

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 10, 2020

ACTS 7:55-60 | PSALM 31:1-5, 15-16 | 1 PETER 2:2-10 | JOHN 14:1-14

With only one exception that I can think of, today's gospel reading has been read at every funeral I have done here. It's easy to understand why. St. John's descriptions of what he calls eternal life can often feel cryptic and difficult to understand, but they feel a little easier to grasp in this reading.

This is good for funerals, but it poses at least two problems for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. First, having looked at this text again and again, it is unlikely that I'll have something new to say about it. Second, on the off chance that I do find something new to say about it, the smart thing to do would be to save it for the next funeral.

To avoid both of those pitfalls, I want to try something different today. Instead of making this a story about something that happens after death, let's try to think of it in terms of life. And to do that, let's pick just one line to focus in on. "I," Jesus says, "am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Pause for a second to think about your own understanding of what that line means. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

When this line is invoked, it's often in a kind of triumphantly exclusivist way. No one can come to the Father except through Jesus. So if you don't believe in Jesus, then you don't get to come to God. Who gets to experience what John's Jesus calls eternal life? No Jews, no Muslims, no Hindus, no Buddhists, no Sikhs, no atheists, no agnostics, and, while we're at it, no Christians we don't care for either.

We often object to that kind of exclusivist thinking because we live in a pluralistic society, and it feels uncouth and tacky to be opining on other people's salvation. (It is.) But it isn't wrong just because it's bad manners. It actually gets something about God wrong as well. It assumes that our relationship with God and with each other is static. It doesn't move. It doesn't change. It doesn't evolve. It's salvation by Excel spreadsheet.

Ask the people who make that exclusivist argument what it means to believe in Jesus or what it means to be saved or what it means to come to God, and they'll give you some story about you getting right with God. You making the right confession of faith. You having the right beliefs. You performing the right rituals. In short, saying Jesus is here. And you need to get lined up with him. Check the box. Make the statement. Hold the belief. Yes or no. Do or don't. Turn or burn.

What's interesting about that way of thinking about Jesus is that Jesus doesn't talk about himself that way at all. Jesus calls himself the truth and the life. But more than that, Jesus says that he is the "way." The Greek word for "way" is *hodos*, as in "odometer." When Jesus says that he is the way, he's pushing us out of those Yes or No, Do or Don't binaries. And he's asking us to stay open to new ideas, new visions, and new graces.

This sort of makes sense if you think about Jesus's teachings. When the disciples ask Jesus a question, a good example is "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus doesn't say, "Samaritans, yes. Persians, no." He says, "Go serve people without regard for nationality and culture, and then see who becomes your neighbor." When Jesus refers to himself as the way, this change, this dynamism, this evolution is what he's talking about. The truth and the life of Jesus is not a code or a creed or a lesson. It's something that emerges when you follow Jesus. When you draw near to where Jesus is and listen for the stirring of God.

It's not a coincidence that the first followers of Jesus in the book of Acts were called followers of the Way. Because they weren't people who signed their names on a piece of paper or

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even believed all the same things, but a group of people who were journeying together wherever Jesus was calling them. What makes you a follower of the Way isn't where you started or how long you've been here or even having the right beliefs. It's where you're going. And who you're going with.

That should change how we hear "No one comes to the Father except through me." If you read "No one comes to the Father except through me" as a threat, your reaction will probably be to consider yourself a judge. To decide who does or doesn't have the right kind of relationship with Jesus. But if you take Jesus's image of the way to heart, the meaning of that phrase becomes an invitation. It's Christ who walks toward the kingdom of God alongside us, and it's Christ who is at the center of every movement toward justice and renewal. We tend to be fixated on right and wrong, insider and outsider, pious and pagan. But Jesus is focused on transformation. That's what following the Way is all about.

This is all fine and good, if a little new-agey and a tad vague. So what does it mean to be transformed on the Way? What does it actually look like? There's a good example of that in today's reading from Acts. The story we heard today is the stoning of Stephen. Stephen gives this long sermon about Jesus to a group of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. And they're not happy about it, so they kill him. And it's implied that this killing is overseen by a man named Saul. Saul is a Jewish leader who eventually has an encounter with the risen Christ and begins spreading the gospel to the Gentiles as the Apostle Paul. So the first time we are introduced to the Apostle Paul, it's not as this radical preacher forming new kinds of counter-cultural communities. It's as a guy who persecutes followers of Jesus who don't share his beliefs.

If you read this story from an exclusivist lens, the important transformation that Saul undergoes in his life is his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. He used to be out, but now he's in. He checked the box. But that interpretation only makes sense if you don't know anything about church history. For one, there is no such thing as Christianity for him to convert to.¹ And more important, the vast majority of Jesus's followers were, of course, Jewish.

But remember Jesus as the way. The important transformation that Saul is not changing religions. It's learning to see his salvation is wrapped up in the very thing that he rejected. The truth and the life that he receives is not some prize where he gets to go to heaven after he dies because he checked the right box. The life he receives is learning to see that the very people he rejects, he stigmatizes, he others, and he kills, are the very people who are bringing God's mercy into the world.

And that brings us back to the beginning. What Saul is redeemed from is not some made up punishment for being on the wrong team when time runs out. Saul is redeemed from the idol of exclusivism. Of course, exclusivism has many incarnations beyond matters of faith. We seen economic exclusivism in who is deemed worthy of protection. We seen social exclusivism in which families are considered normal and which are considered deviant. We've seen a chilling example of racial exclusivism recently in the murder of Ahmaud Arbery.

Exclusivism in any of its forms, religious, social, cultural, economic, never presents itself as narrow-minded exclusivism. It presents itself as a sense of certainty. It makes us feel good because it tells us that we are know everything we need to know. We know who is worthwhile, we know who is capable of change, we know who can be redeemed. In short, it assumes that we know better than God. That we don't need to be transformed.

¹ In the 1960s, Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl gave an influential lecture series in which he proposed thinking of Paul's experience with the risen Christ not as conversion but as a call. "Here is not that change of religion that we normally associate with the word *conversion*."

But the invitation given to Saul and to Jesus's disciples is the same one given to us. To trade our judgement for discovery, our certainty for transformation, and our condemnation for mercy. To begin the Way toward the one who is always a step beyond us but bids us come and follow.

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