

Today on the secular calendar it's Mother's Day. We all know that Motherhood can be a source of both joy and frustration. Parenting is often both comforting and challenging.

We'll thank our mothers later during the service. But I'm not going to preach on motherhood this morning.

Instead, I want to focus on our Gospel lesson from John 14. It too is both comforting and challenging.

It's a chapter that brings incredible consolation. And it's a chapter that makes people extremely nervous.

In my experience of doing funerals over the past 25 years, John 14 is the Gospel reading that is most often chosen. This is the "Greatest Hit" that people choose to have read when they have lost one of their loved ones.

A few moments ago we heard those words of comfort. Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled." He's addressing these words to his followers to prepare them for his death the next day. "Let not your hearts be troubled."

Literally, Jesus is saying, 'Do not let your hearts shudder, do not let your hearts shake.'

Instead, Jesus says, place your trust where it belongs. "Believe in God," Jesus says, "believe also in me." Or it could just as easily be translated, 'Trust in God, trust also in me.' Jesus is saying, let your shaking hearts rest upon a solid foundation. Trust/believe/have faith in God. Trust/believe/have faith in Jesus.

And then Jesus continues: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," sometimes translated many rooms, or many mansions. By the way, when a translation uses "mansion" it's NOT referring to a large wealthy manor house. It's the older use of the word, as a large building with numerous apartments in it.

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." And then Jesus adds, "If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And 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."

These words from the 14th chapter of St. John's Gospel are a great assurance about the world to come. Thus, it's not surprising that people find them comforting at funerals.

But just a few verses later we get something makes many people VERY nervous these days. John 14:6—it's a verse that makes a rather exclusive claim. They are words that seem dangerously absolute in a culture that prizes relativism.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

And when 21st century Christians and non-Christians hear these words, they often get very nervous.

This is probably one of the thorniest verses for 21st Century Christians. John 14:6 has become something of a litmus test. Is Jesus THE way, or simply A way, or perhaps NOT ANY way at all?

Of course, I can't tell you what to think. In the Episcopal Church we try to leave lots of room for people to wrestle with theology and scripture themselves. So I'm not going to stand up here today and say you must agree with me. However, I am going to share how I deal with this thorny question, how I try to make sense of it.

Yes, I know, saying Jesus is THE way to God doesn't seem politically correct. It's a rather exclusive claim. And yet, it's a claim that Jesus makes. And it's a claim that I trust/believe/accept on faith: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

I know—there are many in our modern culture that find such a claim offensive. It seems too narrow. How can you Christians claim that Jesus is unique? How can you Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to the Father?

These are pretty exclusive claims. In the past, Holy Wars, Crusades, Jihads would be fought over claims like these.

We, of course, live in a different age. We allow for freedom of conscience. We practice tolerance of those who are different. That's a good thing. In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society, we must learn to peacefully coexist with those with whom we differ.

A system where different groups coexist is the dictionary definition for pluralism. Pluralism can be a good thing.

But there's a radical form of religious pluralism that makes more sweeping claims. It makes the claim that all religions are basically the same. You've heard that. 'All religions are differing paths up the same mountain.' That's a very nice attempt to be "nice." But it's patently false.

All religions are not the same. As one religious scholar writes,
"Some religious views and practices are clearly false, harmful, and even despicable."

He continues, "I'll never grant David Koresh religious parity with Mother Teresa. I don't think that Aztec human sacrifice and Buddhist almsgiving can expect equal allegiance. Hindu widow-burning, female infanticide... and the mass suicide of 913 people at Jim Jones' People's Temple in northern Guyana all strike me as badly wrong. So, pluralism that

consistently treats all religions as equally valid comes at the unacceptably high price of endorsing the diabolical as well as the divine, which is a polite way of saying that, in truth, most people do not and should not believe that 'all religions are true.'"¹

Plus, the claim that all religions are simply differing paths to the summit of the same mountain is insulting and patronizing to ALL religious groups. Yes, we have great overlap in moral and ethical teachings. But our views of God are radically different. Is God one, as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity proclaim? Hindus claim there are many gods. Buddhists claim no god at all. Contradictory claims. We may all be wrong about God. But we can't all be right.

