



“Doubt and Faith”

John 14:1-14

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 22, 2011

Today’s passage is loaded. It contains some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture. Hundreds of times, while standing in a cemetery or memorial garden, I’ve read these words to people who were saying good bye to a loved one. Jesus says, “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 that I go to prepare a place for you?”

These beautiful words from the lips of Jesus can take some sting out of suffering. Jesus promises to go before us and prepare a place for us in God’s eternal kingdom. His assurance calms some of our anxiety about the death of our loved one and plants in our soul a seed of hope that there is another dimension to existence, a spiritual realm where we can enjoy everlasting life. These words can help us survive the deep valley of suffering and despair.

Yet comfort is not the only feeling prompted by this passage, is it? There are other words in this text that make many of us uneasy. According to John, Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Many people believe that these words should be understood in the narrow sense to declare that only Christians will be welcomed into God’s kingdom. Everyone else? Sorry. Is that what Jesus meant? Such thinking sparked the blood-letting of the Crusades and helped pave the road to the Holocaust.

Numerous Christians have latched onto these words to justify their intolerance of other faiths. Only two months ago, that pastor of the tiny fundamentalist church in Florida made good on his promise to burn the Koran. A YouTube video of the burning quickly made its way to Afghanistan touching off violent protests. More than 20 people, including seven United Nations workers,

were murdered in the mayhem. It is impossible to imagine that Jesus, who constantly emphasized the centrality of love and forgiveness, would want his teachings to be used to provoke violence.

People of faith – especially Christians, Jews and Muslims – are prone to believe that their religion is the only true one. Muslim fundamentalists justify terrorism. Christian fundamentalists have called on the U.S. government to declare war on Muslims. Orthodox Jews declare that only *they* are God’s chosen people. Too often people of faith boast, “God is on our side! Only people who believe as we do are right.” How many people today keep their distance from religion because they think it requires them to be intolerant of other beliefs and to have contempt for people from other faiths?

I believe that Christ is the best revelation of God and the way for *me*. But I try to remember that it is very easy to slip into the mindset that God acts in ways that are especially beneficial to me.

You may have heard the story about the guide who is giving a newcomer a tour of heaven. The guide takes the newcomer past a number of different rooms where people are having the time of their lives. The guide points to the room where the Baptists are having fun dancing. He points to a room where the Methodists are enjoying a glass of wine. He passes a room where the decently-and-in-order Presbyterians are enjoying unaccustomed chaos and another room where the Roman Catholics are enjoying guilt without sex. They walk a little further and as they approach another room, the guide says to the visitor, “We must be quiet now: these are the Episcopalians and they think they are the only ones here.”<sup>1</sup>

Isn’t that the way it is for many people of faith? When they picture heaven, it is filled with people who are more or less like themselves.

When Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” it sounds exclusive. But there are other passages where Jesus strikes a very different note. Earlier in John’s gospel Jesus says, that he is the Good Shepherd and his followers are the sheep. And then adds, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” (John 10:16)

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, we find a story about a Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter. His first response to her is to say that his ministry is directed only at his people, the Jews. Yet, after she begs for help, Jesus heals her daughter and tells the woman that she possesses great faith, despite the fact that she is a Canaanite.

And of course there is Matthew's dramatic scene of the last judgment in which Jesus separates those to be included in God's kingdom from those who will not. His basis for separating them never mentions what people believe. He says those who will enter God's kingdom are the ones who "fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the ill and visited those in prison."

It's vital that we remember the context of today's passage. It is part of Jesus' farewell speech to his closest followers a few hours before he is snatched away and put to death. He is not conducting a seminar on the legitimacy of other faiths. Nowhere does Jesus show any knowledge of Hinduism and Islam would not emerge for 600 years. Jesus is not judging other faith traditions; he is comforting his closest friends and encouraging them to remain faithful to his mission after he's gone.

Jesus immersed himself in God. He studied and lived the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus is "the way" not in the sense that only people who believe in him will be saved, but in the sense that he is a model. He shows us a life that is totally committed to God. It is a life filled by God's love, God's wisdom and God's desire for justice.

Christ is the way for me, but I do not believe that God is limited to only one way of reaching people. It makes sense that God would provide different paths for people to follow. That doesn't mean that any path will do or that they are all the same. Following Christ leads me to respect people of other faiths, but to question any path that promotes injustice or fails to highlight compassion.

That brings us to another critical verse in today's passage that is often overlooked. Listen again to verse 12: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, *will do greater works than these.*"

Jesus challenges us to accomplish amazing things. He challenges us to outdo him in acts of compassion and works of justice. That is quite a challenge.

A few years ago, Baptist minister Tony Campolo was in Haiti checking on missionary work he supports. He went to the little Holiday Inn where he always stays the day before he boards the plane to come home. As he stepped out of the taxi to head for the entrance of the Holiday Inn, he was intercepted by three girls. He calls them girls because the oldest could not have been more than 15. The one in the middle said, "Mister, for \$10 I'll do anything you want me to do. I'll do it all night long. Do you know what I mean?"

He knew what she meant. He turned to the next one and said, "What about you, could I have you for \$10?"

She said yes and so did the other girl. The third one tried to mask her contempt for him with a smile but it's hard to look alluring when you are 15 and desperately hungry. He said, "I'm in room 210, be up there in 10 minutes. I have \$30 and I'm going to pay for all three of you to be with me all night long."

He rushed up to the room, called down to the front desk and said he wanted every Walt Disney video that they had. He called the restaurant and said, "Do you make banana splits? I want banana splits with extra ice cream, extra everything. I want huge ones, and I want *four* of them!"

The little girls came and the ice cream and videos came and they sat up watching the videos and laughing until about one in the morning when the last girl fell asleep. As Campolo looked at the three young girls stretched out asleep, he thought to himself, nothing has really changed. Tomorrow they will be back on the streets selling themselves to dirty, filthy men because there will always be men who for a few bucks will destroy little girls. He did not know enough of their language to tell them about Christ, but God's Spirit said to him: "For one night, let them be little girls again."

Jesus challenges us to be his hands and feet in this world and to carry on his mission. He challenges us to break into people's lives by loving them as he would. Remember, we can never know the lasting impact of an act of compassion. So keep your eyes peeled for the next opportunity that comes your way and give it your best.

## NOTES

1. Peter Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 196.
2. Tony Campolo, "Doing Greater Things," on *30 Good Minutes*, October 6, 1996.