

Easter V

“In God’s house there are many dwelling places, If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” John 14:1

This passage from John’s Gospel is for many people perhaps the most comforting in all scripture. The King James Version has it: *In my Father’s house there are many mansions*; a vision of spaciousness beyond spaciousness, the endless vastness of God’s heaven, the wideness of God’s mercy. I often suggest this Gospel to a grieving family, to be read a funeral service, and they generally agree with grateful eagerness.

But then, as so often in Scripture, a welcoming and consoling statement is followed rapidly by something problematic and troublesome, in this case, *I am the way, the truth and the life*. You know, this is the passage you often see cited on roadside signs and highway overpasses in certain parts of the country: **John14:6** , they proclaim. This saying attributed to Jesus by John poses the same difficulty for many of us as did the figure I mentioned last week: *I am the gate*.

These claims suggest the opposite of what Jesus has just promised: the expansiveness, the inclusivity, of God’s house. These claims seem to propose that, as John has Jesus say elsewhere, everyone who comes to God must come by way of Jesus. So, what about Jews who are not followers of Jesus? What about Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, secular humanists, and all the millions of other people throughout the world who do not acknowledge Jesus as *the way*? Does God’s house have room for them?

I remember the first time I heard someone preach on this Gospel, and it was indeed at a funeral, the funeral of a young man who had died of AIDS. This was back in 1989 or so, before cocktails, before advances in drug treatments that allow so many to live with AIDS. And before this diocese had passed resolutions allowing for the ordination of qualified gay and lesbian candidates, or for the blessing of same sex relationships. Less than 20 years ago, and it feels like the Dark Ages in some ways.

Dark Ages enough so that my friend and colleague who preached from John’s Gospel at the funeral challenged us all to believe, and to confess that we believed, that God’s house did indeed have room in it for Brian, who had died, and for all of us who did not fit a certain mold. That sermon was controversial then. And I suspect that sermon would be controversial now, if not downright heretical, to many of those who plant signs proclaiming **John14:6**.

How do we deal with these apparent inconsistencies in Jesus' message? How do we reconcile them in our daily lives of faith and practice? How do we confront the apparent hypocrisy of Christians who would elevate claims of Christian exclusivism and God's wrathful judgment over promises of divine forgiveness, mercy and hospitality?

In a few moments we will welcome James Leroy King into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, here at St. John's, a baptism is a special joy. And a baptism is always, as well, an opportunity for us to ask what we are indeed welcoming James into. What is this house of God we are talking about, and that we imagine awaits him, and all of us who follow Jesus?

Those of you who hear me preach regularly will imagine easily how I dispatch the question of Christian exclusivism. Many years ago I read a book which set me on my path regarding this question, a book about the Gospel of John called **The Human Face of God**, by Bishop John A.T. Robinson. Robinson argues that we should read Jesus' claim here with the emphasis on his nouns, not his articles. That is, not *I am THE way*, but *I am the WAY*. Not THE truth, but the TRUTH. Not THE life, but the LIFE.

Those of us who have been reading or hearing Marcus Borg, the contemporary biblical scholar, are familiar with this approach. Jesus is the way to God, and that way is suffering. Buddhist teaching would agree with that: suffering is the way to holiness. And Jesus' passion for justice, his preference for the poor and oppressed, his healing touch and his teachings of mercy and forgiveness – these are tenets and foci of all major religious traditions. Most of us here today would agree with such an approach quite readily, I think. But in 1973 when Bishop Robinson published his book, or when I read it in 1980, the arguments were fairly revolutionary. And I suspect, as much as any other book, this one helped me to stay in the Church and to preach Jesus.

But many who call themselves Christians today would find Bishop Robinson heretical. And one of the claims we make on James today, and make for him, is this: we claim him into an understanding of Christianity that is truly welcoming, truly inclusive, and which does not pronounce itself to be the only way to salvation, to holiness, to heaven –whatever heaven may mean.

In a few moments James's parents and godparents will be asked, on his behalf, *Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?* They will answer, on his behalf, *I do*. And if we stop to think, we may find this exchange problematic, as we associate the confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior with a Christianity that does make

claims of judgment and exclusivism, that does dwell on personal sanctity and salvation rather than on justice, peace, and hospitality for the stranger.

What does it mean to accept Jesus as our Savior? And not, following Robinson and Borg, not THE Savior, but OUR Savior? Not THE way, but OUR way? Well, it means to accept a radical thought and spirituality. Following Jesus as OUR Savior means following Jesus the Jew; Jesus the piercing prophet; Jesus the indiscriminate healer of lepers, the blind, the lame, the possessed, the bleeding; Jesus the controversial teacher; Jesus the resurrecter of abandoned human lives; Jesus the Good News for all; Jesus the presence of God in flesh and blood; Jesus the authentic revolutionary; Jesus the exacting spiritual director. It means accepting Jesus as the Glory of God, that is, the One who manifests to the whole world how God's glory is available to any and all of us.

That's what accepting Jesus as our Savior means for us here today, as we renew our own baptismal vows and as we promise to support James in his. It's a tall order. It's an order that leads, if we are faithful, to a transformation of hearts and minds, a transformation of lives. It's the order that's the journey of a lifetime.

One translation of our Gospel text for today, apparently an accurate translation and a reflection of life in first century Palestine, is this: *In God's house are many way stations. That is, In God's house are many stopping places. In God's house are many points along the journey.*

We are all of us at one of those points in the journey. Wherever we may be at this moment we pause to welcome James aboard. And we promise to journey with him along the *way, our way*, in company with the One who goes to prepare a place for us in the everlasting heart of God. Alleluia! Amen.