

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 14:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I would guess that many of you have seen or heard complaints against Christians and Christianity that speak to, or speak against, the exclusivity of the faith. That is to say, those who complain are displeased with the fact that only those who believe in Jesus Christ and trust in Him for forgiveness and righteousness will be saved. They confess it to be unfathomable that a loving God would send those who deny faith in Christ to hell, or even allow it to happen. They also likely believe all people are generally good.

Unfortunately, this a world that wants to believe anything and everything, at least those things thought to be encouraging and uplifting, and especially those things which confirms deeply held biases. Seemingly contradictorily, the world is quick to accept everybody's opinion as that person's own truth, though that truth better not extend beyond that person's personal space. Anything or anyone who teaches against these two ideals is denounced as intolerant and elitist. This is a society that values situational ethics and relativism over absolutes, that wants to shift blame and not accept responsibility. It's a world that refuses to know The Way.

What feels like ages ago, I spent a summer at the University of South Florida in Tampa where I took a class on world religions. The instructor professed to be Wiccan; though it seemed as if she tried to hide her bias against Christianity, every once in a while she let it slip through that she was an adherent to the philosophy that good people will enjoy an afterlife in paradise, regardless of faith or confession.

Near the end of the semester, she gave the class an assignment to interview a faith-leader of a different religion. I set up an appointment to interview a Jewish Rabbi at a synagogue not far from my grandparent's house. His branch of Reformed Judaism denied the coming of a Messiah, which he qualified by saying that there was to be no person who would be a Messiah. However, he did confess that there would be a coming messianic age, that the Jews were to initiate it somehow, and in this messianic age, all people, regardless of confession or religion or faith would be saved. To him and his congregation, being Jewish was not so much about being right, being on the right side when judgment came, or worshiping the right god, but about being the ones through whom (and it sounded like by whom) this messianic age was to start.

Before I go any further, I don't want you to think that the philosophy of universal salvation regardless of faith and general goodness of mankind is endemic only of non-Christians. Christians, or those who claim to be, are not immune to this thought. I once read a quote by a pastor of a Church of the Brethren congregation, an anti-creedal group from among the Anabaptist movement, in which he confessed adherence to relative truth. He said,

I believe that praying or worshiping with persons of other faiths implies that one recognizes that the Creator works in and through a variety of religious institutions and manifestations. Since I believe that no religion, including my Christian branch of the faith tree, contains all the truth, I am happy to participate in interfaith services. Isn't it presumptuous to imagine that the Holy One has revealed all wisdom to only one group?

This idea is so common, you often hear of it referred to as "all roads lead to God," or as I once heard it referred to, it's a belief in the Oprah Jesus. It also goes by the fancy theological term *syncretism*.

Hearing this, thinking of syncretism, I recall an image used to combat syncretism from a Bible study during my vicarage, which also feels like ages ago. It went something like this: Imagine a ship filled with passengers crossing the Atlantic. The ship suffers an accident and is slowly sinking. Some of the passengers do not know about the lifeboats; these passengers are lost, and their deaths cannot be laid at the feet of the lifeboat manufacturer. Some of the passengers believe they can be saved by clinging to the smoke stacks or other items on the ship; however, these items do not float, so these passengers are lost as well, and their deaths cannot be laid at the feet of the lifeboat manufacturer. Still other passengers believe the lifeboats can save them; they use the lifeboats and are saved, not because they believed really hard that the boats can float, but because the boats float as they were designed.

That's how the world is. There are some who do not know the Savior, Jesus Christ. Should they remain that way, they are lost. Some believe their savior is Allah or Krishna or the Oprah Jesus or some other false god. They, too, are lost, should they continue to follow the doctrines of these false religions. Others know and believe in Jesus Christ, and they are saved. They are saved, not because they believed really hard in Jesus Christ, but because Jesus saves, as He was sent to do.

And that's the truth! Jesus saves. Only Jesus saves. He said it himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." There is no other way to be saved. Ignorance is not bliss, even if it is not the person's fault. Allah does not save, nor does Krishna, nor does the Oprah Jesus; these are false religions set up by the Great Deceiver. So, to answer the Church of the Brethren pastor, who asked, "Isn't it presumptuous to imagine that the Holy One has revealed all wisdom to only one group?" "No, Christians don't presume anything when making that claim; it is simply repeating what the Holy One Himself said: that He is the only Way, the only Truth, the only Life. It is His claim; why argue with the Creator and Savior of the world?"

