

John 14:1-14 (NRSV)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In 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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "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. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This text is one of my favorite texts for funerals. The first verses are full of reassurance that God provides all kinds of space for all kinds of people and that Jesus has gone to prepare a space even for you and for me, as obviously ill-suited as we are for

heaven or paradise or eternal life. Jesus will return, he will take us to himself and there we will abide, with him, in him, forever. It's a great text for funerals.

It is, perhaps, a sign of how broken and sinful we are and the world is, that we can't just be content with this reassurance. No, we race past it to get down to verse 6, the verse that has caused so much trouble over twenty centuries.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." That seems fine. But then we read the next statement – "No one comes to the Father except through me." Generations, centuries of believers have read these words to imply the supremacy of their beliefs to the exclusion of everyone else. No one can come into the presence of God except by believing in Jesus. No one can be saved except by believing in Jesus. What else could this mean after all?

Over the centuries Christians have used these words of Jesus to justify all sorts of bad behavior toward other religions. It isn't enough that Jesus makes a place for us – it seems that we need to be reassured that he is *not* making places for other people who don't meet our standards.

It seems more than a little ironic then that in today's first reading from the book of Acts, Jewish leaders use the Hebrew Scriptures to condemn the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen. The reading is very short, only the very end of the story. In the sixth and seventh chapter of Acts, Stephen has been accused of blasphemy against Moses and God, accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the laws that Moses had handed down. Most seriously, Stephen has said that God does not live in the Temple. And so, he is brought before the Sanhedrin.

Stephen recites the history of the Jews, describing how they had disobeyed Moses and opposed the prophets and eventually betrayed the Righteous One of Israel, Jesus. The Judean leaders

become so furious that they cover their ears and grind their teeth. They drag him out of the city, throw him off a cliff and roll boulders down on him, killing him.

The key point here, remember, is that Stephen is a Judean, too. If he were a Roman or a gentile, he might be offensive but the Sanhedrin would not execute him. What is being described here is a religion enforcing its own beliefs among its members.

Now, most of us wouldn't approve of enforcing religious beliefs this way. When we hear, for example, of Muslims stoning people for things they say or do, we are appalled. But equally certainly, what Stephen is saying is, in the eyes of his fellow Judeans, blasphemy. The Judeans believe in one God and only one – “I am the Lord your God,” says the first commandment. “You shall have no other gods before me.” To say that this human, Jesus, is equal with God is surely blasphemy before the Sanhedrin. To tolerate this talk would be to tolerate the worst sin imaginable. So, of course, in the view of the priests and elders, Stephen had to die. Paul is the silent observer of this sacrilege and its punishment.

And so we are caught. We don't approve of enforcing orthodoxy with capital punishment. But, neither do we permit blasphemy. Is there a middle way?

Perhaps. Let's go back to Jesus' words: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” What do we think Jesus meant? First, we should remember he is not speaking to a crowd of Muslims or Buddhists in order to convince them of the rightness of Christian religion. He is speaking to his disciples on the last night of his earthly life – this passage is taken from Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples. He is consoling them, reminding them of who he is, and, therefore, who they are and why he has to leave the way he will, in death and apparent disgrace. What he will say next, after the current text, is that the Father will send them an Advocate, a Helper who will carry them forward, who will abide in them.

And then Jesus will give them a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved them.

So what does he mean? How do we come to the Father through Jesus? We come to the Father through reliance on the Son, by keeping his commandment of love, by living as he lived, in service and in peace. We should recognize that this is a statement, a statement that lays down a boundary, that stakes a claim, that says, “This is who we are. This is the kind of people we are. This is how we want to be known. As people who follow a God who offers peace and seeks peace, who offers love and wants us to love one another, who rules through service and sacrifice and wants the same from us. This is how we want to be judged, this is the standard and the norm for our behavior.”

Put this way, this passage says less about what other people should believe and more about what we believe. We should recognize that the implicit threat in the statement is less to others than to us. We are declaring not how others should know and believe, but rather how we want to be known and what we believe.

And there’s a bit more in this passage. Phillip says to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” And Jesus replies, “Phillip, you have been with me all this time and you still don’t know me. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Last week in the middle-school Sunday school class we confronted exactly the same issue – “Can the finite bear the infinite?” was the question. *Finitum capax infiniti*. Lutherans say, yes! We can experience God in the bread and the wine. We can feel the touch of God in baptism. And all we need to know about God is what we have found in Jesus, in his life and in his teaching, in his sacrifice and his resurrection.

Our God is not unknowable, not remote, not someplace else far away. Our God became flesh and blood in Jesus, and Jesus is our bridge to God, indeed is everything we need to know about

God. And our discipleship journey, our journey to God, is through Jesus.

As I said when I began, this text is one of my favorites for funerals. And it is. It's gentle and reassuring. But this is also a great text for baptisms. It isn't a text of intolerance, telling people what they have to believe. It is a text of faith, saying what we believe and how we want to be known and how we want to live and why we want to live this way. It is a text about what God is like and how we know. And it is a text about what we have to look forward to, not only in the next life but in this one.

Amen.