

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**April 20, 2008**

**Easter 5A 2008**

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining:  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, the lectionary editors have pitched us another one from John – and it is a difficult one. I think it is difficult for a number of reasons – it is familiar and strange at the same time. One part of it is comforting, but usually misunderstood and the other appears clear but isn't and, thus, is often misapplied with the most appalling results.

One of the things you learn growing up in suburban Connecticut is the difference between a cocktail party and cocktail hour. A cocktail party is a public event, a see and be seen occasion. There is a lot of pleasant banter going on around serious and not so serious matters. You wear your public face to a cocktail party. A cocktail hour is a private event at home among family or close intimates. You discuss matters close to the heart or of critical importance. Speech can at times be plain or allegorical to express ideas that are difficult to put into words.

Now I am not calling John's version of the Last Supper a cocktail hour, but it is that kind of gathering of close intimates where serious matters are discussed and there is a level of candor and complex nuance that are absent at public events. Jesus is anticipating his death and resurrection and he knows that life will change completely for his closest disciples. He seeks both to prepare them for his departure and at the

same time give them an explanation of the meaning of what is about to occur. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. 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 I go to prepare a place for you.”

Many of us have heard this passage many times, often at times of great loss and vulnerability. It is a frequent gospel reading at funerals. If you are like me, you tend to think that Jesus is speaking of heaven – you know, the place somewhere “up there” where God lives. Jesus’ listeners had the same thought. When Jesus says, “and you know the way to the place where I am going,” Thomas, that great truth teller, says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” Jesus answers in part, “I am the way and the truth and the life” and he later says to Phillip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”

Here, I would ask you to consider whether Jesus is pointing us away from the idea of a purely physical destination and towards a relationship – a state of being. Jesus, the incarnate Son, dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in him. Jesus points to himself as the way, the way to the truth of God and to life with God. The way to dwell with the Father is to enter the same indwelling relationship with Jesus. It is hard to express in words and hard to hold in our minds. Maybe that is why we have art and why we have sacraments – to express a truth beyond our human minds. One of my favorite icons is an 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian one of the Holy Trinity. In it the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are represented as three men at a table with one cup and loaf on the table. The unique thing about this icon is that the three figures are not looking at one another but rather are looking out of the icon at the viewer as if to invite him or her into their relationship. I think this is what John is trying to express.

Here John's community is expressing their understanding of entering God's life through entering relationship with Jesus. Eternal life is a state of being. It begins with entering the way of Jesus and death cannot extinguish it.

There is another statement in today's Gospel lesson that has caused a great deal of grief throughout the centuries: "No one comes to the Father except through me." This has been used, and still is being used, to provide divine justification for the idea that only Christians know God and only Christians can be saved. It has been used as justification for the slaughter during the crusades, for the enslavement and killing of indigenous peoples in the New World and for the execution of heretics during the Inquisition and various religious wars. It is still used to oppress and harm people who disagree with us enough to be called insufficiently Christian and thus, if not heretics then certainly "unorthodox".

So what are we to make of this one verse that has caused so much dissension and harm? First, I think we each have to be clear about and own not only what we believe but also what we find impossible to believe. I think I can honestly say without putting myself outside the bounds of Christian belief that I cannot believe that the God who loved us and all creation into being is going to disown someone who never heard of Jesus. I think I can also honestly say that I do not believe that any opinions that I may have about another person's beliefs is going to influence one way or another God's relationship with that person.

I think we have to deal with that text and we have to do that by taking the Bible seriously enough to do the hard work of seeing it for what it is and understanding it within the context of the author's time and situation. We are reading it and we seek wisdom in it but John's Gospel was written by John for John's community. I'll give you

an example I heard several years ago from the late Anne Richardson about one of her predecessors in office. In 1929, “Pa” Ferguson was ineligible to run again for governor due to an unfortunate felony conviction. His wife, “Ma” Ferguson, ran and was elected.

Once when asked about an “English Only” law for Texas, Ma knew her Bible and declared, “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for all the people of Texas!” Ma Ferguson was transferring her world into the Bible and had Jesus speaking English before England, let alone the English language, existed. We have to be careful about doing this sort of thing.

Gospels are not newspaper reporting. They are four separate and different theological reflections by four different communities of their experience and understanding of the life of Jesus and of the Risen Christ. It is important to understand that John’s Gospel is different because he and his community lived in different times. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed. The Jews had been exiled from Judea. The Pharisees were the sole surviving branch of Judaism other than the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Pharisees were throwing John’s community out of the synagogues.

This is the context of today’s Gospel. John is drawing a line here, but it is a line within his culture. *For us followers of Jesus*, John is saying, there is only one way to relationship with the Father and that is through our relationship with Jesus the Christ. John is defining his Christian community’s distinctiveness and boundaries in relation to the Pharisees in the early second century. Note that John’s formulation of the core beliefs that are particularly Christian were the consequence of his community being excluded rather than the other way around.

We cannot import our 21<sup>st</sup> century questions of other world religions into John's Gospel. It is our job to do the thinking and work needed to answer these questions. Katherine, our Presiding Bishop, has been roundly criticized by fundamentalists for not taking the position that this text excludes all non-Christians from God's salvation plan. She is being a thoughtful person and a good scholar. We can listen to this text in defining the core claim of Christian identity without disparaging or excluding those who differ in their faiths. In short it is about what is particularly Christian and has nothing to do with God's relationship with others.

Here in Hawai'i we know we can be good Christians without excluding or diminishing our neighbors. With our many faiths and cultures, we have learned that we do not have to negate others in order to affirm ourselves. Perhaps that is our own unique experience we can share with the church. In the current church controversies some are drawing lines. But are they drawing lines as John did – to define what is unique and central to our Christian identity – or are they drawing lines as did the Pharisees – to exclude people who disagree with them?

As this summer arrives and we hear all the talking heads about the Anglican Communion and Lambeth, I think the question we need to always have in our heads is whether or not whatever is being state is or is not at the core of what our experience of Christ is and thus our Christian identity.

Amen.