



A Homily on John 14:1-14

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“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...”¹ As I read those words this morning, I’d be willing to bet your thoughts were drawn immediately to the memory of a funeral of a loved one or friend. This is the setting in which we most often hear these words. They are words of comfort. “...I go to prepare a place for you...”² These are reassuring words when we have lost someone dear to us.

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Yet, often at funerals I find myself editing this text from John 14. After reading the first half of verse six: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” I leave out the second half: “No one comes to the

Father except through me.”

I do this because at funerals there are often people present of other faiths; and with no opportunity for dialogue, for an explanation, I am fearful of giving offense. Too often in the history of Christianity’s relationship with other religions, these words from John 14 have had blood on them. My friend Patrick Willson, a preacher over in Williamsburg, VA, says that there is a technical, theological term for this kind of phrase. It’s called a “diddywhacker.” A “diddywhacker” is a “diddy” you take from the Bible and “whack” somebody with it.³

So we Christians need to be careful with this phrase, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” I happen to believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. These words from John’s Gospel affirm that Jesus is the Word made flesh, and therefore he makes the truth of God available in a unique fashion. In him we meet God.⁴ In him I meet God. But as theologian Douglas John Hall points out, Jesus does not say that this or that doctrine about him is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus does not say an image, or creed, or hymn, about him is the way, the truth, and the life. He says that he himself is the way. Perhaps most importantly, Jesus does not say that this means that only those who say he is the way, the truth, and the life, are going to be saved.⁵

Yet, that is the direction in which too many Christians have moved in our interpretation of Jesus’ words. We’ve made these words into a “diddywhacker.” Jesus is for us, and to us, the way, and the truth, and the life. He is the purest revelation of God’s goodness and grace. But in all honesty, don’t we have to admit that our faith in Jesus has deeply affected our attitude toward others, particularly those of other religious faiths? Isn’t the natural human tendency to look upon all, or nearly all, of these “others” with suspicion? Or at least a measure of caution?⁶ Isn’t this especially true when it comes to Jews, Hindus, Muslims?

Yet, there is something that continues to counteract and transform this suspicion of ours, something that will not let us remain easy with it. That “something” is a someone - Jesus! The grace that comes from God (through Jesus Christ) constantly judges our biases, prejudices, xenophobia, fears, and suspicion of others. You simply cannot read the story of Jesus in the Gospels without coming face to face with the fact that it was Jesus’ nature to reach out to those who were “other” than himself and his followers. He was open to all sorts of people. He mingled

¹ John 14:2a, (NRSV). Subsequent citations are of John, unless otherwise indicated.

² 14:2b.

³ Patrick Willson, in a sermon “Is The Way Clear?” preached at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, Ft. Worth, TX, May 9, 1993, p. 2.

⁴ Gail R. O’Day, *John, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX*, (on CD), (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 742.

⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 144.

⁶ Hall, p. 145.

with the most despised people of his day. He forgave and blessed even his enemies. He laid down his life for people he could have justifiably ignored.⁷

We believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is for us the unique and definitive revelation of who God is and what God expects of us. But to have faith in him, to seek to know him and follow him, is to encounter one who challenges our tendency to exclude others.⁸ To have faith in him drives us in the direction of openness toward others, particularly those who are very different from ourselves, and especially those whose religion is very different from our own.

It is ironic, isn't it? We believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; we claim he is the one in whom alone salvation is to be found. We believe Jesus is the unique revelation of God, but we also believe he is one with the very God whom Israel confessed before there were any Christians!⁹ Therefore, as theologian Shirley Guthrie writes,

To confess the unique self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then, is to confess not just what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for and among us Christians; it is to recognize what the life-giving, life-preserving Creator of the world has been doing, is doing, and intends to do also outside the Christian circle, among all people everywhere, including those who do not know, confess, and voluntarily serve Jesus Christ as their Lord.¹⁰

I believe this is the truth to which the words of Jesus in John 14 point: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places."¹¹ In Greek the verb "to dwell" is used in John's Gospel to describe the mutuality of the relationship of God and Jesus.¹² Therefore, "many dwelling places" means many ways of being in relationship with God. Jesus is saying, "It is possible for us, but also for others, to join in the relationship with God. There are many dwelling places, many kinds of relationships with God."

Bishop Leslie Newbigin puts it this way,

We must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God – the creator and sustainer of all that exists – is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to his works in all creation and to all human beings.¹³

For you and me, Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. In him God's infinite love has overflowed to include us. If God's love can include us, then are we not compelled to at least consider the possibility that it can, and does, include all human beings?

⁷ Hall, p. 146.

⁸ Hall, *op.cit.*

⁹ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), p. 69.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *op. cit.*

¹¹ 14:2a.

¹² O'Day, *Ibid.*, p. 740.

¹³ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 175, as quoted by Guthrie, *Ibid*, p. 71.