

In the name of our one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's reading from John's Gospel, the last gospel that was written. It is both a comfort and a challenge to us. Many of us are familiar with the particular words of this passage. The particular words are these: First we hear, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," and then we hear, "Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

The first phrase I referenced is read at countless funerals and memorial services. It is read in order to help sustain us through the troubled times of grief. And then there's the second and challenging part of this text. Scholars suggest that the author of John's gospel included these words in order to help sustain the faith of his community during a troubled and anxious time for them. At the end of the first century when this gospel was written, the people in John's community were being punished by the spiritual leaders of their day. They were being punished because they had chosen to follow Christ. Jesus had opened the door into a new way of being in relationship with God and these courageous people had chosen to step through it. They had chosen the Way of Jesus over and above relying on the Orthodox ways of the synagogue; the ways of the Jewish tradition that had been handed down to them through Moses.

Most of you who know me have learned that I do not shy away from challenges. My husband would like for you to know that he is one of them. I think you all know that I like to deal with challenges head on; I know my husband knows that. I have found through life experience that it is important to face challenges with honesty and integrity rather than sweeping them under the rug. I have found that there is much to be gained by using that approach. In the process, I have learned that it is also important to be sure

that the people I work with, or grapple through an issue with, have the same information I have before we get started.

That may be why the author of John's gospel approached the approaching departure of Jesus this way. This text comes from Chapter 14 in John's Gospel and is identified as the beginning of the Farewell Discourses. The Hebrew people would have been familiar with another Farewell Discourse in their tradition. That was the Farewell Discourse of Moses. In those speeches, Moses was preparing his followers for proceeding on their journey without him. Moses was very old and knew that he would not live to see the end of their journey together. While Jesus was not old, he did know that he would not be with the apostles much longer. He knew they needed to be able to make the emotional, psychological and spiritual shift of overcoming their grief over his physical absence. He wanted them to be prepared to see the movement he had started through to its end.

So in this discourse, Jesus starts by assuring the apostles that if they believe and have faith in God they should also have faith in Him. Jesus had revealed the nature of God to them in his words, in his deeds of service for others and in his open acceptance of all people of all sorts and conditions. Jesus assured them that what they had seen in him was also what they could know about God. Further he assured them that they would see him again, and they would return ultimately to God the Father.

Specifically he said, "You know the place where I am going." But Thomas spoke up for the others saying, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This is where some key words appear. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

What do you imagine those words might have meant to the apostles? What might they have meant to the people in John's community in the late first century? What might they mean today? Should we take these words on, wrestle with them for meaning, or sweep them under the rug? I think you know where I might go with them.

When I first contemplated these words seriously, I was in the midst of seeking a deeper relationship with God through Christ. I was an active layperson at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Goochland. I suppose it might have been during a question and answer period following a Lenten lecture, but I distinctly remember asking the rector about these words. He said, "You have to keep in mind who Jesus was speaking to." I don't remember following up after that, but those words stuck with me. And they stuck with me as I went through seminary. I came to understand more and more of the worldview of the disciples and the historical time in which they lived. Only recently I have come to understand more and more of the historical context of John's gospel in particular.

I have learned, for example, that John's gospel is even more mystical and intertwined with Hebrew history and tradition than I had earlier understood. I had not realized the intense influence that being expelled from the synagogue had on the sequence of the chapters and shaping of the characters until I read Bishop John Spong's book called The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic with the St. John's Women's Book Group. Through study with that group I came to understand that these words that are spoken by Jesus in this gospel may or may not have been actually said by him. Spong pointed out that these words are not recorded in any of the other gospels or in the letters of Paul. That leads me to believe that the author of John's gospel put the

words here because the people in that community needed to hear them; they needed a verbal reassurance that the Way of Jesus was real; they needed affirmation that the relationship they so strongly felt with Jesus and each other was firmly grounded.

We need to hear that, too. But unfortunately some faith leaders in our modern world have lifted these words out of their original context and turned it into, as some scholars label it, a gauntlet. These words, when they are taken out of context, can be interpreted to mean that there is no other valid way to approach God than through Jesus. I don't believe that interpretation and here's why. The one who initiates the approach to relationship is God, not us. God does the acting and we do the receiving. It is God's grace that allows us to be in relationship with Him. Jesus's life demonstrated that. By breaking the barriers that had been established by the spiritual leaders in his culture, Jesus showed us that God loves us all - the poor, the rich, the sick, the lame, the sinners, the outcasts, all of us. He showed us that God wants to come to us all and will, if we let Him into our spiritual selves. God meets all of humanity right where we live and especially comes to us when we are troubled or in crisis; God comes to people, all people including us, when our hearts are broken open even a little.

We are blessed to have Jesus to guide us when grace allows that to happen. I can't imagine my life without Him. But I don't believe that God's grace is exclusive; it is not ours to judge to whom God chooses to come. God is omniscient, omnipotent and God's being is beyond human understanding. Even so, we can know God thanks to Jesus's revelation of God to us.

Through the Holy Spirit of God through Christ, we can be led to form life giving relationships with the poor, the rich, the sick, the lame, the sinners, the outcasts, with all

people. When we invite the Holy Spirit to join us as we face the challenges of life, our relationship with Almighty God is deepened. After that, when our hearts are troubled, God is ever more a comfort to us.

We choose to follow Jesus because that is the way we know; the way we have been taught; the way that informs how we interact with the world. We choose to follow Jesus because we know that our spiritual selves are not whole; our spiritual selves are suffering and we need His support as much as the unfed need food, as much as the homeless need shelter. With God's help, as members of the body of Christ in this world, we care for the poor, we visit the sick and imprisoned, we pray for healing for the lame, we lobby for healing for the world, we ask for forgiveness for sinners. We do that because that, my friends, is the Way of Jesus.

Jesus is my Way, my Truth and my Life. and I hope and I pray that he is yours.