

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 7, 2023

Faith, Okemos

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, I Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

This bold, seemingly audacious promise of Jesus is given to his disciples and to the infant church in the first century and even now to us who would follow him in this 21st century. “If in my name...”

If we are troubled in mind or heart, we need only ask Jesus for comfort and he will give it. If we are overcome by shame or self-loathing, we need only ask Jesus for the assurance that we are beautiful in his sight and he will give it.

If we have nightmares of being lost and alone as I often do, we need only to ask Jesus to walk with us and he will do it... It is in his name, in his nature to save us from falsehoods, from dead ends, from paths that lead nowhere. Our risen Lord is with us on this fifth Sunday of Easter, this first Sunday after we said “goodbye” to Pastor Ellen. If only we ask in his name, he is right here, right now, holding our hands, gently but firmly, assuring us that all will be well.

I talked yesterday morning with the son of a good friend who shared with me that his father was near death. In the course of the conversation I asked him if he had a sense, even palpably, that Christ was with him and his family in this difficult moment. His response was to me profound: “Jesus has been there most clearly in the way my brother and my mother and I have been there to lift each other up when any one of us was exhausted or very down.”

I thought about how it is here at Faith, about the way we are with each other when we grieve or are anxious. I think about Jesus’ words: I am the way, and the truth, and the life... The risen Lord Jesus is palpably with us when his great love for us and in us is expressed in our doing our best to listen carefully to each other and maybe, at some level of consciousness, asking the Holy Spirit to guide and prompt us to be as fully present as possible in those moments when another troubled soul shares something of their heart with us, whether in spoken words or in body language.

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Probably too often those words of Jesus are used to

pronounce condemnation on those who do not believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior...Like our Muslim sisters and brothers who dined and visited with us Friday evening. Those words can be used to coerce people to make that confession of faith in the triune God out of fear of damnation, of going to hell.

But that is to miss the whole point of what Jesus said and to whom he said it. It was spoken to his disciples who would soon lose their wonderful leader to an ugly, shameful death on the cross. Jesus spoke these words to people whose dreams of a wonderful, messianic kingdom led by Jesus were already shattering when he shared with them that he would soon be condemned, suffer and die. It is spoken to us whenever our hopes and dreams have been or, we fear, are about to be shattered.

But knowing their fears and their grief at the impending loss of their friend, Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house....I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." As Pastor Ellen taught us in a recent sermon, Thomas, the one we tend to denigrate because of his doubts, is the brave one, brave enough to be totally honest: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And to him, and to us who would be his disciples: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These words are not meant to be a weapon to frighten or convince people to become Christians. They are meant to assure us that when we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, when day after day the Holy Spirit kindles within us even a flicker of faith in God, Jesus thereby claims us as his own. Whenever life goes horribly wrong, when we get the s___ kicked out of us, whenever we feel lost or confused or desolate, exactly in those hard, scary moments, Jesus takes us by the hand and gently leads us to his Father's house.

Of course this is picture language. It is Jesus' frequent way of helping us to see that there will always be room for us, always a place for us, a safe place where he will always patiently hear our cries, always understand us, always comfort us, and, I think importantly, always challenge us, always invite us to do wonderful work for him.

After the Friday evening dinner and presentations by the iman and myself, and the thoughtful questions we were asked, a young man came up to me with one more question. Coming from India, he told me there were many religions and many gods. It was not uncommon, he said, for various people to pronounce themselves

to be god. So, he asked me, “How do you know what is true? How do you define or describe God? Really good questions. I shared with him what Martin Luther once said: Your god is whatever or whomever you ultimately trust.

After I said this, I was thinking, one’s God could be one’s investments, one’s hard work, one’s intelligence, one’s friendships, one’s influence on or over others. But it was clear to me, especially as I was thinking about this sermon, that for me it was Jesus. For me he is the way, the truth, and the life. He alone together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is worthy of my ultimate trust. I didn’t try to convince my new Muslim friend of this. But I do think Jesus was in our conversation, in the way we talked to each other, in the honesty we shared, in our understandings of what matters, what life is all about.

Often this Gospel text is read and preached at funerals. I have done so many times. We think of the Father’s house in heaven where there are many dwelling places [“many mansions”] Jesus has prepared for us after we die. But I think this text is just as much about life here on earth. Because Jesus went away for awhile, temporarily leaving his disciples; because Jesus left us all for awhile, dying on the cross, he thereby took away and into his body all of our sins, all of our broken relationships, all of our failures to be merciful and compassionate. Then on the third day Jesus rose from death to take us to a safe place, to sit with us and listen to our sorrows, to take our hands and lead us on his way through the pain and darkness of this life to a place with enough light and insight and truth and courage to live each day by faith, to live each day by grace, to live each day in a growing love for and with God and for and with each other.

I don’t know this morning if my good friend has already died and is now face to face with Jesus. I do know that, in the words of his son, Jesus was, for him and his family, the very present way and truth and life with a loving God, with a loving Father.

“If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” Jesus, sit by us today, walk with us today, listen to us today, then lead us this very day to do whatever will make this world a little less anxious, a little more honest, and most of all, a lot more in love with you.

Amen.

JDS