

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: John 14:1-7

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe^[a] in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?^[b] ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going."^[c] ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know^[d] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor^[a] he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God^[b] and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we, too, are his offspring.'

²⁹ "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

“In Him, We Live, Move and Have Being”

Soooooooo, what would you say, brothers and sisters, if/when you are asked the question, *“When a Muslim and a Jew and a Christian each pray to God, who is listening? One God who hears all three prayers, three gods, or one God who chooses one prayer and hits the delete button for the other two?”*¹ It’s an important and reasonable question with which to challenge ourselves...with which to challenge ourselves in our HUGELY pluralistic and religiously diverse society. In fact, I think that there are few more critical issues before us than that regarding the relationship between our religion and the religion of others different from us. We share a country, a culture, a world that is all the time growing smaller and smaller.

Well, our Scripture today has something to teach us about this. In about 55 AD, the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, Greece. Athens at the time was several centuries past its Day as the center of the Western world, no longer the center of politics, or commerce. But the city was still the best in the area of philosophy. There was a university there and two famous schools, the Epicureans and the Stoics. In the center of the city, next to the Acropolis, was a place called the Areopagus, a bare outcropping of flat marble. There, philosophers gathered every day to debate weighty issues in philosophy, science, politics and religion. In fact, at the Areopagus, the dream of a democratic republic was first conceived.² Athens was also a city chocked full of idols. In fact, an ancient historian once said of Athens, *“It is easier to find a god there, than a man.”*³ There were altars, shrines and temples to Athena, Zeus, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Posidon, Artemus and more.

Upon arrival Paul set about to present the Gospel to all who would listen. As was his custom, he went to the synagogues first. But his sophisticated education and his ability to engage in spirited debate soon attracted the attention of the Stoics. He was brought to the Areopagus. And what he did there has been held up as a brilliant example of not only rhetoric but how to best engage an opponent ever since.

¹ John Buchanan. *“Is Our Way the Only Way?”* <https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2002/050502.html> (accessed 5-11-23).

² Philip McLarty. *“Taking It to the Streets”* <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/acts-1716-32-taking=streets-mclarty/> (accessed 5-11-23).

³ David Chappel. *“Street Preaching.”* https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003139/street_preaching (accessed 5-11-23).

His great success was founded on his deep respect for his listeners and his willingness to accommodate them! He used Greek philosophy and quoted Greek poets. And most importantly, he acknowledged the common ground they all shared. For instance, their interest in religion and theology, and deep spirituality, as evidenced by their many, many idols. Paul pointed to one of their altars, the altar of the unknown God, as a particular example. He said that its presence showed that they rightly knew that God can never be limited by something human beings construct. God is so much bigger than that. He stated that God, the One God of Judaism and Christianity, similarly cannot be limited, and he then went further stating that God cannot be limited by an idol made of wood or stone, not by a temple, and not by a theology. The consequences of his teaching about a single God were not immediately apparent, but ultimately through Paul several key leaders were converted, and they became very important in establishing a church there.

Retired pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Rev. John Buchanan, makes some astute observations of the consequences for US of Paul's dialog with the Athenians regarding a single God. One is that there comes an Openness to the Truth that is Known by Other People and Other Religions. There is no doubt that when Christians have heard Jesus say that he "*is the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me,*" Christians have taken that to mean that because Jesus is the only way to salvation, the Christian church is the only way. Frederick Buechner says, Christians have misheard Jesus in this. "*Rather than hearing that Jesus is the way, that it is by living, participating in, by being caught up in the way of life that Jesus embodied, that we know the truth, we have heard Jesus say that it is the Christian ethic, doctrine, and religion that is the way, the truth.*"⁴ It is this misinterpretation that has unfortunately led to exclusivism, triumphalism, and intolerance. Horrible atrocities such as the crusades and the inquisition have happened in history, and others too with anti-Semitism, or anti-something else at the core. They happen yet.

