

May 14, 2017
5th Sunday in Easter
John 14:1-14; Acts 7:55-60

GRATITUDE: A WAY OF LIFE

Before I could be ordained in the Presbyterian Church, I was required to participate in a program called Clinical Pastoral Education--CPE. Most of the mainline denominations require it. There are variations, but generally to fulfill your CPE requirement, you spend 6 months working as a chaplain in a hospital. I was part of the first CPE class ever held TMH. Our class consisted of 2 protestant seminary students, a Catholic Deacon, a semi-retired protestant minister who wanted to become a full-time Hospice Chaplain, and a Jewish seminary student named Ed who happens to be Bill and Dottie Lee's son in law. CPE students spend about half their time providing pastoral care to patients and families, and half their time pretty much sitting around talking about it. The sitting around talking about it has more lofty sounding titles most of which I don't remember, but it was basically processing the experience as a group, which felt like part group therapy and part being the subject of some rather aggressive interrogation practices. I did learn a lot and it was a privilege to walk with people often in times of their greatest spiritual challenges. But I really could have done without the sitting around processing and interrogation part.

Anyway, during one of those sessions, I don't remember exactly how it came up, but we got to talking about this passage from the Gospel of John. To me, it has always been one of the most comforting passages in the entire Bible. Jesus knows how hard life can be. He knows that his followers will have struggles and faith challenges. And so this teaching is all about comfort and assurance. Don't let your hearts be too troubled he says. Because you will carry my peace within you. Always I will be with you. Not only that, when your time in this life is over, it's

not over. I'll come for you and take you to the place my Father prepared for you from the beginning of all eternity. It really brings home what we mean when we talk about the good news of Jesus Christ. That we are saved by his grace, unconditionally loved and accepted by him in this life and the next.

But verse 6-- "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" has been a source of considerable controversy within the church. Worse, it has been used by many within the church to judge, threaten and even historically persecute those outside the church. Yes. There have been dark times when the church officially justified the slaughter of anyone who refused to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Jews in particular have been the targets of that persecution by Christians. Christians have pointed to these words of Jesus, which he intended solely as comfort and said "see, only people who believe in Jesus Christ go to heaven. Everyone else is going to burn in hell for all eternity. You better join up with us or be damned."

Understandably, Jews have a certain aversion to be talked to that way. So, like I said, I don't remember how it came up in our CPE group, but one or two of the Christians started talking about how the Bible is clear. Only those who believe in Jesus go to heaven. I tell you. I didn't have everything all figured out then like I do now, but I was thinking to myself "really? You're going to say something like that as if it's an objective factual statement right to our Jewish friend and colleague?" One of the others said, "there's a moment between the death of the body and meeting Jesus when you can still make your choice." To which Ed pretty much scoffed. Then I said something equally insensitive. To my credit I didn't make it up, I heard it from one of my seminary professors. That was the idea that it was possible that those whose lives in fact mirrored the teachings of Jesus—you know, people like Gandy and the Dali Lama—could get to heaven through Jesus even if they didn't know him. At that Ed said "well that is just condescending."

He didn't get angry or raise his voice or anything, but I wasn't feeling too good about that conversation. In fact it has bothered me ever since. Really? how presumptuous of Christians to think God's plan for salvation is so technical and exclusive.

Here's the thing. I don't have it all figured out, but I don't believe that God sends people to eternal damnation simply because they die without ever coming to believe in Christ. And I don't know any Presbyterian pastors who do think that. It just is not consistent with the most basic essentials of our faith.

We've been talking about these essentials in our Wednesday night study about the will of God. Things like, God is love. God is just. Christ died once for the salvation of all. We are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, not by what we do or say. Thank God. I could go on and on about all the ways that the belief that God condemns all people who did not recognize Christ in this life, is a belief that is irreconcilably inconsistent with everything else we believe about salvation through Christ alone.

I admit that the "I am the way" saying is troublesome. I had a bit of an argument one time with a person who was sure that only people who affirmatively accept Christ as Lord and Savior in this life will enter heaven. This person said it has to be that way, otherwise why would anybody be a Christian? I was stunned. How about that part of the good news that applies to this life? God in Christ is with us as we walk through this life. Good times are better, hard times are easier because we know he is with us. It's great. It is the gift of a way of life that is fulfilled, reconciled and at peace.

But here is what I think is overlooked by people who are so sure that salvation is only for those who proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He spoke these words on the night before he was arrested, tortured and nailed to the cross. And as he hung there dying in agony, he said "Father, forgive them; for they do not

know what they are doing.” That was his final teaching. That is what the early church remembered. That is what Steven, the first known Christian who died for defending his faith in Christ, remembered as he was being stoned: ⁶⁰ **Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."**

What did Jesus intend, what was the will of God in that moment of suffering in granting forgiveness of those who rejected him? What did Steven understand about forgiveness when he prayed that God not hold it against them? What is Divine forgiveness if it is not the promise of eternal life?

There is not a person who ever lived that is not in need of forgiveness, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics and most of all Christians. When it comes to living according to God’s will, we are all as guilty as those who nailed Jesus to the cross and those who threw stones at Stephen. They were forgiven and so are we all. Those who do not believe in him and those who do. That is God’s ultimate will. Salvation through Christ for all.

Thank God. And those of us who do accept Christ as Lord and savior are privileged and blessed to live this life in the sure knowledge of his presence, comfort and unconditional love . As James said, it is not thankful people who are happy, it is happy people who are thankful.

The key of course to a fulfilled life of gratitude is to be committed, faithful members of the church of Jesus Christ. You will be receiving your pledge cards and time and talent sheets in the mail hopefully on Monday. Please take some time to pray and think about all the things in your life that you are grateful for. Come back next Sunday prepared to renew your commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ and celebrate our gratitude for his unconditional love in this place at this time.