

Sermon preached by the Rev. Gregory Taylor  
Christ Church, Charlottesville, Va., April 24, 2005

Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

This claim about Jesus in John's gospel has a very odd ring in the 21st century. We live in a diverse, pluralistic world. Even in a comparatively small community like Charlottesville we are exposed to a multitude of cultures and beliefs. We no longer live in a culture where practically everyone was a Protestant Christian. Most of us have close friends who are not church goers, or who do not identify themselves as Christians. And as a nation we are increasingly entangled with a part of the world which is predominantly Islamic, where most people declare that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger.

Does it make sense in such a world to cling to the belief that only Jesus is the way the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him? Can we look our Jewish and other non-Christian friends in the face and say that?

I want to say two things about this this morning. First, I want to say that Christians must continue to insist that Jesus is the Lord and Savior of the world. But second, I want to say that it is just as important to live the truth about Jesus as to tell the truth about Jesus.

Among educated people there is what may be called the "politically correct" view of Jesus. There are many people who think of themselves as Christians but who do not like the idea that only Christianity is "true" or superior in some way to other religions. This view is that all religions are basically equal; they are all paths to God. We Christians just happen to like Jesus best, because we were raised that way. It is part of our culture.

People who hold this view think that it is arrogant and imperialistic to say that only Jesus is the true Lord and Savior. The Episcopalian Biblical scholar Marcus Borg, for example, says that statements about Jesus being "the only way" should be understood as exclamations, not doctrines, and as a "poetry of devotion and hyperbole of the heart." I suspect that Borg's view is quite commonplace among modern, sophisticated Christians. It is also very convenient and avoids embarrassing confrontations with people who have different beliefs from us.

But this view also has difficulty making sense of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It tends to reduce Jesus to one of many great spiritual leaders or ethical teachers. Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson thought that if you took away all the dogma in Christianity and simply followed the moral teachings of Jesus you could be a happy Unitarian and the world would have a lot less trouble. Sometimes I am strongly tempted to follow this advice, but then I realize that this would be sacrificing truth for expediency.

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, forgiving sin through the blood of the cross. This is the truth of Christianity, and we must uphold it at all costs and not water it down to accommodate the culture of diversity, even if it is not "politically correct."

But how do we, in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, "speak the truth in love?" (Eph. 4:15) How can we, as Christian believers, affirm the truth about God without at the same time rejecting or despising those who differ from us in belief or practice?

One of the things that would help would be to avoid categorizing people as "saved" and "unsaved." Some Christians seem to think that you have to have just the right theology or just the right kind of conversion experience in order to be among the "saved." Christians need to be reminded that the only outward sign of our salvation is our baptism. The rest is up to God. In fact God may have all kinds of good things in store for the human beings he has created and whom he loves, things we know nothing about. The parable of the weeds reminds us that the ultimate fate of human beings will not be revealed until the end of history, when God separates the wheat from the chaff.

One thing that is obvious to me is that God is not just at work in the lives of believing Christians. We all know people who are not believers but whose lives are characterized by love for others and a strong sense of responsibility for the greater society. Wherever there is love, there is God. That is the teaching of the New Testament. In fact the First Letter of John goes so far as to declare that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." (I John 4:7) I assume that this would even include people who profess no belief in God, or in Christ.

I think it was Archbishop William Temple who said that Christians are not necessarily better than other people; they just have a better Lord.

Maybe we need to stop thinking of Christians primarily as the "saved" ones and start thinking of ourselves as the People of God, in the sense that we are the people whom God has elected to show forth his glory in the world. The New Testament says relatively little about saving souls. It says a lot about being faithful witnesses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world. . . [L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:14, 16)

But what about the responsibility of Christians to spread the gospel, to bring the Good News of Christ to a fallen world? The history of world missions is a great chapter in church history and world history. But missionary work can take a variety of forms.

Today the great challenge of Christianity is to establish positive relationships with the Muslim world. What should our attitude be toward Islam? Should we view Islam as a false religion and Muhammad as a false prophet? There are a lot of things about Islam, as it is practiced in Muslim-dominated countries, that we find unappealing and which should be condemned. I am thinking here about the treatment of women, the suppression of dissent, anti-semitism and barbaric criminal penalties. Scholars dispute how much of this is intrinsic to Islam itself and how much is a matter of local tradition.

Historically, Muhammad's teachings arose at a time when the Arab peoples were steeped in polytheism, the worship of many gods, and Christianity had become weakened in the Middle East by reason of the Church's efforts to crack down on what it viewed as heresy. Islam was originally a kind of reform movement - an effort to unite the warring Arab tribes around the worship of one God and many of the teachings of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

So, in a strange kind of way, the spread of Islam may have been an act of divine providence - God's way of filling the vacuum left by the Church's failure to be true to the gospel, by its failure to offer a meaningful alternative to paganism among the Arabs. Islam was, and is, in an ironic way, a kind of judgment on Christianity. In more recent centuries it has gained strength as a reaction against the Crusades, when so-called Christian warriors murdered thousands of Arab men, women and children in the name of Christ.

But let me tell you a true story. Back in the 19th century some wealthy New Yorkers, the Blisses and the Dodges, were called to become missionaries and spread the Gospel to the Muslim people of the Middle East. After years of great sacrifice they established one of the great educational institutions in the Arab world, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. For several generations this university has produced Arab leaders - educators, scientists, doctors, engineers, political leaders -- most of them still Muslims even after attending a Christian university. The operating philosophy of the Dodges and the Blisses was not to impose the truth on others, but to live the truth. They gave themselves on behalf of the people of Lebanon unstintingly, with complete humility and respect for people who may not have been Christians but were fellow human beings. To them this is what was meant by missionary work.

To do such things as this is to live out the meaning of the Gospel, and there is often a price to be paid. Some years ago the President of the American University was assassinated by an Islamic extremist. This has often been the fate of missionaries, as Jesus himself predicted. The Muslim who killed the University president probably thought that he was doing God's will, very much like the people who attacked his land many centuries ago in the name of Christ and called themselves Crusaders. Maybe the assassin was simply seeking revenge for those ancient wrongs. Such are the ironies of history.

Jesus, in a way certainly not intended by him, brought not peace but division to the earth. The question is, are we going to be the cause of division or healers of division? Are we going to hold on to the truth of Christ in a spirit of division or a spirit of love? All of us cannot work in overseas missions like the Dodges and the Blisses. But all of us, without compromising the truth of Jesus Christ, can live the truth wherever we are, among those human beings whom God has called us to love and serve.