

Sermon for chapel, 8 May 2009 / Mary Hess / Luther Seminary

From the Gospel of John, in the 14th chapter:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way." Thomas said to him, "Master, 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."

My practice is to preach from the text appointed for the day by the Roman Catholic lectionary. When I originally looked up the date in the daily lectionary, my heart sank within me. This is not an easy text, and the thought of living closely with it for a couple of weeks did not thrill me.

Actually I'm fine up until verse 6. I think the notion of Jesus preparing a place, and of a house with many dwelling places, is widely expansive and powerful.

But what does it mean to claim that “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”?

On first read, from the point of view of Christian “insider,” I suppose this text can be heard as comforting. The text says: “No one comes to the Father except through me” and an insider might draw the conclusion that “I’m a Christian insider, I’m ok, if I go down this path, I’ll get to the father.”

But what about if you read it as an outsider, or even just a newcomer? Then what? It’s hard not hear this text and infer judgment. It’s hard not to hear this text without also inferring that those not on this way are condemned to die without the promise of eternal life. Indeed, there are all sorts of verses scattered throughout the gospel of John that lend themselves to taking that extra step.

And we certainly have a long history in the Christian community of sustaining contempt for other communities of believers. Even that hallowed saint Martin Luther wrote some things about Jews which we grieve.

I cannot read this text, then, without hearing it through the ears of my friends and colleagues, my family members, who are not Christian.

Let me be honest. I’ve struggled with this text for weeks now, and I stand in front of you with fragments, pieces of ideas which I find compelling in relation to it. But I cannot

“solve” it. In fact, for a while I thought about simply reading the text, and standing here in silence while images of the shameful ways Christians have used this text played out on the screen behind me.

I won't subject you to the images.

But I do refuse to solve this text. I prefer to live in its interstices, the hard places, the ruptures that this text opens up, rather than attempting to pretend they are not there, or that there is a simple way to paper over them.

I have just three reflections to offer to you:

(1)

My friend and colleague AKM Adam writes of Christian leaders that:

“our job is to discern how to make affirmations in a world of ambiguity, how to deal with uncertainty in an uncertain world. That involves reliance on God, not because God resolves our ambiguities into clear-cut, iron-clad certainties that circumvent our travails, but because in turning to God we enter a Way...”

So my first thought about this text is that it is God, in Jesus, who is speaking of “the way, the truth, the life.” It is God who is speaking. God can do that. I can turn to God, and enter a way which leads to God. That is an affirmation. But I do not have to take the next

step, and turn that affirmation into a claim by which I, as a human being, judge who is and is not on the Way, who does or does not “have” the truth. If I do that, I am on deeply shaky ground.

In this text Jesus is claiming that he is intimately part of God, an affirmation that centuries of Trinitarian thought have affirmed. This is God speaking.

I am not God. I am human. I may not, I *can* not, turn this verse into a judgment on those who do not make a similar affirmation. To the extent that any Christian does so, we are blaspheming.

(2)

Which brings me to my second point, something I gleaned from the work of my colleague Craig Koester, who has written extensively on this gospel. He writes of this verse that:

“The words “no one comes to the Father” (14:6b) level the distinctions between people by directing attention to the separation from God that all human beings share. This negative assessment of humanity’s situation underlies the Gospel’s positive presentation of Jesus as the way. *John* does not identify Jesus as the way in order to close off relationships with God, but to open up relationships with God where sin has created separation (4:6a).” (211) (*The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel*, Craig Koester, Eerdmans, 2008).

So my second thought is that far too often we read this text as quick reassurance *for* ourselves, rather than condemnation OF OURSELVES. We want to hear Jesus' reassurance without hearing the hard words that name our broken, fallible, sinful selves:

No one comes to the Father.

(3)

Craig goes on to write:

“The particular and the universal aspects of the Gospel’s message are counterparts to each other and must be heard together. On the universal side, the gospel assumes that sin separates all people from God. This is understood to be a basic dimension of the human condition.... This is where the particular aspect of the message comes in. When Jesus says “I am the way and the truth and the life,” he speaks of a gift that God extends to human beings through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus can be called “the way” for others because he has gone the way of death and resurrection himself.” (213)

My third thought draws from this distinction between the particular and the universal.

Universally Christians claim that human beings are sinful, mortal, fallible creatures. This is a recognition that doesn't have to be stated in Christian terms to be believed, it's

something we all experience. But how do we talk in universal terms about this most amazing love that God has poured out on our behalf?

It might be easier to read this text if it was about “a” way “a” truth, “a” life. But that is not how human beings love.

When I speak of my love for my husband, and the sacred vow we made in the sacrament of matrimony, I do not -- I cannot -- speak of “a” husband. He’s not just any old husband. He is *my* husband. I also cannot speak in ideal, universal terms of “the” husband (sorry Eric!). Rather he is MY husband.

Poets know something of what it means to speak of the universal in precisely situated ways.

Roberto Goizueta puts it this way:

“We discover the whole, or the universal, not by adding up the particulars, but by entering fully into their very particularity, *within which* we will encounter their universal significance: ‘To know is to recognize the specific phenomenal activity that, in each case, reveals to us the Universe.’” (97) (*Caminemos con Jesús*, Roberto Goizueta, Orbis, 1995).

So it is life-giving for me, as a Christian, to speak from my particularity about this love

that was poured out *for me*, this love that I encounter in my unique specificity, in the unique human specificity of Jesus.

Let me go back to Craig again:

“It is not a general idea of love, but God’s particular act of love that is at the heart of this Gospel.” (214)

And even further, Craig notes:

“This means that the Gospel writer cannot say, “Jesus is the way for me but not for you.”

To say that would be to say that “the love of God is for me but not for you,” or that

“Jesus went the way of the cross and resurrection for me but not for you.” (214)

The whole Bible witnesses to God’s love *for all*. I won’t go into the many bible verses I could quote here, but let me rattle off just a few:

John 1:29: “Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”

John 3:17: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the *world* might be saved through him.”

Romans 5:18: As one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*.”

Romans 11:32: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to *all*.”

Colossians 1:19-20: “For in him all the fullness of god was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven.”

(139)

(these are collected in an essay entitled “The universal significance of Christ,” by Clark Williamson in the book *Seeing Judaism Anew*, ed. by Mary Boys, Sheed&Ward, 2005)

So we speak from our specificity as Christians of a very specific love that is yet deeply universal. When we do so in ways that evoke that sense of connection, of that universal, I think we are speaking the gospel. When we do so in ways that wall people off from each other, however, when we speak of God, of Jesus Christ, in ways that narrow and condemn, we are in fact “stepping off the way,” turning from the path.

None of this fixes the text for me. Indeed, I find myself more reluctant than ever to proclaim it aloud in the narrow, exclusive, monolingual, monocultural church contexts I find myself within. Preaching this text to insiders vitiates it.

But I do find myself able to witness to a longing for God, and a fulfillment of that longing, in the specificity of Christian faith, in my witness to Jesus. I am not God. I will not speak of “the” way, “the” truth, “the” life. But I can sing in petition “come my way, my truth, my life.” I can pray in specific ways to the God I know through the life and death and life of Jesus Christ.

And in sharing this witness beyond insiders, I will return to these three points in particular: (1) that it is God speaking, not human beings; (2) that this text speaks to our brokenness as human beings, and when Christians use it to condemn others we only further display that brokenness; and finally, (3) this is a love so specific, paradoxically, that it is universal. But it is not a love I can control, a love I can embody, but only a love I can bear witness to. As such it is welcoming and reconciling, not judging and condemning.

Alleluia, amen.