⁴ Frederick Buechner. "*Wishful Thinking*". (New York: Harper Collins; 1993).

It would be wise, brothers and sisters, for us to ask, “*who is this Jesus who says this?*” For the One who said, “*I am the way*” also said, “*I have other sheep that do not belong to the fold. I must bring them also so there will be one flock, one shepherd.*” (John 10) Yes, Jesus is so much bigger and freer and gracious than we can possibly ever fully comprehend, and it is Jesus who perfectly makes known to us what we know of God, through himself. It is Jesus who is the one who included those whom others wanted to exclude. Quoting Shirley Guthrie, Jesus “*taught that God loves sinful, unbelieving and different-believing people, those who were excluded and rejected by law-abiding, morally respectable, members of the religious establishment.*”⁵ He taught that God’s desire is not to condemn the world but to save it, and that God cares not just for right thinking, right believing, right acting people but for all people maybe especially for people who are precisely wrong thinking, wrong believing, wrong acting.”⁶

To be clear, I am not saying, friends, that all religions are equal or good. No, absolutely not! Some religions are dangerous, evil...the radical twisting of faith to dictate disregard for life and the slaughter of others in the name of God is always wrong, wrong, wrong. Nor am I saying that all people are saved. No, I do not believe that we can know whom God saves, and we need avoid postulating on this. We need leave this up to God! But I do think that believing that Jesus is the way to salvation, AS WE DO, does not preclude an attitude of respect for other religions, and a regard for interreligious dialogue. I think simply that we need not be threatened by, no, in fact we need recognize that we are charged to share our enthusiasm, as did Paul, for Christianity, all the while avoiding the INVALIDATION of others’ religious experiences.⁷ As John Buchanan says in response to this text, “*Christianity is our religion, our theological home however, it is all about a God who creates everyone and a God to whom all people are related and in whom all people live and move and have being. Jesus is the one who died for all people and whose resurrection means that he is alive and working not only in and through the Christian church, which is his body, but also in ways that are bigger than we even know.*”⁸

⁵ Shirley Guthrie. “*The Way, the Truth, and the Life*” (The Presbyterian Outlook, 11 Feb, 2002).

⁶ KC Potomy A Collection of Westminster Sermons, Nashville, TN. 2010.

⁷ Philip Wingeier-Rayo. “*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 5th Sunday of Easter*” In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, et al; Connections. Year A. Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP; 2019), 221. (accessed 5-12-23).

⁸ John Buchanan.

This, my friends, is what our God intends for us. This is how his kingdom will be brought to earth. This is how the rifts that exist between our religion and the religion of others different from us can be undone and we move forward as Gods people who all are God's offspring, sharing a world that is all the time growing smaller and smaller.

*Early on, and throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, there were national worship services online and in outdoor venues which convened people of various faith communities for the purpose of lamenting, healing and hoping together. Often, the services had leaders of the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Hindu faiths working together. Prior to one of these national services, to be held on the steps of the steps of National City Christian Church in Washington DC, a service wherein 100,000 American lives, 350,000 worldwide, were being remembered with candles (little did they know what the extent of the epidemic would be), Michael Martin of NPR conducted an interview with Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. Martin asked him, "How do you think we go about healing?" Rev. Curry's response was this: "I think, all of us must make a commitment to being people who are driven, guided and directed by love - unselfish sacrificial love that seeks the good and the welfare of others. And that means people of faith - of all faiths – need make a commitment to, doggone it, say 'I'm going to be a person of love even when it's hard for me to do it. I'm going to do it'. The more of us that do that alive in that way and actually encourage our society to live that way, the more of us that are committed to that, then maybe, please God, nobody will be left behind. Then maybe, please God, inequalities will be overcome. Then maybe, please God, we will learn how to live together as brothers, sisters and siblings even when we disagree. We will learn how to love each other as the first principle of how we relate to each other. And if that happens, you've got a revolution in human relationships and society. It may be the second American Revolution."*⁹

I recall watching one of these services. Maybe you saw one too. First there were some words from the Catholic leader in the city, then some Protestant bishop or Minister, then a

⁹ Michael Martin "Episcopal Church Bishop On National Memorial Service For COVID-19 Victims--All Things Considered" <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/24/861744577/episcopal-church-bishop-on-virtual-memorial-service-for-covid-19-victims>. (accessed 5-12-23).

