

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

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Well, we are all here this morning. I guess none of us are part of the elect who got their express tickets to heaven yesterday, and I don't know anybody who did. That or once again a small fringe group has dragged the Christian faith through the mud in front of the media again by picking and choosing this passage and that to make a point that is not warranted in scripture. No the rapture did not happen yesterday. The rapture is not found anywhere in scripture if you read the passages used in their proper context. However I found it a really interesting exercise in writing this sermon on Friday morning with all the news coverage and Facebook chatter going on.

The rapture is all about who is in and who is out. Many take the verse about I am the way the truth and the life as the definition of who is saved and it is a pretty narrow view and definitely not the image of a loving God.

Now we can joke about this, but this type of misinterpretation can cause great harm. I read a story about a family who stopped saving for college for their kids two years ago, because they were convinced that they would be taken up in the rapture so there was no need to plan for the children. Another reported that they delayed medical care because the children will be taken and if not then they are not among the saved so who cares.

This passage is probably the most popular one to use at funerals and I often cringe when it is selected. People love the image of the mansion and the open place in heave waiting for them. I often make a reference to the deceased as redecorating or some other way of preparing the room for the rest of the family.

However then we get to the no one comes to the Father except through me part. Stop for a moment and think about how this sounds to a grieving person who may not be Christian or a member of a church. Not a problem for your basic atheist since they don't believe in God, heaven or hell anyway. I did a funeral at a home on the beach a year or so ago and many in the gathered group had left the church long ago, were maybe nominal members or maybe Jewish. The husband selected this passage for the reason of the mansion, but gave no thought to how an exclusive reading of verse 6 would impact the others gathered to mourn her passage. I felt necessary to unpack this passage for them as I will do for you in just a moment.

I remember sitting with the associate rector at St. Paul's and a woman whose husband had just died. She was deep in her grief and part of her anguish was that someone had said to her, "This must be so hard for you. At least I know that when I

die I will see my husband in heaven, but to know that you will never see your husband again since he is not a believer and in hell must be terrible.” What a horrible thing to say, but that is in effect what people are saying when they take the stand that only baptized Christians are saved.

I could go on and on with story after story of how this and other passages have been used to beat people into submission. Of course this rarely works. The more usual course is like the children of the family in the New York Times article, they want nothing to do with Christianity and tend to walk away from religion in general.

Now I am in good company when I raise this issue. Our Presiding Bishop Katherine regularly takes criticism for raising the issue that there are many ways to know God. There are many ways to get a room in the mansion and we do not have a lock on that way. Several years ago the Most Rev. Desmond Tutu addressed a group in Pittsburgh. He asked the gathering to please tell him at what point did God become exclusively Christian?

So how do people like the Presiding Bishop, Desmond Tutu, the writers of all the commentaries that I have on my shelf and myself read this passage in John and come to an inclusive interpretation? I would like to propose another way to look at this passage and we must look at the entire passage not just one verse.

These verses are a high point in the Christology of the writer of the fourth gospel. Notice I do not say that it is Jesus’ high point, but the writer’s. As we have talked about in other classes and sermons, every gospel writer tells the story with a unique spin. In studying this passage we must understand this spin. For the writer of John, Jesus is a unique revelation of his community’s relationship to the Father.ⁱ

A large amount of our theology of the Trinity comes from John and the writer is truly developing the relationship of the Father and the Son in this passage. Notice that Jesus does not say no one comes to God except through me. Jesus is teaching us about the unique revelation of God that is contained in both his person and the first person of the Trinity, the Father. The gospel writer is carving out a unique place for his community that has been thrown out of the synagogues by the Council of Jamnia. He in effect is saying to all others that we have a unique access to the Father through Christ. He does not say that nobody else has access to God. He is saying that they have a unique and in his opinion superior way to God.

The word “way” is critical and holds the principle place in this argument. The image of a path or way to God was common to all religions at that time. This is a statement from a small struggling minority religion, not the triumphal statement of a major world religion. The context of John’s community is totally different than ours. Reading this passage in our context of a majority religion turns these verses into a weapon to bludgeon others. I cannot think of anywhere in scripture where Jesus does not act out of love and concern for others. Frustration and anger, we certainly see, but hatred and exclusion are not part of the teachings or actions of Jesus.

Remember earlier in John, Jesus has said that I have other sheep, that you do not know about. The more critical error is that we tend to skip the end part. Believe in me and you will do things greater than I. Do things greater than Jesus? Now that should make us a little nervous.

The real point of this passage for John is that Jesus is not only the way to the Father, but also the way to Christian discipleship and this is the far more important message. Jesus is leading up to a huge call to mission in the end of this passage, the part we tend to not read, mark and inwardly digest.

This passage is about the fact that we have a way to the Father that is unique to us. For me Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life because I believe in Christ as my Lord and savior. Jesus is the way for us to a deeper relationship with God the Father. This relationship though is a demanding one and requires that we all seek and serve Christ in all people. This relationship is where our Baptismal promises come from. This relationship is what it means to be a Christian. This is the point that John is making and it is far more challenging than sitting back and saying, thank God I'm saved. Salvation is a piece of this, but the mission of Christ's expectation that we will be able to do even more than he, that is the point of the relationship that this passage is all about.

ⁱ The New Interpreter's Bible vol 9 (Abingdon Press) pages 740-743