

September 25, 2011

Acts 4:8-12

John 14:1-11

“The Way, the Truth and the Life”

A man arrived at the gates of Heaven. St. Peter asked him, “What is your religion?” The man said, “Methodist.” St. Peter looked down his list and said, “Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” Another man arrived at the gates of Heaven. “Religion?” “Catholic.” “Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” A third man arrived at the gates. “Religion?” “Jewish.” “Go to Room 11 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.”

The man said, “I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass Room 8?” St. Peter told him, “Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they’re the only ones here.”

Sometimes religious groups can believe that their way is the only way to heaven – and this has nothing to do with our Baptist brothers and sisters. We can all feel that our group or denomination offers the best way to heaven. It is easy to compile a list of doctrines and then say that if you don’t believe these things, you won’t go to heaven. But Romans 10 offers us something very simple – that if we confess Jesus as Lord and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved.

Yet there is something that must happen first before anyone can really trust that Jesus is Lord. There is something that must happen before we believe in our hearts that He was raised from the dead. We must know Him. Very seldom does anyone truly trust in someone he or she does not know. That is why the telling of the Gospel account of Jesus precedes anyone making a heart-felt decision concerning Him. “How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14)

This is exactly what the Lord intends – He intends for us to hear about Him and then to know Him. Jesus was profoundly relational. Jesus offered a relationship between Himself and anyone else – no matter who that person was - if that person would only accept Him. It seems that His closest disciples came to know Him in significant ways.

There is no doubt that Jesus took the time to know his 12 disciples, and they eventually came to know Him. He wanted to be with them and they wanted to stay with Him. Jesus could have gone to the cross immediately after beginning His ministry, but He didn’t. The timing had to be just right. But what was He waiting on during those 3+ years? I believe He was waiting for His followers to really get to know Him.

And they only matured in their faith as their relationship with Him deepened. If you want to grow as a Christian, your relationship with Christ must become more and more intimate. You cannot grow spiritually any other way than through Him.

Now whenever anyone loses a close friend or family member, they grieve. The disciples had lived and worked with Jesus day and night for years. They were all very close. Therefore when He died on the cross, their painful emotions over His departing were real.

And so when Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit during their last night together, it was not some theological discussion on the Trinity. It was highly relational. He said that the Holy Spirit was sent so that the disciples would not be left like some many orphans. Distressed by Jesus' departure, the disciples were sent a comforter. God wants a relationship with us.

That's what God deeply desires. He wants us to know Him. And God wants us to know Him more every day. I submit to you that Christianity is not primarily a religion. It is a primarily a relationship.

Karl Barth was lecturing to a group of students at Princeton. One student asked the German theologian "Sir, don't you think that God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?" Barth's answer stunned the crowd. With a modest thunder he answered, "No, God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son." When you know His Son, you know God. Christianity is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now people can get nervous when Christian teachers talk about this aspect of our faith. Philip was also a little nervous about Jesus' claims and especially after Jesus said that knowing Him was the same as knowing the Father. Jesus told them, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."

But Philip wasn't even thinking that anyone could know the Father so intimately. He was expecting more of a burning bush or a miraculous vision. He was looking for a God that was totally separate and above any fragile relationship. And so Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Now at that moment, Jesus could have revealed Himself like He did on the Mount of Transfiguration. Perhaps Philip wanted to see Him in the same way that Peter, James and John had experienced Him.

But rather, Jesus asked Phillip about their relationship, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? If you took your personal relationship with Me seriously Philip, you would have seen the Father in Me. God wants us to evaluate our personal relationship with Him.

Now Jesus wasn't the first person to talk about a personal relationship with the Father. In the accounts of Exodus, when Moses met with God— even amidst all the smoke and fire and miracles, we read these profound words, “Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend.” (Exodus 33:9-11)

In this text this morning, Jesus is not just promising eternal life and bliss in His heavenly kingdom. He is promising them that they will all be together again. He is promising them that they will all be close to Him. That's why He said, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.” Heaven is a place to be with Jesus. You see it will only be those who have a relationship with Him that will truly long to be with Him.

