

**Sermon – 4<sup>th</sup> Easter**  
**John 14: 1-14**  
**May 14, 2017**

**“E Pluribus...Christian”**

In 17 years as a pastor I have preached on John 14:1-6 more than any other passage of scripture. Most of the time I'm preaching it on a Tuesday or Friday morning at 11:00 however and I'll bet you can imagine why. This may be the most requested funeral passage in the Bible – “*in my Father's house there are many mansions...I go and prepare a place for you.*” Frankly it's a bit of a challenge for me to conclude a funeral service reading “*no one comes to the Father except through me*” without unpacking what Jesus meant by that but I never get a chance to. Folks at funerals want to be comforted not challenged to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior...or else! And yet that is the implication of these words – ‘*no one comes...except through me.*’

I ask you – was Jesus tolerant? “*I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” is among Jesus' most memorable but controversial statements - one of seven statements in the gospel of John in which Jesus claims for himself endearing but exclusive titles such as “*I am the Bread of Life*” and “*I am the Light of the World.*” In describing himself in these ways Jesus implies no one else can be those things. But these sayings present a conundrum for we in the church, because if there is anything that is valued in public discourse these days, it's tolerance of other people's way of thinking, sources of truth, and choices in life. It's very American to be tolerant and value pluralism. The conundrum is that while Jesus was unquestionably welcoming of people, deliberately including women and tax collectors and an occasional Roman soldier in his circle of friends – when push came to shove Jesus described himself in ways that can only be defined as “exclusive.”

Diversity is the watchword of our day, and nothing is more diverse than the church, the people of God whom Jesus called in John 10 to part of “*one flock*” under “*one Lord.*” The good news is that in 2017 Christianity reverberates everywhere in the world and as I recently learned even that proverbial end of the world place called Timbuktu. Christianity proves there is one faith, one Shepherd, but a mighty large sheep pen. The bad news is that in the 500 years since the Lutheran Reformation we have gone from Christianity to “Christianities.” There are today over 45,000 different denominations of us. And not every new spiritual “itch” that someone scratches represents an expression of historic Christ-centered faith.

Back to the conundrum presented by our lesson. The world is pluralistic and tolerant, but by and large in a way that Jesus wasn't. The first century world was pluralistic too. There were cults and religions galore, and even Judaism, the mother of Christianity, had its “denomination problem” – there were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians, and Zealots. Jesus encountered them all. But he parted from them all by declaring his kingdom would not be defined by the Sadducee's rigid interpretation of Torah or the Pharisee's fastidious adherence to traditions of the elders or the Essenes insistence in removing themselves from the wider culture or the more palatable version of Judaism promulgated by King Herod that urged open adaptation of Greek culture so Judaism could stay relevant. Jesus' kingdom was defined by himself – the great “I AM.”

Now days you can go to any religion website or what remains of that relic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the bookstore – and find all kinds of views on what would make Christianity more palatable and presumably popular – impressive studies that boil down to one conclusion – Jesus is a conundrum. If he can be treated as “*a way, a truth, and a life*” fine - but that definite article Jesus kept putting in front of his name is a definite problem. Many modern Christian denominations would be skeptical if not hostile to the view that we know God uniquely through Jesus. I appreciate the diversity of Christianity but I know diversity in the church signifies the “dividedness” of the church - a human thumbprint on the faith once passed on from the apostles. And once sinners “denominate” it’s easy for us to try to “dominate” the truth business.

Truth cannot be splintered however, and 45,000 denominations is in truth a slicing up of what began as “*one shepherd and one flock*” acknowledging “*one way, one truth and one life*”. There is hope for the church, if, despite all the polling we hear to the contrary we recall that the way of Jesus, the truth of Jesus and the life of Jesus is challenging. As the great English writer G. K Chesterton once said, “*the way of Jesus has not been tried and found wanting...the way of Jesus has been found difficult and left untried.*” If we try Jesus however, we’ll show the world a Savior whose arms are wide to the world but whose truth exceeds everything that passes for it nowadays. And that calls us to prayer. As citizens of a great country we ought to embrace our values of tolerance and diversity. Yet as citizens of the kingdom of a still greater God we cannot transfer wholesale these values to *that* Kingdom in a way Jesus never did.

The culture in which we exist needs convincing that our story, while old, is not outdated. We are the church within a diverse culture, but we must still be “the church” of *the way, the truth and the life* – Jesus Christ. We must render to this world the things that belong to this world – and to fellow citizens what our modern democratic society has bestowed to us all – equality under the law and the promise of equal access to our country’s rights and blessings. But Jesus has even greater blessing promised to those who dare trust that “*whoever believes in me will do the works that I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father.*”

A good way to do that is to recall an old Bible Camp song whose refrain says; “*they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*” The sort of pluralism Jesus wants for his church is a love that does not discriminate but a love that does not deviate from how Jesus loved us. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many rooms, if it were not so would I tell you I go and prepare a place for you.*” Jesus spoke these wonderfully inclusive words to assure anyone that if you believe God was in Christ then Christ is in you. He spoke them because Jesus would not, could not tolerate you living life anyway other than this way - with full assurance he loves you, forgives you, has a place for you today and forever. AMEN

