

Sermon: Arguing with Jesus
Scripture: John 14:1-7
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: January 25, 2009

I struggle with this text and similar ones to it and I have for a long time. I am unwilling to write them off. I still hold them as sacred texts pointing us towards the truth, but I have to say they make me uncomfortable. Jesus says “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but through me.” And similarly the same gospel says “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life... but whoever does not believe in him is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God.”

The traditional theological understanding is quite logically if you don't accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you don't become Christian then your lost. You can't know God. You won't be saved and enter into heaven in the afterlife. And there are many many Christians, maybe the majority of Christians even, who accept that as just the way it is. They have a deep commitment to the word of scripture and the constant study of it and feel sincerely that unless you remain committed to the literal word of scripture, unless we accept all of it, even the parts that make us uncomfortable then you are in danger of forging your own way and abandoning God's way and placing your immortal soul in jeopardy. A friend of mine captures this point of view by saying “I know its not a popular way of thinking in our circles, Will, but it is the Gospel. What is the Gospel if not this? What do we have if we begin to explain away the salvific work of Jesus on the cross, dying for our salvation.” He says “I am very much a universalist. I don't believe that only a few are chosen and offered salvation. I believe all are offered salvation through Jesus. But everyone also has free choice and not everyone will chose to receive and accept that salvation.” Jesus is the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but through him, but everyone is invited.

Dr. Rick Warren would definitely hold this view and that's why he would lead a prayer at the opening of the inauguration that only Christians for the most part would feel comfortable participating in. It's not what I would have done if Barak had asked me to do the invocation (I was waiting for months for that call!), but I wasn't surprised and I

wouldn't expect anything different from one of the most popular voices on the conservative end of Christianity today in this nation. Since Rick Warren holds to a belief in salvation through Jesus alone, he would be remiss not to take advantage of that pulpit, reaching more people in one moment than any pulpit in the history of humanity, without somehow inviting people into the word, the life of Jesus. And he did it by praying the Lord's prayer.

Or we can hear this scripture that seems to proclaim an exclusivist approach to Christianity and we can dismiss it altogether. We can say, and many liberal Christian theologians and believers do say that John's exclusivistic teachings in the Gospel are less a reflection of Jesus' teachings and more a reflection of John's experiences and issues with the communities of his day. Or we can join with Thomas Jefferson and say that we believe in Jesus' teachings and then figuratively or literally as Jefferson did we can tear out of the Bible all the references to the supernatural – all the miracles, the healings, the raising from the dead, even the resurrection itself and be left with a manual basically for good and moral living. We could relegate the Bible to the periphery of our lives, understanding it as an inspired book maybe that contains much wisdom but not absolutely authoritative for our lives, discerning which passages resonate with our intuitive sense of Jesus' fundamental message of love, peace and reconciliation and then leave the rest that seems to run counter.

Those are two options – the literalist: “The Bible says it, I believe and that does it” approach or the other of picking and choosing what resonates and leaving behind what doesn't. I wonder how many of us fit into one of those categories or the other. My guess in this church, if you are comfortable with my preaching for the most part then you fall into the latter category and that's probably where most of the time I fall as well. And its scriptures like the ones we read this morning, scriptures that seem to proclaim an exclusive understanding of who can know God and claims of ownership of God that lead me there personally.

But there is a middle ground between these two poles which I think is where I would prefer to stand even if I'm not always standing there. And I think it was this middle ground where I was standing for a lot of last week as I gathered with Jews and Muslims for interfaith dialogue during our Building Abrahamic Partnerships course.

Those of us who were Christians taking this course were mostly of the liberal ilk and one of the things that the Muslims in particular had trouble understanding was our approach to sacred scripture. In a similar way that more conservative Christians would challenge the liberal approach, the Muslims didn't get how we could talk about the Bible being inspired but also talk of it being a human document with a cultural context containing even the slants and perspectives of particular writers. For all the Muslims that were there – and of course they can't represent billion Muslims in the world – but all the Muslims who attended the course were convinced and committed to the notion that the Qu'ran was the absolute revelation of God, word for word for syllable for sentence. I reminded them at one point that probably the majority of Christians hold a view of the bible that was similar to the way they viewed the Qu'ran but in the room only the liberal Christian perspective was represented. But even so, Kelly, a Muslim who converted recently after growing up in a secular family in Baltimore, was baffled and said “then how do you know what God said if you don't accept the Bible as the literal word of God, how do you know how God expects you to live your life?”

