Sunday, May 2, 1999
PIN NUMBERS AND PASSWORDS
John 14:1-14

In last week's sermon, I noted that many of us have our favorite Bible passages or verses. I mentioned some of mine, like the 23rd Psalm, which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"; John 3:16, "God so loved the world that God gave His only Son"; and John 10:10, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

It's also true that many of us know Bible verses that are puzzling and difficult to understand. A Bible passage that has puzzled a lot of people over the years is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 6, where the gospel writer reports Jesus as saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

At first reading, all sorts of questions come to mind. What did Jesus mean by saying, "No one comes to the Father except through me"? What about all those millions of people who were born, lived, and died before Jesus lived among us? They had no opportunity to know Him. Does that mean all those millions of people could never come to know God and God's love in any way? Are they forever excluded from God's grace because of when they were born, lived, and died?

What about all those other millions of people who were born, lived, and died after Jesus lived in the world, but because of where they lived, no one ever told them the story of God's love becoming a human being and living among us? Are they excluded from God's love and care forever? And what about those who have followed other religions, such as Islam or Buddhism?

There are also millions of people who, because of their limited mental capacity, can never rationally know of the love of God as expressed through Jesus. This includes those who are born but die as infants or as very young children.

Does this statement from John's gospel mean that the Christian faith is exclusive? Does the name and person of Jesus operate like a "PIN number" or "password"?

If you're on the internet through an online service, you need to have a password to be connected. If you use an automatic teller machine for banking transactions, you need to have a "personal identification number" (PIN) to complete the transaction. PIN numbers and passwords are required today in our electronic world to gain access for any number of activities. Do we have to have a PIN number or password to gain access to God? Let's examine this statement of Jesus more carefully to determine what it means for us today.

First of all, statements like this one always need to be seen in connection with the rest of the Biblical tradition, not in isolation.

The Gospel of John, in which this statement is recorded, begins with a retelling of the creation story found in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being." Then a few verses later, we read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

One way to paraphrase this description of creation is: “In the beginning was the Love of God. This Love was always a part of God. It was the purpose and power of the Love of God that brought the creation into being... And the Love of God became a human being and lived among us.”

To put it another way, the love of God, which found its most profound expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, was always a part of God. This love of God was there at creation. It’s what we also call “God’s grace.”

The Nicene Creed, one of the ancient creeds of the church, describes Jesus as being one with the Father before creation and says, “through Him all things were made.”

In the first sentences of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, the writer describes it this way: “Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, He has spoken to us by a Son.” The love of God has always been active in creation.

So, when the writer of John’s Gospel reports Jesus as saying, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” he is saying in another way that it is because of and through God’s unconditional love — which has always been a part of God — that we have been created, have access to God, and are accepted by God. One of the Psalms tells us that there is no way we can escape the love and presence of God.

In the deepest sense, the love of God, which found its ultimate expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is like a PIN number or password, but it is already stored in the computer. It has been there always as a part of God. All we have to do is “sign on.”

It’s one of the strange ironies that, while God’s love is inclusive, we want to make it exclusive. Even Jesus’ closest disciples had this tendency. According to a story in the Gospels, one day the disciples saw a man casting out demons by using the name of Jesus, and they tried to stop him because he was not one of their group. They were proud of themselves for trying to stop him and reported what they had done to Jesus. He surprised them by saying, “Do not stop him, for whoever is not against us is for us.” (Luke 9:49-50)

This man knew the right PIN number or password, but the disciples considered him a “computer hacker.” He was not an authorized user of that password or PIN number. Jesus had to remind His disciples that God has not given any one group of people an exclusive PIN number or password that only they can make available to others or that they can limit others from using.

There’s a little poem I’ve used before in another sermon that expresses this very well:

I dreamt death came the other night,
And heaven’s gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright,
Ushered me inside.
And there to my astonishment
Stood folks I’d judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth,
And spiritually disabled.
Indignant words rose to my lips

But never were set free
For every face showed stunned surprise —
Not one expected me.

One of my most embarrassing moments took place years ago when I was visiting a congregation I had served. After the worship service, I was greeting people I hadn't seen in a long time and trying to remember their names. I asked one man who I remembered as being one of my critics, "How's your wife, Eileen?" I was proud of myself for remembering her name. "Oh, she's in heaven," he answered quickly. Not thinking about what I was saying or how it might sound, I said, "I'm sorry." Then I realized by the pained expression on his face that he had taken my comment the wrong way. So, trying to recover, I said, "I'm glad." Somehow that didn't sound right either. So, finally, I blurted out, "Well, I certainly am surprised."

It's so tempting for us in the church to try to exclude people rather than include them. Christians have said, "You were not baptized in the correct way, so you're out." Or, "The right words were not used when you were baptized, so it's not valid."

In a professional journal I receive, a minister wrote that she had been using more inclusive language as we do here in our sacrament of baptism. She said, as we do, "I baptize you in the name of God our Creator, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit." It was reported to one of her superiors in the hierarchy, who then said the baptism was not valid because she did not use the right words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." What nonsense.

Too much of current religious conversation focuses on who's in and who's out. A journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes, Sandburg replied, "Exclusive." The ugliness of "exclusive" depends on whether we see ourselves as being among the included or the excluded.

The first major conflict in the early church centered on the question of who is in and who is out. Are gentiles to be included? Peter and Paul debated that issue until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality.

Judging people by whether or not they are one of us misses the gift of God's grace. What we forget is that God has a history of acting decisively in and through people we consider outsiders. Jesus, the very incarnation of God's love, refused to live by the divisions and barriers of His time. He challenged every practice of limiting God's grace to one's own race, ethnic group, religious institution, and political party.

God has not given an exclusive PIN number or password to any one brand of Christianity or to any one denomination or even to the Christian church as a whole. God's work is carried on in the world in many different ways and many times by people who aren't even aware they are doing God's work.

Remember the parable that Jesus told about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46? God is the main character in the story. God welcomes a group of people into His everlasting presence and tells them, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me." And these people who didn't have a PIN number or a password are totally surprised. They ask God, "When did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And God answers, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

Whenever I read such Bible stories, I think of people like Mahatma Gandhi in India. He did not carry the label "Christian"; he was Hindu. Yet in some ways, he was more Christian than many of us who worship and pray regularly. He lived a life of selfless, unconditional love. He worked for justice; he practiced non-violent compassion. God's grace is everywhere and can't be controlled by us.

Many years ago, during a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated whether any one doctrine was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the topic of discussion?" he asked, and his colleagues explained that they were talking about Christianity's unique contribution among the world's religions. In his forthright manner, Lewis responded, "That's easy. It's grace."

After more discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love as a part of God from the beginning of creation, offered to us, free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law — each offers a way to earn God's approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

And yet we don't want to believe it or live it. We sometimes seem to have a built-in resistance to grace. Maybe that's why Jesus talked about it and practiced it so often, although He seldom used the word itself. He described a world suffused with God's grace, where the sun shines and the rain falls on the good and the bad; where birds gather seeds gratis, neither plowing nor harvesting to earn them; where untended wildflowers burst into bloom on rocky hillsides. Jesus saw God's grace everywhere.

If "exclusive" is the ugliest word in the English language, then "grace" is the most beautiful word. Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and that includes all of us. Dear friends, hear these final words about God's grace: When you are aware of God's grace, you know that things do not have to be perfect to be good. You also know that every gift you have been given would make a good present for someone else, and that giving out of the fullness that is already in you only increases that fullness.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That PIN number, that password, is forever stored in God's memory. You are loved. You are accepted. Amen.