity, but we have some very attractive doctrines as well. One of them is common grace, the notion that God makes the special power to reach across divides, to see the other, to heal divisions—God makes saving grace available to everyone. Whether they have ever heard the name of Jesus Christ or not, everyone can, with God's help, follow in the way of looking intently and lifting up the rejected that leads to truth. It is that way, I would argue, a way that we Christians believe was perfected in Jesus, that distinguishes the worship of the living God from false religion.

Rowan Williams, whom I mentioned before, puts it this way: Jesus Christ may not be the answer for everyone, but he does pose a question or challenge for everyone. The challenge is reconciliation. Religious groups that reach out, that see and touch those who suffer, that seek to reconcile us, one to another and to God, those groups meet the test of true faith and deserve our deep respect.

Friends, you have given yourselves a great treat this summer. You have gathered wisdom about the way of reconciliation from Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and several brands of Christianity. In the months to come, as you go your separate ways, use the wisdom to impel and inspire you to do your part to repair the world. Give lavishly of yourselves to projects that aim to put our fractured world back together. And look intently into the eyes of those who have no one else to look at them. There you will find healing, and truth and life.

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