Native American Leader, an Imam or Rabbi. There was beautiful music of various styles. All of it moving. But then there was, there was a call for prayer and an invitation for all people participating online and in-person to speak with God in their own faith tradition. There was not the question of whose God or what God. No, there was simply a call for prayer. And I could hear the mixture of languages from the space where the broadcast was taking place...the Lord's prayer, the Shema, a Du'a...others... but mostly I could feel, from the much bigger space of all participating virtually, the space of living rooms and dens across the land, offices, church parlors, diners, airport lobbies, taxis, anywhere there was a screen, prayers being woven together and rising to the one God of us all, the One God who hears every prayer, the One God who loves each and every one of us and who will never, ever give up on any one of us, and whose grace and mercy exceeds anything that you and I or anyone else could ever think or imagine.

To God be the glory through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Generally speaking, it seems that there are three ways: exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. The traditional stance of exclusivism has unfortunately, very unfortunately led to a Christian triumphalism. Atrocities such as the crusades have happened and also conflict after conflict with anti-Semitism at the core, believing that Christians replaced Jews as the chosen people. The INCLUSIVIST position states that there are wonderful non-Christians who have upheld Christ-like values in their lives, who will be saved by God. These may be the surprised sheep to whom the Judge in the parable of sheep and goats

says, *“Even as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”* The PLURALIST position argues that there are many faith traditions that lead to salvation in their different ways somewhat like bicycle spokes that extend to the same hub.¹⁰

In the context of his last night of conversation with his disciples, Jesus was not talking about other religions. As one preacher has said, *“He wasn’t teaching a comparative religions course”*.¹¹ He was having a tender, farewell moment with brokenhearted friends. *Episcopal priest and professor, Barbara Brown Taylor, puts it this way, He was “giving them everything he [could] think of to help them survive without him, and he [used] the singular, exclusive language that people who love so often do.” It is language like we use in our tender and teary moments: “You are the best mother in the whole world. You are the only man in the world for me. No one has ever loved a child the way I love you.” This is language from the depths of relationship, spoken only for love to grasp. A child in need of reassurance asks his mother, “Do you love me, mommy?”....A mother’s answer, “Of course, son, I love all children” would not be the most helpful one. If Jesus had used similar language with the disciples, they would have been filled with anxiety and fear. Instead, he said, “I am the only one for you. You have made the right choice. No one can lead you to God better than I. I’ve got you covered.”*¹²

This contextual insight I find helpful. But it is also important to simply note that when Jesus was asked by Thomas how they were to know the way to where he was going, Jesus’ answer was *“I am the way, the truth and the life.”* He did not say, *“Christianity is the way, the truth, and the life.”* As Frederick Buechner observes, *“Jesus didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. HE SAID HE WAS...he said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.”*¹³

¹⁰Philip Wingeier-Rayo. *“Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 5th Sunday of Easter”* In: eds. JB Green, TG Long, LA Powery, CL Rigby, CJ Sharp *“Connections Yr A, Vol 2”* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 268.

¹¹ Shannon Kershner. *Sermon: “The Way”*. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/051417.html> (accessed 5-6-20).

¹² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Sermon: “The Only Way to God,”* (Duke Chapel, May 2, 1999). Quoted in Amy Miracle, *Sermon: “Last Words”* <https://www.granpres.org/sermons/2017/5/15/last-words> (accessed 5-6-20).

¹³ Frederick Buechner. *“Wishful Thinking”*. (New York: Harper Collins; 1993)

