

Easter 4B 2018, Acts 4:5-12, April 22, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, for the past couple of decades, turns our attention to Jesus the Good Shepherd. The earliest visual image of Jesus dates from the early third century AD, and shows him as a young man, carrying a lamb around his shoulders. The comforting, caring quality of Jesus the Shepherd is surely one of the most enduring symbols of church art.

This morning though I want to turn to our first reading, from the book of Acts. Surely there is comfort here, but also challenge. After he heals a crippled man, Peter is hauled before the governing religious authorities in order to give account concerning how he was able to accomplish such a powerful and mysterious act. Peter's testimony concludes with a statement that is a challenge to our religiously pluralistic world. He proclaims, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

So, what's going on here? Peter is under arrest by the high religious authorities. The same authorities who arrested Jesus, tried him and sent him to Pilate, the Roman governor to be crucified. It's really quite remarkable, this transformation of a man who denied knowing Jesus and fleeing for his own life when the authorities came for his followers. Now Peter stands boldly in the Temple where Jesus taught, performs healings just as Jesus did, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter naturally concludes that it's the living Jesus, resurrected from the dead, who is doing all these things. No one else could do all this. Not my power. Not your power. Only Jesus. Only by his name is this man healed. Only by Jesus can any of us be healed, restored, receive salvation.

Most us will probably agree Peter's claim is true on an individual level. Namely, there is salvation in no one else "for me." I find my own way of salvation in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For me Jesus is my Lord and Savior, and for that I am thankful to God. I even rejoice when others come to believe in Jesus. And I'm glad to belong to a fellowship of believers who share this faith. I also believe in a kind of universal application of this salvation. I really believe it when I hear the gospel writer say "for God so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." For the sake of the whole world, not just a particular family, or tribe or nation or race or period in time. God's will for salvation is universal. But God's will is also specific because his will is made known through what happens with this one, particular person, Jesus of Nazareth.

For centuries the exclusive claim of Christianity that salvation comes through no one except through Jesus didn't bother anybody. Anybody except non-Christians, that is. Christians believed with their whole hearts they were performing acts of love by sending missionaries right behind the conquistadors to convert heathen Indians to the Christian faith. Religious dialogue was regarded as futile because Christians believed all non-Christians lived in darkness and ignorance and, besides, anyone who didn't believe in Jesus was going to hell. Rescuing the heathen from pagan darkness and leading them into the light of God's salvation through Jesus motivated missionaries to leave their comfortable homes and travel to challenging and even dangerous places in Africa and Asia and India and South America. And we now live with both the good and the bad from that great missionary impulse. When I visited Tanzania I talked with church leaders about this mixed legacy. They are happy and grateful for the missionaries who came over a century ago and led them to faith in Jesus Christ. They are now equally zealous in leading others in their own country to faith in Jesus. At the same time, they struggle with the

effects of a century of colonialism which destroyed much of their egalitarian culture and introduced corruption and cronyism into government.

I think Peter's words challenge us because we live in a culture that allows for all religious expressions to flourish, or none at all. Valuing religious freedom means everyone is allowed their own religion. It's almost regarded as impolite and an imposition to try to persuade someone to become a Christian. We find it even within our own families. A cousin, a grown child, simply stops going to church and we don't want to seem pushy. So we say to ourselves, "they are walking by their own spiritual path."

We might then justify our reluctance to be as bold as Peter by adopting a popular response that says that as long as someone acts justly in the world, treating your neighbor like you want to be treated, valuing all of life, then everything is ok. A Japanese proverb says, "There are many paths up the mountain, but at the top the moon looks the same." I think there is a certain appeal to this way of thinking. It means that no particular religious or spiritual tradition has a monopoly on the truth. It says that all faith journeys are trying to reach the same goal, they are just on different paths. While there may be some appeal to thinking like this it can also be just another form of prideful belief and a superior way of thinking. We can't really know what another faith tradition teaches unless we are standing within that tradition. A Buddhist view of salvation may in fact be quite different than someone who practices Islam, or Judaism. I think it's actually quite demeaning to tell someone else what their own religious faith really means. We need to realize that the only way to think about religions at all is from within your own tradition.

For those who claim the title "Christian" this means above all humility. What I mean is that we ourselves can never start to think that somehow we deserve to be on the faith journey we are on. It's really just sinful pride to believe that our path of following Jesus is privileged over all others. Only out of humility can one truly listen to another and hear their own stories of faith and struggle and commitment. We should respect the right of anyone to hold the religious beliefs they desire, and extend to all unfailing courtesy and kindness.

This doesn't mean we should minimize our own beliefs concerning the uniqueness of Jesus and the belief that God will restore all creation through him. This is still our truth. It is what we believe because of the testimony of eye-witnesses like Peter. We are still called to share our faith in Jesus whenever we are given the opportunity. But it's all about listening to one another. It's not always just about telling. Too often Christians have gone about their missionary activity with a kind of prideful superiority which is unbecoming an attitude of humility.

We believe God is restoring and healing this broken world, and that Jesus is the way God is doing it. In his life we are given an example of how to love and serve one another, graciously and humbly. His resurrection from the dead means that his truth is a universal truth and that he is the first born of all who will live with God. But this truth is also a gentle and humble truth, like a shepherd leading his sheep to green pastures. In the end I think it's enough to admit that we don't know everything there is to know about God and his ways. But to trust in God and the life he gives to the whole world through Jesus is enough. Amen.