

To Whom May We Go?

If there is a dominant value that I have spent my ministry pursuing, it is that of *inclusivity*. Admittedly, I have a personal stake in the matter, but this runs deeper than just my personal experience – besides, at the end of the day, don't we all have a stake in being included in God's kingdom? One of my core convictions is that the Hebrew Scriptures convey, to anyone who will look, a clear message of the value that God places on *hospitality*. A congregation that pursues a culture of inclusivity in the church is, to my mind, moving in the direction of the kingdom of God.

But here, in John's Gospel narrative, just when Jesus seems *finally* to be wrapping up his stem-winding sermon on the bread of life, a sermon whose invitation seems universal in its scope, we run headlong into a slab of what could be perceived as *exclusivity*.

Knowing that his words brought challenge, Jesus quizzed his listeners whether *they* were offended.

Indeed, he asked if they wished to turn aside.

Questions of eternal life seem to me to be one of the most frequent stumbling blocks that Christians come across...some of you may remember the firestorm of criticism that surrounded evangelical preacher and author Rob Bell when he published his book, Love Wins, a few years ago.

At the beginning of the book, he describes an exhibition that begged the question of the eternal status of a person of a different faith, notably Gandhi.

To be perfectly frank with you, I find questioning anyone's salvation unhelpful at best.

I remember once a friend of mine was opining about matters of the scope of salvation and added about a friend of ours, a rabbi, "If one can conceive of a notion of heaven that doesn't include Rabbi Judy, I'm not interested in it."

But, for whatever reason when we encounter the words, "eternal life," that just naturally seems to be where at least some of our minds go, following the voice of the church.

The questions crop up, "Who's in, who's out, and how's that determined?"

Various passages of scripture, including today's, force us to take a moment and consider what the answers to those questions may be.

Since we don't yet know one another well, let me put my cards on the table about my beliefs. I believe we must take all scripture seriously, and I do recognize that there are some sheep and goats passages and we often struggle with what to do with them. But whatever

those passages *do* mean, they come alongside a preponderance of passages where Jesus uses the words, “all,” “everyone,” “the world.”

In John’s Gospel, at least, Jesus seems to intimate that the wholeness and healing he brings is for all of creation. Such words leave me with a strong hunch/hope that they mean *exactly* what they say.

But, the history of interpretation didn’t always go that way.

Even John Calvin, who exercised extraordinary humility in his theological claims, was willing centuries ago to declare readily what the scope of salvation was. Well, actually he was willing to set a cap on it.

The maximum cap was the *church visible*, with a few additional saints and martyrs thrown in. Those would be the folks you see church on any given Sunday, or at least the folks in Calvin’s church in Geneva. *They* were eligible to be in the *church invisible*, which is the smaller subset of the folks who were actually elect. (Elect being Calvin’s way of saying saved. God “elected” a few for salvation for God’s glory.)

That’s a gross simplification, but it’s close enough for government work, which is what Calvin did.

Passages such as this, which say, “Lord you have the words of eternal life,” suggest that some will hear them, some will not, and thus will the difference be settled.

But, what is important to remember about Calvin is that, above all, Calvin was terribly concerned with God’s *sovereignty*. In a world where life expectancy was low and infant mortality was high, the idea that somebody might *actually* be in charge was a pastoral doctrine, designed to comfort. The world might appear to be falling apart around you, but God is the ruler yet. Nothing is outside of God’s providence – and that’s good news.

But by the time we get around to the evangelical revivalism of the United States in our formative years, Calvin’s way of looking at the gospel seemed terribly undemocratic. The idea that there are some elite persons (most of whom were naturally Presbyterian) whom God has chosen seemed problematic. The evangelical revivalists, whom we now may see as *narrowing* the scope of salvation because of some narrow definitions of behavior, were in fact at their heart seeking to broaden it, to spread the Gospel far and wide. So, where Calvin would write of the *hope* of salvation, the revivalists began to write of the *assurance* of salvation.

This is covering hundreds of years of interpretive history in a blink, but where Calvin said roughly, “God’s in charge, trust God, and rest easily,” the revivalists expanded their reach saying, “Make a decision for Christ and rest easily.”

Some of you will recognize these messages from your own faith journey.

It's easy to get sidetracked by the salvation question, so the first point I want to make about this passage with its exclusive flavor is this: whatever it says about salvation, it says it alongside every other word of the Gospel about salvation. Where it says that no one comes to Jesus except by the will of the father, it says it alongside, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." And where it says, "does this offend you," it says it alongside, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

In every age we have looked at this passage and we have tended to reduce it to a question that can be focused *outward*, on other folks. And in so doing, we avoid the *inward* questions that lead to growth.