And the response to that question that dawned on me even as the Episcopal Priest who was presenting on Christianity said it – the word of God, what God said was not a book like in your tradition, we believe that what God said, the word of God was a person. We read the person and life of Jesus Christ for what God said. And granted the scripture is the primary source for that life but not the only one. We also believe that through the Spirit that person and life is present to us in the here and now for our reading and receiving and understanding.

Nonetheless, I felt challenged by these Muslim's commitment to the Qu'ran and how even the littlest details of their lives were lived in accordance with what the Qu'ran had to say from washing your hands to eating and relating to one another to the 5 times of prayer a day and so many other things. And similarly how the Jews in the group related to the Torah such that their daily even hourly lives were directed towards God by what the revelation of their scripture tells them. And what I felt was some of the impoverishment of my own liberal Protestant tradition that can more easily take or leave what is found in the sacred scriptures. I experienced the beauty of their commitment to their sacred texts – which ironically I have to admit I could appreciate more than I can appreciate my own conservative Christian brothers and sisters same commitment to my

Bible. I'll admit I was experiencing a kind of romanticized response to these beautiful Muslims and Jews I was meeting and their passion for their faith and tradition, but even so the challenge was real to my own approach and again I felt invited into that third way of engagement with our scriptures.

This third way was cinched one morning in our textual study of Judaism when we came upon this wonderful story in the midrash, which is an ancient Rabbinic commentary on the Torah. The story basically tells of an argument between a Rabbi and God where finally God throws up his hands and laughs and concedes the point to the Rabbi. The Reform Rabbi who was leading that particular section of the course talked about how important argument and disagreement is in the Jewish engagement of their faith and text. She said, "we often say of ourselves, you get 2 Jews in a room and you'll have at least 3 opinions."

And it suddenly struck me that the third way between total acceptance and submission to the authority of the sacred scriptures on one side and a relativistic picking what we choose on the other is instead standing in the tension and wrestling with the scriptures, arguing with Jesus and God! And it dawned on me, as though I was given a celestial green light right there in that room, that I was being invited to argue this out with Jesus, the Rabbi, who himself was full of argument and contrariness, who would probably welcome a confrontation about the scriptures! All we have to do is read through the Gospels to see that Jesus spends a lot of his time in this kind of argument and confrontation which wasn't at all I realized just because Jesus was really mad at the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day but even more, this was the way that Jews have always done their faith and pursued the truth. They believe and practice that it's in the argument and conflict that Truth emerges. And it seems that for some reason, the Christian focus on love has tended toward the warm-fuzzy interpretation and we have felt like conflict is a problem and argument is bad rather than the path to the truth.

So I have been invited by God, it feels to me, to argue! Not to just blindly accept the scriptures as God's truth and do as it says, nor to relegate it to the side-lines of my life but rather to hold it front and center and say "what the heck Jesus! No one comes to the father but through you? Come on man! How is that fair? Everyone is condemned who doesn't believe in you? How in the world is that an expression of love? Are you kidding me here?! And instead of thinking that I need to decide and figure out an answer and

what it is that I believe, I think I'm going to practice and trust being in the argument of it even if it takes the rest of my life. I'm going to refuse to ignore or reject such scriptures but I'm also going to refuse to accept blithely and blindly what doesn't resonate with me. Cause I think somewhere in there lies the Truth.

I want to end by sharing with you one other moment in my week that was particularly powerful. One evening we had to divide up into small groups and simply share with one another a profound experience that we have had of God. And I happen to be in a group with Abdullah, the Imam who was presenting on Islam throughout the week. And I shared my experience and he shared his. The context of mine was one particular winter weekend in a town in Connecticut in conversation with one person at a monastery and his was shoulder to shoulder back to back with over a million people in Mecca during his Hajj.

What was amazing to both of us was that while the specific contexts of our experiences could not have been more different, the experience of God and the after effects of that experience were so remarkably similar. It would have been utter madness, nothing could have been further from the truth than for me to have thought for a moment that his experience because it was of Islam was of something other than or less than God and mine, because it was through Jesus, was *truly* an experience of God. No, it was obvious, we both came to the Father, we both experienced God, the same reality and it was an incredible thing to share that with a man whose religion was different, whose culture was different, whose entire world view was different. And yet before God we were undoubtedly brothers, children of the same God, swimmers within the same amazing mystical reality of the Divine. And there is no way that my sacred scripture, which seem to suggest at times something different, is going to convince me otherwise. But then neither am I going to throw out or ignore my scriptures either. So continues my argument...