

Acts 7:55-60  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

Today we are celebrating Mother's Day. This day holds meaning for all of us as we remember and think about our mothers. For some of us it is a day of joyful celebration and thanksgiving and for others of us it may be a difficult day of absence or unresolved memories. In either case, our mothers were the very first human relationships we had and as such they were and are quite powerful. As we remember our mothers on this day, may God's healing love infuse those memories and provide comfort and healing for each of us. My memory of my own mother looms large for me and was never more powerful than when I entered seminary. In my heart, she went with me.

While I was in seminary, I learned a number of catch phrases that sort of describe a seminarian's experience from time to time. One of those phrases was "to wrestle with the Scripture." That phrase brings up quite a mental image, doesn't it? .....visions of actually rolling around on the ground trying to get the upper hand. Sometimes, reading Scripture and trying to figure out the meaning of a particular passage feels just like that. This week I spent a fair amount of time wrestling with the passage from John that we've just heard. And I will admit...it's not the first time I've wrestled with this passage. I have struggled to understand John 14:6 for as long as I can remember. That particular verse is: "Jesus said to him. 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" It's a phrase that we are all familiar with. We've heard it before. And it sounds like it is pretty straightforward and pretty scary. But like so many verses in the gospel of John, context is everything. If we take this one line out of context, we can miss the entire meaning. So let's take a look at the context in which we *think* Jesus is saying that if you don't believe in him you will be excluded from salvation. The immediate context gives us more to think about, but the entire gospel of John is an even more powerful context.

Here we are at the fifth Sunday of Easter...after the resurrection...but we are hearing what's known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. When He speaks these words, He is spending his last evening with the disciples. It's the night before His crucifixion and He is trying to prepare them for the fact that He is about to leave them. The disciples want to know where He's going and why they can't go with Him. They sound like small children whose parents are about to leave them at home alone. And in many ways, they must have felt just like that. So Jesus begins by

saying to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” When our hearts are troubled, they aren’t just anxious or nervous. They are agitated. They are stirred up. They may even be angry. They are anything but peaceful and serene. Jesus can tell by the expressions on their faces that they are, indeed, troubled by what He’s telling them. And we know about troubled hearts. So many of our own hearts are troubled right now in the midst of this very frightening and invisible pandemic that holds some lethal consequences. Even now, Jesus says to us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The Jesus describes the many mansions in His Father’s house and He tells them He is going to prepare a place for them. This is one time when Jesus alludes to eternal life. And He assures them that He will come back and take them to himself. And then He says something that they don’t understand at all. He says, “And you know the way to the place where I am going.” And good old Thomas protests: “No we don’t. We don’t know where you’re going and we don’t know the way to get there.” That’s when Jesus says the famous line: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This passage from scripture has been used for thousands of years to be judgmental and exclusionary. It’s been used to keep people away from Jesus, not to draw them close. But why would Jesus do that? Jesus is not exclusionary. Jesus is inclusive. We know that He makes a point of reaching out to people who have been excluded from the Temple and from society at large. He makes a point of being inclusive. He makes a point of letting everyone know that He is here for everyone and for the entire creation. Knowing what we know about Jesus and his mission, it makes no sense that He would become exclusionary himself. So what could this passage possibly mean?

If we go back to chapter 12 in the gospel of John, we hear Jesus trying to explain to his disciples...once again...who He really is. In v. 44 Jesus says: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.”

God is the Father. Jesus is the Son. We know about the relationship between fathers and sons. What we don’t know about is the unique phenomenon of two separate beings inhabiting one

human body. The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. The two are inseparable. We human beings are so finite in our experience and in our understanding. How could two separate entities occupy the same space and time? It's unheard of among human beings. No human body houses two separate entities...except the one we know of as Jesus Christ. Our brains are too concrete to envision that phenomenon and yet if we know Jesus, we know the Father. God loved His creation enough to minimize himself enough to be able to inhabit a human body and live and walk among us. God wanted to be known. He wanted His creation to know Him and the only way that was possible was for God to become incarnate in the person of Jesus. That's what we celebrate at Christmas...the incarnation of God in the infant Jesus. That's what we celebrate during the Epiphany when that incarnation is revealed to us in a variety of ways. What we know about God and how God feels and what God wants, we know only because we know Jesus. Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus. You don't get one without the other. Jesus has said, "I am the gate." And he has said, "I am the gatekeeper." If you turn to God...if you return to God when you die...Jesus is right there. The two are one. You don't get one without the other. God became incarnate in the person of Jesus in order to bring *all* of creation to himself.

Don't forget the conversation that Jesus had with Philip in the lesson we just heard this morning. It's part of the context we need to keep in mind. Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus replies in what must have been a truly exasperated tone, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.""

It's not that we are going to be banned from the Kingdom of God if we do not believe in Jesus. Look at the context in which all of this is being said. And remember that the gospel of John is the incarnational gospel. It is the one account of Jesus that places the divinity of Jesus front and center. The entire Gospel speaks to the Incarnation. We aren't going to be blocked at the Pearly Gates, but if we are looking for God, Jesus tells us that we have already encountered God in Jesus himself. When we arrive at the Pearly Gates, Jesus will be there...no one is going to be reunited with God without encountering Jesus. It's just that if we approach the Kingdom of God at our death, Jesus is going to be there. He is in the Father and the Father is in him. And He says, "If you don't believe what I say, then look at what I do." It's hard to argue with that!

Remember, not only is John the gospel of the incarnation...with an emphasis throughout on Jesus' divinity and Jesus' oneness with God, but so much of the gospel of John that is taken literally is easily misunderstood. Do you remember Nicodemus trying to figure out how to be

'born again' by re-entering his mother's body for re-birth? It is easy in the gospel of John to miss the point if the message by focusing on the literal word. And remember the woman at the well who wants Jesus to give her some of this 'living water' that He speaks about thinking that there must be a jug of it somewhere close by when she is actually looking at the living water. The gospel of John is just chock full of opportunities to miss the point by hearing those words literally.

Jesus is proof-positive that God love us and all of creation. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. What we know about God we know because we know about Jesus. If we want to know what God thinks or what God wants or how God feels or what God expects from us, we need look no farther than Jesus of Nazareth. He is our greatest opportunity to get a glimpse of God. And if we know Jesus' character, we know the character of God. Jesus didn't come to shut us out. Jesus came to draw us in and hold us close.

And so now, little children, do not let your hearts be troubled. Rest is the assurance of God's love for each one of us shown to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.