Indeed, the late Raymond Brown offers the observation that this is simply an acknowledgement that no one ever gains life on their own.

What if this were less a passage about *salvation* than an admonition about *commitment*?

And it leaves all of us with Jesus's question, "perhaps you, too, want to turn aside?"

Isn't that an honest question? Who hasn't considered it?

Have you? Have you ever thought, "Oh good Lord, forgiveness is tough, I'd much rather nurse this grudge."

Or maybe the thought has occurred to you, "My pledge sure would make a nice trip to Belize and I'm awfully tired. Let someone else carry the water for a change."

Or just maybe it goes a little more like this, "We've got tonight... who needs tomorrow?"

I just have a hunch that when Jesus asked his disciples whether or not they wanted to turn aside when they realized that the Gospel is demanding, indeed when it actually became offensive, he wasn't really talking about whether or not they were interested in being saved or not.

Jesus is always talking about living water and bread of life and such things in John. And he talks about other things too, things like sacrifice, and taking up crosses – and these are very much related.

Jesus is always talking about things that seem so against the grain, so counter-intuitive.

He seems to want so much to lead people onto a different path, in some cases a harder path and right there in John's Gospel narrative, many turn aside.

May some days you want to turn aside also?

You wouldn't be the first.

God has always asked God's people to be different.

I've never forgotten what someone said to me once when I was teaching a Sunday School class and I was going on and on about the very particular ways that God calls us to be different – render to no one evil, turn the other cheek, love one your enemies...all of those things Jesus commanded. A member of the class quipped, “Well, that’ll get your lunch money stolen!”

That’s just the point. God’s people have a long and storied history of getting our lunch money stolen.

That was the charge to the Israelites in today’s lesson: Be different, so people know who your God is.

You see, God has a long history of acting on behalf of those who need God’s help, and then inviting them to tell the story.

Why? Because that is who God is.

You know, God didn’t create us because of any deficiency, any lack in God’s being, but rather, out of the overflowing of God’s love. And God didn’t redeem us because God couldn’t do without us but because of the perfection of God’s love.

When you think of it that way, I tend to think of the reduction of the bread of life to a question of “who’s in and who’s” out as rather missing the point.

The heart of Johannine theology is sacrificial. John, unlike the other Gospels, makes it very clear that the story of Jesus’ life and ministry is that he will be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Where the Synoptic Gospels tell us the story of Jesus and his disciples sharing a Passover meal as the last supper in the upper room, John alone changes the order of the telling of the story so that Jesus himself is the Passover lamb on whom all the sin of the world is taken so that the world might be redeemed.

I suppose I’m relapsing to my deeply Presbyterian roots and reverting to the heart of Calvin’s theology – that we don’t need to spend our time thinking about who is in and who is out because God has that all taken care of. And that God is love. And that out of the abundance of God’s love, Christ was begotten. And that in Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to God’s self. And out of the perfection of God’s love, Christ was faithful unto death. And out of the power of God’s love Christ was raised to new life and so we hope in the resurrection.

And where does the everlasting love of God leave us?

It leaves us in prime position to get our lunch money stolen. The Johannine theology of Christ as sacrifice also comes with the expectation that we follow Jesus, even as God’s people have always been called to live the love of God, because this is a passage about commitment.

Where does that commitment leave us?

It leaves us resting in the love of God.

Perhaps you, too, wish to turn aside?

Down through the ages mystics and prophets have sounded the clarion to remember that God is love and that God demands love.

Love is a slippery concept at times. We know of “tough love,” of “empathy vs. sympathy,” we wax poetical about romantic love.

Friends, love is work. And love is *life*.

I love the way Richard Rohr puts it:

“*What is* is love. It is God, who is love, giving away God every moment as the reality of our life. *Who we are* is love, because we are created in God’s image. *What is happening* is God living in us, with us, and through us as love.”¹

And as hard as we work at loving, by doing the things Jesus commanded and being the disciples he called, *we will never out-love God*.

I know that what it means to love, what it means in real and practical and tangible terms can be a bit challenging to divine sometimes, so perhaps these lines of The Brothers Karamazov will leave us with a clear call. As Father Zossima lies waiting for death, he says to Alyosha,

“Love people even in their sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ <https://cac.org/loving-the-presence-in-the-present-2015-12-29>

² Book VI, chapter 3: "Conversations and Exhortations of Father Zossima; Of Prayer, of Love, and of Contact with other Worlds" (translated by Constance Garnett)