

FAITH, FACTS, AND ACTS

Texts on Sunday, October 9, 2011

John 14: 1-7, 25-27; Psalm 46

Liberal-minded Christians often find this passage from the gospels more troubling than any of Jesus' ultra-demanding commandments. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." Liberals feel anxious about the billions of souls that sound left out from this formulation, and anxious about membership in an exclusive club. Far from anxious, conservative Christians (used to?) wave this sign at football games: *John 14:6*—ss if to say, *We're in the club—you should be too.* So where lies the truth? Does claiming truth give you the truth? What is truth? So said Pontius Pilate to Jesus on the day of his execution, according to John's gospel. At least this much is true. The translation is good—"No one comes to the Father except through me." No wiggle room there.

What can it mean? I do not ask, What *does* the passage mean? as if you were religious radio receivers tuned to my beams of Bible truth. No. *What can it mean?* is the attitude of our inquiry, for though very many Christians assert that they possess the one and only truth, we intend to grow beyond that view. Once we thought, like a child, that there is only one way. Now, have taken our crown. We see through a glass darkly. We see that we are ourselves responsible for every interpretation we make of things too wonderful for us. A mystery grasps us. We ask, What can it mean, to hear our Lord say, "I am the way; no one comes to Father but through me"?

It can mean many things. If to one it means that God consigns to eternal darkness all who have not confessed Jesus as the one truth, well, facing such a believer, I must concede that the verse can mean that. But we are not done. It can mean something very different, something very clear and simple, which has nothing to do with any destiny except your own.

Remember that the story is set in Jesus' last night with his disciples. It is a word for disciples in extreme uncertainty. It is a word of absolute peace. "Let not your hearts be troubled." What can the passage mean? First, that you be not afraid or anxious about ancient facts and fictions. You cannot get to faith and trust by weight of evidence. Do you think your partner faithful because you have the evidence of how every hour of every day was spent while you were apart? "In my Father's house, there are many rooms."

In the late 1980s, for a series called *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers interviewed the great scholar of religions and mythic literature, Joseph Campbell. Moyers asked this man so thoroughly acquainted with the stories, claims, and hopes of religions whether he had ever adhered to any of the traditions he studied. In a word, *Have you been a believer?* Campbell said he had not. Moyers pressed further. Could he say he fully knew the religions, not having walked in their ways? Campbell acknowledged the void in his manner of knowing religions. Wise man, I thought. Then he added, "What the world really needs is a *planet religion*—a universal

practice to unite, not divide, people. Foolish idealist, I thought. Like a man in a three-piece suit walking the edge of every lake in the district, Campbell knew the shoreline of religions, but he never got wet. He kept his objectivity—he kept his self dry—but he never tasted religion. Jesus' word to Thomas can mean that this word is for all disciples, when they feel confused about the way forward: *I am the way forward. Faith is not a matter of facts. You must get into the water of life, the way you have seen me do.*

As I was watching Moyers and Campbell long ago, an image of religions flew to my mind. It was the board game called *Parcheesi*. At the outset of the game, each of the players has all her pieces in a separate corner of the board. At the throw of dice, a player brings the pieces into play, tramping step by step around a serpentine path on which other players' pieces also move. Sometimes the players' pieces pass one another by, like Muslims and Christians and Jews here in the city. Sometimes the pieces interfere with the progress of others. The object of *Parcheesi* is to get all one's pieces to the center of the board, which is called "Home." I read now from the directions: "Each player has his own home path and may not enter another's. So, when a piece is on its own home path, it can no longer be [interfered with]. Once a piece [is in the] home path, it can no longer be moved except to move all the way home." (Wikipedia) That, I thought way back then, is a little like religion. At the end of the game, the various players' pieces are mostly all together in the home space. But each got there on its own home path. "In my Father's house, there are many home paths."

Now this figure, if winsome, is also clumsy and misleading in various ways. Nevertheless, it puts into relief the weakness of wishing for a planet religion, for a wiping away of all real religions, in favor of an imaginary universal that will not embarrass us with its particularity and localness and relativity. The error in that utopian wish is to suppose that there exists any way Home other than the particular path. Seeing that several paths exist does not move you homeward, but only putting your piece in the game and taking the home path you have been given. To wish for a planet religion is like wishing to be born with a planet body—one neither male nor female, one without all that alarming particularity and odd shape, something less gross and smelly, something more . . . humane. No. The human way is the embodied way, male or female, this color hair or that or none, this nation or that. Is one better than the other? Does one religion send you home more securely than another? That is the question, isn't it?

