Sunday, April 24, 2005
STORED IN GOD'S MEMORY
John 14:1-7

I have my favorite Bible verses. Each one of you has your favorite Bible verses or passages. One of mine is the 23rd Psalm, which I memorized many years ago. It begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Other favorite verses for me are John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son," and John 10:10, where Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

I am also aware that there are Bible passages that can be difficult and even exasperating. You can be reading along and feel comforted, then suddenly come across something unsettling. For example, I love these words from Psalm 139: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me ... Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Then, a few verses later, the mood of the psalmist changes drastically: "O that you would kill the wicked, O God," implying divine approval of the hatred the writer has toward all God's enemies.

The passage from the Gospel of John read earlier contains another example that can be difficult to understand. The writer quotes Jesus as speaking to his followers shortly before his coming death. He comforts them by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

Then, a few verses later, Jesus says something that sounds very disturbing. In response to a question from Thomas, who says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus answers, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Does that imply that all those millions of people who were born, lived, and died before Jesus lived among us are excluded from God's grace? They had no opportunity to know Jesus.

What about those spiritual giants in the Old Testament: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, Elijah, Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, Solomon, Ruth, Deborah? What about those individuals who are named in the genealogy of Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, for example, Tamar and Bathsheba? All of these people and more had no opportunity to know Jesus.

And what about those millions of people who were born, lived, and died after Jesus lived among us 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 forever excluded from knowing God and experiencing God's love and care?

In embracing the Christian way, do you have to believe that those of other faiths are excluded from God's grace? In order for your faith to be true, do all other religions have to be false? What about the good and decent people you know who are godly but not Christian? Does God exclude them? Do you have to be a member of the club to be invited to the party?

There are also millions of people who, because of birth defects and other mental problems, can never rationally know of the love of God as expressed in Jesus. Does knowing the name of Jesus operate like a "password" or "PIN number" in our technological world?

If you're connected to the internet, you need to have a password to go online. If you use an automatic teller machine for banking transactions, you need to have a "personal identification number (PIN)" to complete the transaction. Do you have to have a PIN number or PASSWORD to gain access to God?

In coming to an understanding of Bible passages like this one, remember these three principles: context, context, context.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples during his farewell discourses — a series of statements made by Jesus to his followers the day before he was to be crucified. He wants them to know that he is not abandoning them — that he will be with them in a new way. He also wants them to remember the distinctiveness of his life and teaching as far as they are concerned. Especially, he wants them to remember that through him they have come to a new understanding of the loving God. He is not talking about the people who lived in previous centuries or who will live in the future. To try to use these words in an argument over the relative merits of one religion over another is to misunderstand their intent. These are specific words for a specific time. That's the immediate context.

These words of Jesus also have to be seen in a larger context. 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 Hebrew Scriptures. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He (that is, Jesus) 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, you read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

The story could be retold like this: "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 in the beginning of 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 ... through whom all things were made."

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament 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." In other words, the Love of God has been active in creation from the beginning and has been active in many ways before Jesus entered our world.

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 all human beings have been created, and therefore all have access to God and are accepted by God.

To use a contemporary metaphor, the love of God, which found its ultimate expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is like a PIN number or PASSWORD that is already stored in the computer. It has always been there as a part of God. All you have to do is "sign on."

It is one of the strange ironies that while God's love is inclusive, there are always those who want to make it exclusive. Some of Jesus' early followers had this tendency. According to a story in the gospels, one day, some of his disciples saw a man casting out demons in Jesus' name, and they tried to stop him because he was not one of their group. They were proud of themselves for their attempt 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 PIN number or PASSWORD. Jesus had to remind his followers that the love of God expressed in him had not given any one group of people an exclusive PIN number or PASSWORD that only they could make available.

There's a little poem I've used before in other sermons which expresses this point in another way:

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 back visiting a congregation I had previously 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 from the pained expression on his face that he had taken my comment the wrong way. 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 followers of Jesus to try to exclude other people rather than include them. There are those who have said, "You were not baptized in the approved 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 read, a minister wrote that she had been using more inclusive language, as we do here, in the sacrament of baptism. She said, "I baptize you in the name of God our Creator, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit." What she had done was reported to one of her superiors in the hierarchy, who then said the baptism was not valid because she did not use the traditional wording of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Throughout the history of religion, too much time has been devoted to trying to figure out 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 first major conflict among the early followers of Jesus centered on the question of who is in and who is out. Are Gentiles to be included? Peter, Paul, and James debated that issue until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality.

Judging people by whether or not they are included in God's grace misses the gift of God's grace. According to the stories in the Bible, God has a way of working decisively in and through people whom others have considered outsiders. Jesus, the incarnation of God's love, refused to live by the divisions and barriers of his time. He challenged every tradition 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. It is the testimony of the Bible that God's work is carried on in creation in many ways, often by people who aren't aware they are doing God's work, as well as by people you might least expect.

A few weeks ago, when John Dominic Crossan was here, he said there is a big difference between the particularity of the Christian faith and demanding that it be exclusive. To be particular in your affirmation of Jesus Christ is to be forthright about what you as a follower find in him. To those who follow his way, he is the Word made flesh, the fullest revealing of God known. For example, I can't talk about God for very long without talking about Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life to me and to countless others who follow his way.

But that does not mean that Jesus is the only path to knowing God. It does not mean that those who find God revealed in other texts and traditions are necessarily wrong. It is possible for you to be respectful of other religious faiths and to work with people in those traditions for the common good. You can do this without abandoning your particular faith. You can do it by living your faith with integrity and openness.

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 accepted. You are loved. Amen.