Of course, we Christians can AND SHOULD be in dialogue with adherents other faiths. We do live in a culture where we have neighbors of differing faiths, and we shouldn't be afraid of discussing our commonalities and our differences with each other. We shouldn't be afraid of visiting their places of worship—I've personally prayed in Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques and Buddhist temples.

I also enjoy studying and discussing other religions. Many of them contain great spiritual truth. There are many things I can agree on with a Muslim or a Jew or a Buddhist. It's important for us to agree on those common areas that do overlap, that we do share.

But we also have to acknowledge there are some areas where we have profound differences. And there's nothing wrong with that. In the marketplace of ideas, adherents of other faiths are VERY clear about what makes THEM distinctive. Christians need to be just as clear about what makes US distinctive.

Christianity is the only world religion that claims that God became a human being. If you want to know who God is, classic Christianity says, look to Jesus Christ.

If that claim is true, and I believe it is, then it follows that Christians have a deeper and more complete understanding of who God is than any other religion. We may overlap partially. But if what we proclaim is true, then it logically follows that we've got an inside track.

If Jesus IS the way to the Father, then it doesn't do us any good to pretend otherwise. In other words, it's possible that other world religions may offer various paths part-way up the same mountain. But only Christianity gets to the summit.

But then the objection comes up. Isn't that harsh? Isn't that unloving? Aren't you condemning billions of non-Christians to either eternal death or an eternity without God? That's a tough question. And I think we have to walk a VERY fine line here. This is how I make sense of it.

First of all, I can't judge anyone. That authority has not been given to me. It's WAY above my pay grade.

¹ Dan Clendenin, "Is Christianity a 'Sublime Bigotry?'"

Second, I can trust what God has revealed about himself in scripture and in Jesus Christ. But I can't know EVERYTHING there is about God. Only someone equal to God can know everything about God.

I do believe Jesus is not only the way to the Father, but also the only way. What I don't know is all the possible different ways Jesus is active in the world. Let me say that again. I cannot know all the possible different ways Jesus is active in the world. I know that God was active in my life long before I ever had any sense of his presence. How can I know how Jesus Christ is acting in other people's lives, whether or not they sense his presence?

Over a century ago, one NT scholar wrote, "(only through Christ can we) apprehend God as the Father and so approach the Father." But he adds, "It does NOT follow that every one who is guided by Christ is directly conscious of His guidance."²

In other words, Jesus may be acting in your life or in the lives of other people even though you're unaware of it, or even though they're unaware of it.

Along similar lines, C.S. Lewis also famously writes, "The truth is God has not told us what his arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ, (but) we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."³

It boils down to this: Who am I to say how or in what ways Jesus can act as the Way to the Father?

After all, Jesus promised earlier in John's Gospel, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."⁴

How can I possibly know or say in which ways Jesus will speak, or when or how people will hear his voice? I simply have to trust in him.

Which brings us back to the beginning of ch14. Jesus says, 'Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust God. Trust me.'

Last week in our Gospel lesson, Jesus told us that as his sheep we had to listen his voice and follow. That's what we're called to do. And we have to trust him to sort out the more difficult questions

But he does call us to follow. He does call us to believe/trust. And he does call us to proclaim his good news, to love others in the same way that he loves us.

² Brooke Foss Wescott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 1908

³ *Mere Christianity* penultimate paragraph, Book II, Chapter 5

⁴ John 10:16

There's a famous exchange between a Christian Missionary and the great Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi. The missionary asked, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ. If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today."⁵

Perhaps that's what we need to do. Instead of worrying about what others believe, perhaps we need to be more faithful. Perhaps we need to really believe what we say we believe. And perhaps we need to live as if we believe what we say we believe.

If you believe that Jesus is the way, then follow him in the way he commands. Love others, as he loves us.

⁵ Dibin Samuel, *Mahatma Gandhi and Christianity*, in Christian Today India