

**5 Easter
May 14, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Happy Mothers' Day! I wish many blessings for all the mothers here this morning and hope that you have a wonderful and special day. I learned a long time ago that preaching about Mother's Day is fraught with landmines, so this morning I'm going to stick with the lectionary readings.

So, is it true that the only way "to the Father" ... to God ... to the divine presence of the sacred ... is by being a Christian? Does that mean that other people in the world around us who happen to worship God in a different way, and call God by a different name ... or maybe don't even believe in God ... are denied access to a divine presence? In our Gospel reading from John this morning we hear those well-known words: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." But we also hear "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places."

These words not only provoke confusion, but they also raise honest questions. In his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, David Barrett identifies 10,000 distinct religions, 150 of which have a million or more followers. Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus is the only way and that the other 9,999 religions are false? What are we, as Christian, to think?

Many people today favor some version of "religious pluralism" ... the belief that no one religion can or should be normative for all people. Religious pluralism insists on a radically egalitarian perspective that grants parity and equal validity to all religions. A traditional Japanese saying suggests that despite their outward differences, all religions connect with the same divine reality ... "Although the paths to the summit may differ, from the top one sees the same moon." However, a friend of mine once said, in an admonishment that we must ultimately make a choice about which path to follow, "If you keep changing paths you'll never get to the top."

I think it is fair to say that I am one of those who happen to believe in religious pluralism ... that although my faith is Christian, I respect and honor those of different faiths. With Caren being Jewish life in my home would be very difficult if that wasn't the case. Yet I also believe that some religious views and practices are clearly false, harmful, and even despicable. The world obviously has not ended, in spite of repeated predictions by people of deep faith that it would. I don't think that ancient Aztec human sacrifice was a viable means of approaching the God who gave us life. And I think the abduction of 300 young girls attending a Christian school in Nigeria because of a fanatical understanding of the Koran by a group called Boko Haram is not about the proper expression of devotion to the God who created this world. Some religious interpretations are clearly false ... and some are harmful and even despicable.

If all expressions of faith were the same there wouldn't be 10,000 distinct religions. The mere fact that we can count the number of distinct religions means that we have focused on what makes them different from each other. And for many people it is a matter of either/or, that is, if my religion is the "right" religion, and you don't believe the same things I do, than you must be wrong. So we end up in separate little boxes arguing about who is right and who is wrong; which is the better path to holiness; and which faith path is going to lead us to the divine presence of God. But what if we were to ask another question ... not about what makes these religions different, but what might these religions hold in common?

There is a United Methodist Church in a small town ... Fountain Hills ... outside of Phoenix, Arizona that identifies itself as Progressive Christian community of faith. It shares its worship space with a Reform Jewish congregation, is involved with ministry projects of a nearby Mosque, and openly welcomes the LGBTQ community into its life and leadership among other things. Nevertheless, there were some other churches in Fountain Hills that took offense to this expression of the Christian faith, and so the Fountain Hills Ministerial Association coordinated a six-week series of sermons and classes: *"Progressive" Christianity: Fact or Fiction?* These eight churches all put large banners on their front lawns, paid for a full-page ad in the local paper along with an Op-Ed piece, and members of these churches began writing letters-to-the-editor denouncing Fountain Hills United Methodist Church.

Why? Here is some back-story ... really old back-story. The Christian fundamentalist movement began just a little over 100 years ago. Hard to believe that it has been only 100 years! Christian Fundamentalism began in response to Darwin's Theory of Evolution. If the theory of evolution were true, then the world wasn't made in six days like it says in the Bible, so evolution says the Bible is wrong! The Fundamentalist declared five doctrines as "necessary and essential" to the Christian faith:

- *The inerrancy of the Bible*
- *The virgin birth as literal and historical fact*
- *Jesus' death was an atonement of sin*
- *The bodily resurrection of Jesus as literal and historical fact*
- *The historical reality of Jesus' miracles*

These eight churches in Fountain Hills are descendants of this Fundamentalist movement. Sadly, rather than focus on what their beliefs might have in common with other expressions, they focused on what makes them different.

Although our bishop has told us at St. Cyprian's not to use the term Progressive Christian on our web site, and not to provide a link to the Center for Progressive Christianity, I, for one ... and I know there are others in this congregation ... consider myself a Progressive Christian. Among other things Progressive Christians believe:

- *That ... on the one hand ... following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life.*
- *And ... on the other hand ... that the teachings of Jesus provide just one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;*
- *And progressive Christians also seek to build communities that are inclusive of ALL people*

I mention this in the context of my sermon because although there may be many things that divide the religions of the world, there are also some very basic principles that unite us. As most of you know that through Compassionate St. Augustine this municipality was declared a Compassionate City ... and is now one of the outstanding Compassionate Cities ... there are 400 around the world ... that are seeking to make the Charter for Compassion a reality in peoples' lives. The Charter for Compassion says, *"The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always ... and in every way ... to treat all others in this world as we wish to be treated ourselves."*

Now, not all religions have a version of the Golden Rule as part of their belief system, but most of them do ... and certainly all of the major world religions. We Christians often quote Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." But five centuries before Jesus Confucius is quoted with a similar saying.

So, just what is this compassion that unites these world religions? What does it mean to be compassionate? What might it cost me, that is, what might I have to give up to live more compassionately? Aren't we, as Christians, by definition, a compassionate people? Why would someone have to declare themselves, or their church, or their organization "compassionate?" Moreover, what does this have to do with Fundamentalism on the one hand ... taking literally, *"No one comes to the Father except through me?"* And, *"In my father's house there are many dwelling places,"* on the other?

The premise is simple ... treat all others as you would want to be treated ... NOT as you have been treated, BUT the way you would like to be treated. So, the fact that someone ignores you isn't a reason to ignore them. Indeed, it is a call to acknowledge them. If someone insults you, instead of returning an insult, offer a compliment. The execution is not always simple or easy. In our homes and marketplaces, in the halls of justice and politics, in the use of our personal bank accounts and in the global economy we must look at how we treat others and set aside our competitive ways and look to our shared responsibilities. We must treat others as we want to be treated ourselves. We must move beyond mere toleration of the other and begin to appreciate them as our sisters and brothers ... children of the same God, regardless of the name they call this divine presence.

I return to the Gospel of John. *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Those who want to define themselves against others will use this as a way to say that Christianity is the exclusive ... the one and only ... way to salvation.

However, I for one, also hear the verse *"In my father's house there are many dwelling places"* and understand that to mean others are included also. I also try to use our scriptures in ways that unite us, not separate us. If I take seriously what Jesus took seriously then I find his way of living in relationship to God as a means to truth and fullness of life. I can offer that understanding to others ... if they are curious ... without denying that they may have a way by another name that also leads to truth in their life and a fullness of being which contributes to seeing the other as one would see oneself.

It is in this light that I invite us to look at our lives and see where compassion fits as a means to coming closer to a divine presence of the sacred. I invite us to do to others what we would want done to us. I invite us to seek a Truth that binds the children of God together ... to seek a way that is compassionate ... and to seek life in all its fullness. Look at those who are living in those other "dwelling places" in the house of the divine presence of God and recognize them as fellow travelers on a spiritual journey ... regardless of how different they may seem from us. For some, the verse *"No one comes to the Father except through me"* grounds their faith. Although it sounds paradoxical, I do not want to deny that to them ... I just ask that they open a room for me. I invite you to see those who see sometimes see as "different" ... for whatever reason ... as a fellow child of God. Treat them as you would like to be treated.

Amen.