
What Are We Saying About God?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A**

I am going fishing this week. I can't remember how long we have been doing this. Ten years, maybe. There are four of us and we all gather at Doug's cabin on the Piney River just outside of Amherst, Virginia. Doug and I went to high school together. He is now a fly-fishing guide. I know that Doug has been up to the cabin this week. He will have made sure that the cabin is clean and that there are fish in the river. He's not above introducing some stock fish if the native population seems a little low. He will have filled the kitchen, the refrigerator, and at least one auxiliary cooler. He will have tied a few of the flies that he thinks will work for us. He will have packed his truck with the extra equipment that we will need. I'm still not sure how he knows what I'm going to forget. There will be one day during the week when Doug goes out with each one of us to make sure that we catch something more interesting than our best catch last year. I am already feeling grateful.

Maybe you have had an experience of someone preparing a place for you. A grandparent when you went to visit them in the summer. A parent who maintained your room as a shrine after you left home for school. A friend, partner, or spouse who knows you and makes space for you whenever the two of you are together, whether you deserve it or not.

I think of this kind of radical hospitality when I hear how Jesus talks to the disciples in the farewell discourse of the Gospel of John. Jesus is telling them that he is going away and they are understandably afraid. They know how to follow him while he is with them, but they can't imagine how to make their way once he is gone. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he says. "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?" Later, he reminds them, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

These are comforting words. They remind us that God loves us unconditionally. Things are going to work out. We are not going to be left out in the end, even if we lose our way a few times between now and then, which of course we will. Maybe that's also why we so often choose these words to read at our funerals. They promise that we will be with God in the end.

That's also probably why we often decide not to read the next verse. Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." These words seem to spoil the mood. Even if we think we're still in, others will be left out. What about people of another faith? What about people of no faith at all? Do we really believe in a God who would punish someone for not believing in the right things?

While we're talking about it, is there even any such thing as knowing what the right things are? Doesn't each person need to decide for themselves what is true and what isn't? Don't the differences between people, cultures, and time mean that what is true for some won't be true for others?

These are good points.

The good news is that is not what's going on here. Jesus is not making exclusive claims about salvation. He is not deciding who is in and who is out. He is not trying to scare anyone into making new commitments. He is just trying to calm and console his disciples. They have already made their commitments. He is telling them that they know more than they think they know. He is telling them that they do, in fact, know the way and that they are not going to lose him entirely. Although he will not physically be with them, he will be spiritually available to them. He will be in them, and they will be in him, just as the Father is in him and he is in the Father.

He is the one who in the beginning was with God and was God. They have nothing to fear as long as they are going to the Father because he is the way there.

Hold on, though. Just because we can explain away some interpretations of this verse that are unhelpful doesn't mean that aren't others that can feel exclusive to some people. The New Testament, as I read it, does claim that some things are universally true. We do believe, for example, that what we encounter in Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. We do believe that what we read in the New Testament is the truth about God and that it is the truth about us. We do believe that there are real consequences to not accepting that truth and surrendering ourselves to it. We do believe that the Word of God that we call Christ is final and unique. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, puts it, "No one apart from Jesus of Nazareth expresses the truth like this."

What we don't believe is that we can somehow understand how God might communicate these truths differently to other people. We don't believe that Christians are the only ones who find what Jesus calls the "Kingdom of Heaven that is within you" or who take on what Paul calls "the mind of Christ." In the end, it's about participating in the life of God that saves us, not our ability to say the right words or tell the right story about God.

I attended a conference recently in which one participant asked the leader to weigh in on a dispute he was having with a friend. He said his friend was a Christian and told him that he was going to hell if he did not accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. He was a self-avowed atheist and thought his friend was trapped in an egoic system of thought. He asked the leader to tell him who was right. The leader chuckled before suggesting that they were both trapped in an egoic system of thought and maybe it was not helpful for either one of them to judge the other.

Compare the spiritual maturity of the fourteenth century Sufi poet known as Hafez. Hafez wrote a poem titled, "A Hole in the Flute," which uses this image:

*I am a hole in a flute
that the Christ's breath moves through.
Listen to this music.*

I love the idea that we could shrink our ego to the point that we were empty and willing to let the breath of God blow through us, using us to make beautiful music.

It is good for us to remember that although Jesus repeatedly tells people that their faith has made them well, he doesn't ever demand that they tell him exactly what it is they have faith in or whether they believe in any particular creed or doctrine. He seems to care only that they accept and surrender to the power of love that his presence reveals. It is also good for us to remember that when Jesus healed the ten lepers and only one Samaritan came back to thank him, the other nine were probably grateful enough not to have had an immediate relapse.

So, as we reflect on the verse "No one comes to the Father except through me," what are we saying about God? We are saying, I think, that we are all created in the image of God, but none of us will be able to live into the fullness of what we were created to be if we are left to our own devices and desires. We need a savior. Those of us who have chosen to follow Jesus should be more eager to talk about him as our lord and savior. We wouldn't read a great book or see a great movie and not tell anyone else about our experience. Others want and need to hear about what Christ is doing in and through us. We, however, should worry less about how God will go about saving others who, for whatever reason, do not see what we see, lest we start to think that we are somehow saving ourselves.