Heaven is primarily a place to abide with Him and with all of those who desire to be with the Lord. It is not just a stage on which to offer rewards. It is not just a place of splendor and reverberation of praise and music. What makes heaven beautiful is that our Lord is going to be there. It is His glory that we will see – not merely a wondrous creation – but a wondrous Creator.

In John 17 Jesus said, “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am.” Our salvation revolves around a personal relationship. Eternal life itself is a relationship. “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

God's judgment is primarily relational. Jesus taught, “And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” (Matthew 10:32-33) “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’²³“And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; (Matthew 7:22-23)

Now sometimes people gain the impression that because the Christian faith claims with total exclusivity that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, that that automatically implies that no one else will be saved, but Christians. Yet what Jesus was actually emphasizing was that He personally is the only way to salvation – He is the only one who can grant salvation. “I am the way, the truth and the life. And no man comes to the Father except through Me.”

Jesus called Himself the way for everyone. Interestingly, the same term is used to describe the whole Christian Church in Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Our text in Acts is even more exclusive than the words found in John. Peter, filled with the Holy

Spirit insisted, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Is this our belief today or is it simply some old, narrow-minded and judgmental doctrine? Isn't it possible that all religions are helpful and maybe they all lead to God and the same place?

Wil Willimon and Stanley Haweras have raised this issue on the Duke University campus in our time. According to Willimon, the popular idea that all religions are essentially the same and merely a matter of personal opinion is both intellectually dishonest and ultimately intolerant. As Willimon suggests, "this is merely a way of saying, 'Religion is wonderful as long as we first all agree that it doesn't mean anything.'" This is true intolerance of faith.

Now any genuine student of world religions knows that they are so different from one another in the way they understand the divine, humans, and the world. No, it is more honest and more respectful to learn the specifics, to understand the differences, and to know who and what you believe and claim it. It is possible to love and honor other people, to respect their religious beliefs, to find common ground where it actually exists, and to assert your own faith at the same time. Having a specific faith, talking about a specific faith does not mean you have to be arrogant and intolerant about the faith of others.

Because of God's great desire to be in relationship with all people, I believe that every person – regardless of theological conviction or religious persuasion is going to have an opportunity to know and personally accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I believe that God will reveal Himself personally in Christ even upon the throes of death, if at no other time, and that every person – even those who have never heard - will at least have an opportunity to know Him, to love Him and to receive Him as Lord and Savior and Friend. But because it is a relationship, God will never force anyone to enter into that relationship. We are free to say no.

Paul listened to people of other faiths as much as he talked to them. Paul was in dialogue with his Greek audience enough to know their beliefs and find God somewhat revealed in them. But Paul was also not afraid to put his own faith out there. Why?

It's because Paul personally met Jesus on the road to Damascus. For the first time in his life, he knew the God he was following. Paul had developed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And even when Jesus said that He was the Truth, He was not abandoning the idea of a personal relationship. He didn't just say that He taught the truth, He said that He was the Truth. For in the final analysis the Truth is not a concept, but a person. You and I have been saved by Jesus Christ - not by a theory or paradigm or world view or tradition or denomination. And everything that you can do with the truth, you can do

with His person. You can know Him, you can study Him, you can accept Him, you can believe in Him, you can trust Him with your life... you can hear Him. It is only the person of Christ that is The Truth by which all other truths must be measured.

And the last part of His statement was that Jesus is the life. He offers us abundant life now. Personally knowing Jesus is not all pie in the sky just about heaven. The relationship we have with God is good for today. If you are suffering with some issue – you have worries about tomorrow and can't sleep for fear, a personal relationship with God is still the best cure.

When Peter said, “cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” he was speaking from personal experience. He knew that Jesus cared. Knowing Jesus personally is the key to being victorious through every trial.

And it has only been the reality of the living person of Jesus Christ that has changed my life. It has not been the contemplation of a new model for living. It has not been the laws and commandments of the Old Testament; it has not even been one theological principle over another. But rather, it has been the living person of Jesus and His Spirit that have entered my life.

I have met God. I have met Him through Christ. And it is in knowing Him that has made all the difference. Do you know Him personally? Are you growing in your knowledge of Him? That's what a disciple of Jesus is.

“I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” To God be all the glory. Amen.