

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

At On The Way last Monday we took some time to consider this Gospel reading that I just read to you, and what jumped out for several people here is Jesus' claim that "no one comes to the Father except through me." This comes right after his famous words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The message seems clear that the only true connection to God, the only *way* to the Father, to use Jesus' words, is through becoming a Christian, which would seem to close the door on any kind of relationship with people of other faiths, any relationship, that is, beyond "be like me, join my religion or else." That is problematic for at least two reasons. One is that many of us have significant relationships with people of other faiths, or no faith at all. Another is that it reminds us of the distasteful, exclusivist, aggressive Christian nationalism that is attempting to force itself on society in these turbulent political days. Can this really be what Jesus is advocating here in John's Gospel.

Our discussion reminded me of a blog post that I shared with you a few years back that addresses why people are becoming disenchanted with the Christian church. The blog was entitled, "Help me, Christian — I can't see Jesus." The author's point was that many people who are the most vocal about their Christianity these days don't seem to act very much like Jesus. It's not a new idea, or a new problem. It reminds me of a quote that has long been attributed to Gandhi: "I like your Christ, [but] I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." The blog post in question elaborated on this theme. "I've read the words of ... Jesus," the author wrote, "... and they speak deeply into my heart, but when I turn away from them and look at you [dear Christian]—I can't see [Jesus] anymore." "I can't see the 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' Jesus." "I can't see the "'Blessed are the peacemakers' Jesus." "I can't see the 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus. I can't see the 'You cannot serve both God and money' Jesus." And so on.

The author had Christian nationalism in mind in his blog post. But really, if he were to be fair, his critique could also be applied to all of us across the political and denominational spectrum who claim to follow Jesus, but whose lives often do not reflect the values and priorities that Jesus embraces. Who among us truly places our relationship with God at the center of our lives? Isn't it more the case that our families and our careers and our recreation dominate our agendas, and that our relationship with God, our spirituality, or whatever you want to call it, is more of an add on? ... something that we turn to in times of sickness or tragedy, but with the goal of getting us back to normal where we can resume life on our own terms?

Maybe it's because we know that we cannot possibly live up to the standard that Jesus has set. Who can lay down his or her life for others confidently and willingly? Who can truly forgive as Jesus forgives? Who can live a life selflessly focused on God and others? Spiritual Olympians, maybe, religious elites, maybe. The Mother Therasas of the world, maybe. But ordinary folks like you and me? It doesn't seem realistic, or very attractive, if we're honest.

The root of our problem is that we find it terribly difficult to believe in God, by which I don't mean believing that God *exists*, although that certainly can be difficult as well. What I mean is that we find it difficult to *trust* God. That's what Jesus means in our Gospel reading from John today. When Jesus says, "believe in God, believe also in me," he really means, "trust God, trust me too." Our difficulty trusting God is the same difficulty the disciples had. We have

expectations of how an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God would and should operate in the world. A God who loves us should bring an end to our suffering. A God who has the power of life and death should intervene to stop senseless, innocent deaths. A God of peace should not allow us to kill or oppress each other. The creator of such a magnificent creation should not allow us to wreck our environment. Or at the very least, if all of these things have to be, for reasons that we do not yet understand, God should at least give us a clear sign, some glimpse of God's self so that we can know that trusting in God is not merely a hopeful illusion.

That is what Philip is asking for. "Show us the Father," he asks. Philip too wants that transcendent moment of unquestionable revelation. "Give us *something*, Jesus, so that we can be sure that you really speaking for God." He's asking for the same thing Pharaoh was asking of Moses in Exodus. Proof of God's involvement.

But instead of a miraculous display, Jesus says only this: "If you have seen me you have seen God." All of the things that the disciples had seen Jesus do, the transformation of the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the man born blind, the feeding of the 5,000, the raising of Lazarus, all of these point to the new and better life that God is promising. If you want to see God at work in the world, well, you've seen that already in me, in all of those life-changing works. God is at work in me, says Jesus, so if you have seen me, then you have seen God. *Trust* me, says Jesus, because when you trust me, something remarkable will happen. You will begin to act like me. You will begin to do the works that I do. In fact – and this is an astonishing claim – you will do *greater* works than me.

Jesus words to the disciples are also his words to us. Trust me. Trust me that the life that I have won for you, the life that I call you into, life that is directed toward God and to others in the world God loves is the truest, most genuine, most authentic life possible. For 2,000 years now the Church has been with Jesus, trusting in Jesus on our good days, telling his story and doing his work, baptizing in the living water that he gives, partaking in the bread of heaven, reaching out in love to heal the sick and suffering, feeding the hungry, welcoming the outcast, forgiving sins, and promising resurrection and life in Jesus' name.

And while it is true that we have had plenty of bad days throughout our history, when our lives have not reflected Jesus' values and priorities, and that we're having some of those bad days right now, it is also true that God is at work to do something about that. God is at work in our gathering around word and sacrament, our mutual care and consolation in times of joy and sorrow – and through these, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is forming ordinary folks like us into the body of Christ to do the works of Christ.

Jesus's words here are not about belonging to the right religion, or joining the right church so that we can save ourselves. They are not an excuse for us to tell people of other faiths "we're right, and you're wrong" or "if you're not a Christian, you're going to hell." That's wandering into territory that we are not in charge of. What I didn't think to remind us of last Monday is Jesus' words in a part of the Good Shepherd chapter that we didn't read last week. "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." That's Jesus' job. We are not the shepherd, he is. Our job, through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, is to reflect the face of Jesus to the world, so that when people look at us, they are able to say, "I like your Christ, and I can see him in you." May God grant us faith to be that reflection and to do his works, so that our words and deeds proclaim to the world the hopeful Good News that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)