Still, the Truth is so readily ignored. When it comes to "ordinary" life, that is, life outside of or apart from religion, truth is readily accepted. In fact, truth is expected, even demanded. When gassing up cars, you demand that when the meter reads one gallon, then you have filled your tank with one gallon of fuel, not three quarts. When you were in school learning math, your parents demanded a teacher who taught that $2 + 2$ is 4, not maybe 5, 10, or 2000. When you go to the super market and ask for a pound of meat, you demand that when the scale reads one pound, there is actually one pound of meat on it, not 14 ounces. But when it comes to religious life, truth is rejected. There exists an attitude of "whatever works for you" when it comes to faith, spirituality, and salvation; an idea that each person's truth is as valid as the next person's—the denial of absolute truth is almost always done under the guise of tolerance, the ultimate truth in this philosophy. This turns the focus of a person's faith or spirituality onto themselves and inevitably leads to works righteousness and the idea that a generally good person will live in Heaven.

I don't understand why when an engineer says, "This bridge will hold," it is readily accepted and never questioned, but when a theologian says, "Only Jesus saves," it is readily doubted and always questioned. I can explain why, but that explanation is a theological one and would also be readily doubted and questioned: Sin, which has corrupted human nature, has turned humanity against the Creator and Redeemer; therefore, only God-given faith accepts the Truth. As St. Paul wrote,

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

So, when it comes to religion, spirituality, faith, or whatever they may call it, many people think they know the way. But if they don't have the mind of Christ, they believe that they don't need any help, that they will attain salvation on their own. This way leads to death however, just as clinging to the smokestacks on a sinking ship will.

Still, God wants all to be saved; St. Paul wrote as much in his first letter to St. Timothy: "God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4) What is truth? That's the question Pilate asked of Jesus. (cf. John 18:38) It is what you have been taught by every faithful parent, preacher, and teacher for as long as you have been kept in the safety of the Holy Ark of Christendom: that God sent His Son to save sinners—that whoever believes in Him and trusts in Him for the forgiveness of sins will have eternal life. Or, as the Son stated, He is the Way...the only Way. While this is exclusive, it is not difficult. While it may seem elitist, it is far from it.

Yes, the true way to salvation is exclusive, insofar as there is only one. St. Peter confesses, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) The world complains that there is only one Way, and perhaps Christians are guilty of often using this as a hammer against the myriad ways that the sinful world comes up with. However, the fact that Jesus is the Way is good news, and the good news is this: There is a way to the Father, and He is it!

The way of the world, the way of works, is no way at all. It is the way to death. The good news is that Jesus is the Way, and His was the work. He has accomplished every single last bit of it, just as He said near His death on the cross: "It is finished!" (cf. John 19:30) Jesus Christ is the Way, and His way was to death, too: His death for you in your place on the cross. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Upon the cross, Christ shed his blood to cleanse the world of its sins; He won the merits of salvation there for everyone.

But it didn't end there; His way was to resurrection, too. His death and your faith would be in vain had He not risen on the third day. From His resurrection, He had another important and joyful task to see to. He mentioned it in the first part of today's Gospel lesson: He is going and preparing a place for His disciples in His Father's house, that where He is, they too may be. You also see in this statement that it is not any of your work: Jesus is going to prepare the place, He is coming back to take you with Him, that where *He* is you may be.

The last thing Jesus says in this "I am" is that He is the Life. He is eternal life. This is the life He won for you by His death on the cross and in His resurrection from the grave. This is the life that is given to you in your Baptism. Salvation is for all, because God wants all to be saved, and salvation is given individually in Baptism.

Still, it's disturbing; a majority of people believe that a person who is generally good will earn a place in Heaven—they deny that Jesus is **the** Way. The Way is not elitist; the merits won by Christ were won for all, and they are offered freely to all. It's disturbing; a majority of people hold to the idea that every personal truth, no matter if they conflict, is valid, but they deny that Jesus is **the** Truth. The Truth is for all people; God wants all people to come to a knowledge of the truth. It's disturbing; a majority of people these days will die apart from knowledge of the Truth, denying that Jesus is the Way—they deny that Jesus is **the** Life. Death is not natural, but it is the wages of sin; Jesus has come that all may have life, and have it to the fullest. (cf. John 10:10)

And, in order that you may have that fullest life, He has taken your sin into His own flesh and received the payment for it; then, to seal you into that life, He rose again from the dead. That is what you have been Baptized into, as St. Paul declared:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:3-10, NKJV)

Dear Baptized, that's you! You have been Baptized into the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Therefore, being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, you come here where you hear Jesus proclaim to you once again and all the time that He is the Way, that He is the Truth, that He is the Life. He does this out of His inestimable grace and mercy. He comes here, yes He is here in this place to give these to you all—to set you straight in Him, the Way; to erase all doubt and error through Him, the Truth, to rescue you from death and the devil by Him, the Life. That is to say, He is come—He is here—and has forgiven you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.