Try this way of thinking. There is no place to stand to ask or to get an answer to the question, whether one path is more true than another. You can shout as loud as you like that your bible says all other bibles are wrong. But when you are done with this battle cry, the other bibles are still there, with their believers, and what besides emotion did all the noise bring? "Peace I leave with you," says the Lord. The only way to receive what a spiritual path gives is to take the path, body and soul. The path to the all-in-all begins—must begin—through an ordinary hinged door. You must try the handle. In the words of Jesus from John's gospel: *Trust in God, trust also in me.*

Years ago, I was at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. One of the park rangers, a Navajo named Clyde Kaneally, led the group I was with. He entertained us with winsome commentary as he guided us through the ancient cave dwellings. He also encouraged in us an attitude of honor for the people who had long ago dwelled there. “Whole books are written on the question, ‘Whatever happened to the Anasazi?’” he said. “We Navajo never wonder at that. We are what happened! These are our ancestors.” At length, we came to a *kiva*—the word refers to a round room in which a tribal clan was seated for the most sacred and serious undertakings. There, in the flat floor we saw a perfectly round hole, a few inches in diameter. It passed straight down into black. The ranger said, “That is called a *sipapu*. It is the passageway to the underworld.” He let the briefest silence fall, then mocked, “Ooooooh, the underworld! The Mafia must be down there!”

Then he did this. He saw two girls, about twelve years old, and asked their parents if the two might come and stand on either side of him. They agreed. With one hand on a shoulder of each girl, he said, “I observe that you two are wearing necklaces with a figure hanging from the chain. One has two bars crossed and on the other those same bars crossed, but with a human body hanging from the cross. What does it mean? —Oh, I am sorry, I must catch a plane in 15 minutes. Let me tell you what I think it means. I know it’s for your religion. It must mean that your religion honors those who eat the flesh of humans. You with bare cross necklaces are initiates who have not yet been admitted to the sacred practice of cannibalism. You that have the body on the cross have already partaken in the feast on human flesh. I see. Now, I want to really learn all about your religion, so please tell me more. —Oh, I’m sorry, the plane is leaving in 30 seconds, tell me what you can. Oh, they’re calling me now. I am so glad we had this deep talk about your religious rituals. Thank you. I have to go.”

The ranger fell silent. We tourists were utterly quiet within, looking at ourselves in the mirror he had held up. Then he spoke again, “All over the world, all people seek to know three things. Where have we come from? Where are we going? And what is the righteous way between? No one on Earth has any great question but these. We are all holding them together in our ways.” Then he took us out from the cave dwellings of Mesa Verde.

As you hear this appeal from an unexpected voice, do you feel your own Lord Jesus urging you further in and further up the way of the Cross, the way of relinquishment, the way of freedom, the way of peace? We would go this way not because it gives us a good shot at heaven; nor because it seems a good guess at what is true or a good bet on the possibility that God is real. No, but because the truth that will heal you is not available as an object of study. Truth is available to those who take part in it.

Religion is like a language. You can study a language, read all about it, discover its grammar and its syntax and learn the ancient roots of its words—and still be unable to speak it, unable to discover even one real relationship with any who call it their mother tongue. Your religion is like that. It is a pattern of symbols and practices by means of which you can connect with people and with spiritual powers

far beyond than yourself, as well as with those whose fears and anxieties hem them in and keep them from seeing what you have come to see.

Your decision to take part in this truth in this way in this life could not be more urgent. Something is happening. The American experiment is faltering. Is it just the usual boom and bust of economies, soon to be brought to balance with more massive consumerism? Or is our stumbling and this incapacity to act through legislatures and congresses the signal of the onset of a grave neurological disease in the body politic? Some large part of our citizens believes America is the sole owner of truth and claims Jesus as the proof. This part of us shows up anxious and afraid, trying to bar the door at every port of entry, and ignore the poor, and cast out the Muslim. Why, just the other day, presidential candidate Mitt Romney promised us his vision, that the 21st century would be “the American century,” with American military and American commerce ascendant. The crowd roared like a fire with fresh fuel.

I pray I do not use my faith and my religion to demonize others. But I do seek to discern between spirits in good faith. That spirit abroad in our country which wants mostly to protect what is mine and bar the stranger and share nothing with the so-called undeserving needs to hear from us, the other religious America, who experience faith as an inner freedom and hope. At no time in living memory has there been a sharper need for you to articulate your Christian faith in the public square! The world needs people ready to take part—politically, of course, but more—to take part in being sent on the way and the truth into life like this, as our Lord was sent.

Our identity as a people is really in question now. What kind of people are we called to be as Americans? For the sake of all, may you be sent in a spirit of love and a vision for what a human is capable of, and for what a beloved community is capable of, to make the difference in waking up as one nation, indivisible; to stop the tragic slide toward economic and political cataclysm. This is the warning of the Scriptures, which really do say that greed and power, which have no inner principle of self-regulation, eventually destroy the whole structure on which they depend. But they can be called back by an articulate people of faith who are using that language which so many tens of millions claim as their spiritual mother tongue. We must use this language to call people back to the way and the truth and the life.

I leave you with a word about that glorious Psalm 46, which the choir will interpret for us shortly. It begins, “God is our refuge.” It ends, “God is our refuge.” And in the middle, it sings “God is our refuge.” Take that home. Know that on this word your whole substance as an individual and as a member of God’s community is established. On this word, we may go out from this place into these times, confident of our refuge in the Lord, who will show us what we yet must do. Amen.

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