

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 7, 2023 – 5 Easter
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As I did last Sunday, today I would like to touch briefly on several of our scripture readings. Let's begin with the lesson from John's Gospel. The first part is a familiar passage often chosen as a reading for Memorial Services. It is a portion of what are called Jesus' "farewell discourses," the final words he spoke to his closest friends and followers before his crucifixion. Jesus offers words of comfort and reassurance to his distressed disciples. He is going home to his Father in heaven, and he will prepare places for them there so that they maybe with him again. Jesus says that there are "many dwelling places" in his Father's house. Many people – and I am one of them – take this to mean that there are several paths to God and room for all sorts of faithful, loving souls in God's heavenly house.

But then we hear Jesus say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This has been taken to mean that salvation comes only through Christianity. As you know, even in our own day there are Christians who believe that unless a person is a Christian – even a particular type of Christian – his or her life is on the wrong track, possibly on the road to hell. I think this conviction is wrong because it shows a lack of humility before God.

God is the creator of everything, the beginning and the end. We creatures of God cannot claim to comprehend God or to know the mind of God. We believe that in Jesus we see God most clearly in human "form." But who can claim to fully understand Jesus and his works and teaching? Our knowledge and understanding are so limited with respect to God! God is vast, and we are small. Yet throughout the world, throughout history, throughout the history of the Christian church, people have claimed to know the final truth about God. People dare to define how God does and does not act among human beings. People dare to say who is going to "heaven" and who is going to "hell." People dare to exclude and harm others "in the name of" God and of orthodoxy, or "right teaching." People mistake what is less than God – the church, holy scripture, the sacraments, the many paths to God – for God. What terrible harm has come from these mistakes!

In the church we struggle to express in words and actions what we understand about God. I think it is right for us to do this. But we need to keep in mind our limitations. If you think about your life, how perfect is your understanding of your own spiritual path? How well do you comprehend when and where and through whom God has touched you from your birth until today? How often do you have a profound sense of mystery about life and about God? If our understanding of ourselves and our personal journeys is so partial and imperfect, how may we presume to know or judge the paths of others?

Many of us – perhaps most human beings – desire some certainty about life. We want the security that holding solid, practically unchangeable views can give. Regarding

religious affiliation and conviction, we want to know that we've made the right decisions, that we've enrolled in the right spiritual "insurance plan," premiums paid, all set! But that isn't what God seems to want from us. God wants our trust in God. As the psalmist says in the psalm appointed for today: "Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth. My times are in your hand" (Psalm 31:5, 15a). The words Jesus spoke on the cross, showing us how deep his trust in God was. Trusting God with our lives at present and with our lives in the future can be very challenging, day by day and hour by hour. Over and over again, we may need to "hand" our spirits and our times into God's hands.

In this morning's lesson from the Acts of the Apostles we heard about a follower of Jesus who prayed as he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr. Like Jesus, Stephen also prayed that God would not hold against them the sin of the people killing him.

As we grow in the spiritual life, there are always "edges" to our growth, and if we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize them. For each of us the challenges to grow further and deeper will be different, with different particular details depending on our life stories and our life circumstances. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles confronted me with a call to growth that I have struggled with for a very long time. Perhaps you will recognize the same challenge for yourself.

It's a detail of the story that got my attention, once again. The witnesses of Stephen's murder "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." Saul whose name will be changed to Paul. Saul who as Paul will be a great saint and revered messenger of the Gospel of Christ. Paul always admitted his history, that he had persecuted the church before his conversion, that he was initially an enemy of the Lord whom he came to love and serve. Incidentally, he was an enemy of the Lord because of his unwavering conviction that his religious tradition and beliefs, which were challenged by Jesus, were correct. Paul's example might be instructive to those who hold rigid Christian beliefs now, don't you think?

Back to the passage. Here's what I must face. I'm not sure I like this story. Perhaps I would rather have seen Saul punished than converted. What about you? Are there national or international figures whom you revile? Would you like to see them converted or punished? Or closer to home, do you have personal enemies or people who have harmed you in your life? Would you like to see them converted or punished? Honestly. Can you imagine God forgiving these people and feel genuine gladness? Perhaps you can. If so, that is the teaching of Jesus and a blessed state of being.

In closing, one more comment. I would encourage you to read scripture with your heart as well as your mind. Pay attention to how scripture makes you feel, how it challenges you to change. That will make these ancient texts the Living Word of God for you today. We are all on a journey, hopefully forever growing in our understanding and love of God. May the Spirit help us to open our hearts and minds to God, and to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. Amen.