

A New Look At Jesus' Way
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(John 14.1-12)

My great-aunt Gladys decided she would like to have a pet for companionship. So, my family gave her a dog. Once I dropped by for a visit, and I caught Aunt Gladys playing chess with the dog! I was amazed, so I said, "Aunt Gladys! That must be the smartest dog in the world!" She said, "He's not so smart...He's lost 3 of the last 5 games."

It's all about how you look at things, isn't it? With that in mind, let's look at today's gospel reading.

We may as well name that this passage causes discomfort for some progressive Christians, and for non-Christians who have had this text used against them as a weapon of conversion. If we don't treat this text with care, we might be tempted to use it to justify religious arrogance. We might be tempted to believe that our faith tradition is superior to others, or that we somehow have exclusive access to God because we call ourselves Christian. But that is not the only way to view this passage, nor do I believe it is the best way to view this passage.

You see, as progressive Christians, we take the bible seriously rather than literally. And taking it seriously means asking questions. We have done that work with passages that seemed to promote slavery. We have done that work with passages that seemed to justify homophobia. We have done that work with passages that tell wives to be subordinate to their husbands. We have asked the questions and deconstructed the passages and found more liberating ways of understanding and applying them, and now we must do that with the all passages that have been used to promote the idea that any group has exclusive access to God.

Jesus once said that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath; likewise, I believe the spirit of that teaching can be applied to our bible...it is here for us, we are not here for it. It is OUR tool, not our oppressor. And so we are free to choose the most liberative readings from the bible and to apply the most liberative interpretations to the bible.

How will we read today's gospel message? We could make the point that this passage reflects what the writer believes about Jesus much more than it reflects what Jesus believes about himself. We could point out that the writer is writing decades after Jesus' crucifixion and probably never met him. But let's deal with the words themselves. Why does the writer believe these things and attribute them to Jesus at all?

The writer of John's gospel is a philosopher. And philosophers trade in idiom and imagery, myth and metaphor, poetry and prose. This author doesn't want to be taken literally; he is a literary artist, a poet, a philosopher. He would agree with St. Paul, who said, "...the letter kills but the spirit gives life." He doesn't want us to get bogged down in his choices of words and images; he wants us to explore the life-giving spirit to which he hopes his words point.

John wants us to take him seriously rather than literally; his work is literary rather than literal and if we miss that we will lose the profundity of his message.

As a philosopher and a literary artist, John's author isn't just remembering Jesus...he's imagining him. And he offers him to us as a model. New Testament scholar Burton Mack says, "For John, the 'I' of...[his] Jesus and the 'I' of the [reader]...are...one and the same."

In other words, when John has Jesus say, "I am the way..." he is saying that WE must each find our own way; which again agrees with Paul's statement to the Philippians that we each must work out our own salvation...(Philippians 2.12).

The point of presenting a protagonist is for us to identify with the protagonist! The implication is that to know God we know ourselves as being God-filled members of God's good world. The way of God, the truth about God, the life in God are all to be found by accepting our unity with God's Goodness.

God is in Jesus and Jesus is in God. The point of showing us that Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus is to demonstrate that WE are in God and God is in US. Jesus is the example, not the exception.

His way is OUR way;

he knew the truth of his sacred value and we can know the truth of OURS.

His life was filled with the presence of God and so is mine and yours.

We are in God and God is in us. This is the Jesus way of seeing things, this is the truth Jesus knew and demonstrated; and this is the life that can be filled with joy: this is the way to God because it is the awareness that *wherever we are, God is!* (just as we say in our benediction every Sunday).

In Acts 17 Paul quotes the Greek poet, Epimenides, when he says, "It is in God that we live and move and have our being." Luke, who wrote Acts, uses Paul as a figure to make that point. John uses Jesus to make the same point. God is everywhere. We can't be lost from God. We can't be separated from God. The trick is to know that we are in God and God is in us. This is the way Jesus demonstrates. The way to God is to know that God is where we are! There's no other way to God because the only thing keeping us from God is the awareness that nothing can keep us from God! God is everywhere, so to "come to God" is to come to the awareness that we are already with and in God. The Creator is never separate from the creation.

Today's gospel isn't trying to get us to reject, vilify, or convert people who are different from us; it is merely trying to get us to accept what Jesus knew...We are in God, and God is in us.

Jesus knew that, and when we know it for ourselves, we are following Jesus' way, embracing his truth, and living the God-filled life that he knew.

Whoever is willing to know that the divine Presence excludes no one is instantly embracing the way, the truth, and the life that John attributes to Jesus.

Robert Holden says, "Self-acceptance (that is, Self-worth) is the key...to happiness."

Accept that you are made in God's image and likeness.

Accept that you are filled with God's spirit and grace.

Accept that you are part of the creation that God calls very good.

Accept that you are in God and God is in you.

This is the way, the truth, and the life-giving message of Jesus. And this is the Good News. Amen.

**I am in God.
God is in me.
I am filled with God's love.
I am filled with joyful hope.
God's grace is expressing through me.
And I am blessed.
Thank you, God!
Amen.**

Today's final word comes from Philosopher Alan Anderson and Educational Psychologist Deb Whitehouse. They remind us that we are in God and God is in us when they tell us, "The Creator is fully present in the creature, because the creature *is* God's act of creating, not some product left over after the act of creation is finished. And the act of creating *is* the active presence of the Creator."