

SERMON FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER 2020 YEAR A

This morning's Gospel reading contains some of the most familiar and comforting verses from scripture. But it also contains some of the most troubling, at least for many twenty-first century western Christians. When Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father, except through me," many hesitate. Does it take us back to our youth where a stern Sunday school teacher or priest has gone on at length against anyone who does not believe in Jesus - the way they believe in Jesus, warning that unless we conform, we will be in trouble! As mature adults today, let us begin by looking at what otherwise would keep us from hearing Jesus' words as good news.

Jesus was preparing his closest followers for his imminent departure at this point. They are more than a little confused. Jesus says he is going to his Father's home to prepare a place for them, where he will come and take them to himself so that where he is, they may also be. I have read these words at virtually every funeral or memorial service I have ever led, for they certainly are words of astounding comfort and hope.

Life as God designed it, is not confined to this world or to this brief life on earth. The risen Lord has returned to his Father's dwelling place to make room for each of us. And when the time comes for us to make that transition, we can expect none other than the risen Lord to receive us to himself that where he is, we may also be.

This is the first remarkable promise in today's Gospel reading. While the disciples are still trying to take all this in, Jesus tells them they know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas voices the question everyone is silently asking. "Lord, we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Jesus responds with, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The words are as astounding as they may be troubling. They are astounding because Jesus has just used the ineffable name of God for himself. This is one of an entire series of "I am" sayings that appears in John's gospel, wherein Jesus uses God's name as his own and adds to it a life-giving metaphor: "I am the bread of life; I am the Light of the world; I am the Good Shepherd; and the most revealing of all, before Abraham was, I am.

Unfortunately, the shock heard at these words today is different. Almost as a reflex we hear ourselves asking, "what about those who are not Christian?" The question is asked, not so much out of disbelief as of concern. It can be answered from one of several perspectives.

First, though, we as Christians belong to Christ, having been joined eternally to him in Baptism, Jesus does not belong to US. We are His, He is not ours! That is something often forget. We are the Lords, his promise is for us - and we are to share this good news with all who will receive it. But we do not control it nor have we the authority to place limitations on it. The question may be asked, where did we get the notion that Jesus' statement that 'He is the way, the truth and the life pertains exclusively to Christians? This brings us to the second perspective.

Earlier in the Gospel reading Jesus has said, "I have other sheep not of this fold". Jesus has the freedom to call whomever he chooses, however he chooses, whenever he chooses, even if they may not know it. This answers the question about people of other faith traditions who are leading a holy life, who are clearly in contact with the living God but do not confess Jesus as Lord.

The apostle Paul reminds us that "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them". God has acted in Jesus Christ on the world's behalf. What God did in Jesus Christ, God did for the world. What makes us arrogant enough to believe that the outcome depends on our choice? Jesus is the human face of God. He has come among us as one of us, for all of us. As Jesus himself tells us, "to know the Son is to know the Father." There is a unity to this truth.

The unity is such that even the words that he speaks are not his but the Father's. He is God's own self-expression; we call him God's Word. He tells his followers that if they are not able to accept this on the strength of what he says, then they should do so on the strength of the works they have seen him do. Those who do what is true come to him.

This leads to the astounding promise: "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, will do even greater than these, because I am going to the Father." What do you make of that promise?

I find it very confronting myself – Jesus says that those who believe in him have the power to do his work, and even more, because he is returning to the source of all power.

We often doubt ourselves, see ourselves as not being worthy to carry out tasks – even when we know in our hearts and minds that we are not alone, that God is driving us on to fulfill His ministry, the ministry he sent His Son to 'set up' and leave for us to continue in His name – Jesus came as a servant to serve others.

As Jesus prepares to return to the Father, he tells us that you and I have access to the same power, when asked in His name. He promises to do whatever we ask in his name.

Now we need to be clear – this is not a promise for chocolate cake at the drop of a hat, or straight A's without work if you are a student, instant parking places, though Peter prays to the “parking Angels” and it seems to work every time!

It is a promise Jesus gives to his body, the church. This is the meaning of asking in His name. To the extent that what we ask of the risen Lord is in keeping with His will and purpose for the church in the world. That he will do in and through us. You and I.

Indeed, we have seen great works, whether that has been the world-wide spread of the gospel with his word of love, forgiveness and reconciliation in the search for peace, his work to heal and make whole as the church has established hospitals and schools all across the globe, research for better health, even the least of these now, woven into the ethics around many parts of the world. Whatever we ask in his name he promises to do. There is no power shortage here for any of us, so long as it is Christ's work we are taking up.

What does that mean for us as his body as we face the complex questions of Covid 19 with the loss of so many lives around the world. What does that mean for us as his body as we face the challenge of global ecology?

What does that mean about confronting the challenges of the decline in the church for us? Every study that has ever been undertaken on evangelism and church growth says the same thing: it happens when the members of the congregation begin to take up their responsibility for inviting people-family, friends to worship. When you and I begin to speak openly and unapologetically about the faith that sustains us - the power of God engages our words to do God's work, and people respond.

We do not need to prove the truth of the Gospel or Jesus' claims. We simply need to confess them, bear witness to them, say “come and see,” trusting the power of God to do the rest.

Let us Pray: Loving God, help us to believe in your Word when we struggle in our daily lives, help us to rest in your promise that you have prepared a place for all who believe in you. Amen.

Rev'd. Yvonne Riley