

LEGEND OF THE OLD MAN

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, July 27, 2014**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“No One Comes to the Father, but by Me”

My mind has recently been occupied by a conversation that took place two weeks ago at a dinner following the wedding of a deeply beloved person by the name of Kayla, a college student who has been attending our church for several years and for whom I performed the service. I found the conversation disconcerting as it revolved around the kind of gospel that I attempt to preach at this church. It could be summed up in the Statement of Oneness that we read at the beginning of each worship service. Those kinds of statements and that approach to Christian teaching came out in the language of the wedding service.

Seated at the dinner table next to me was a woman who took great exception to the language of the service. She had a real problem with the way in which I was approaching religion generally and let me know about it during the dinner afterward. The discussion centered upon the verse from John 14: 6 that was read in today’s scripture lesson:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”

It’s sort of a slam-dunk argument if you believe in the exclusive version of Christianity. The default notion of this exclusionary view is that everybody is a sinner, and everybody is pretty much in deep trouble spiritually. However, God sent Jesus, and if you take that escape valve, if you take that way out, you’ll be okay. So Jesus is it. Jesus is supremely important in a very xenophobic sense.

You Heretical Liberal Pastor

She quoted that verse to me and said, “How do you handle *that*, you [heretical liberal] pastor?” (She left out the two adjectives, but I heard them all the same!)

So I attempted to go into it. I reminded her that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and Aramaic was then translated into Greek during the first century, the gospels having being written between 60 and 90. It was not until the Middle Ages when the Greek was translated into the Latin Vulgate, which was largely behind the King James Bible of 1600 – 1611. Thereafter, the long preference for the King James version is on rocky ground because one must wade through many layers of intervening versions of the Bible to get back, in the constitutional sense, to the “original intent”

of the Aramaic version, which was itself subject to the slippery difficulty of a language without firm definitions.

In trying to dip into the history of biblical revisions, I have never seen eyes glaze over so rapidly. She then informed me, “Not to worry. I have the Hebrew text on my I-phone.” Nonplussed, I said, “Really? So what? It’s still Aramaic. It’s a completely different language!” But I didn’t go into that either.

Sitting there, I just couldn’t believe my ears. This verse, John 14: 6, has been quoted in opposition to my beliefs probably 100 or 200 times in my life, and I’m *really* tired of it. “So,” she concluded, “Do you preach the *whole* Gospel at your [heretical liberal] church?”

Out of a Tough Question, Cooking up Answers

That is the question I’ve been pondering for two weeks, and I’d like to put it to you. You’re at some party, minding your own business, and somebody finds out, “Oh, you attend First Congregational Church, or at least you were there once. What do they preach there, anyway?” How would you answer in, say, two or three sentences? For that matter, how would I answer that question without getting into an argument?

I do have an answer, though, that I want to give you. It’s been cooking for a while, and I think it’s a decent answer. It’s not the be-all and end-all, but I’m happy with it at this point. It starts right where Suzanne began reading the Scripture Lesson (John 13: 34) and stops where I ended reading the lesson (John 14: 12). Here are the three components of my answer:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you.” You’ve heard that before. You may not remember, but it’s the classic text that is recited in the Maundy Thursday service. (In Latin, “maundatum” is the word for commandment, and that’s where we get the name “Maundy Thursday.”) It’s a new commandment. Try to get a feeling for it. This is an extraordinarily bold thing for Jesus to do. Only God gives commandments, folks. Six hundred and thirteen mitzvot in the Old Testament, narrowed down to ten commandments, narrowed down again to two commandments: “Love God. Love your neighbor.” And he’s saying, a new commandment *I’m* giving you. No wonder Jesus got himself in trouble. And then he says:

“Love one another; even as I have loved you.” Distill it all down. So you start there, and then you heard this conversation between Peter and Phillip and Jesus and a few other people that eventually winds around and leads to:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.” And then it winds on a little bit more, which I’ll get to in a minute.

The Intensive Case Leads to Light on the Path

But what I want to talk to you about is the central part, verse 14: 6. I want to remind you of what this text is about and its importance, and why violence has been done to it in the way it is used throughout most of Christianity. “I am” in Aramaic is “ena ena.” It’s what is called an intensive when you say the same thing twice. We have a bit of this in the English language when we use the word “am.” We never use it alone; we always say “I am.” “Am” is first person singular, and it implies “I” preceding “am.” There’s no other usage of the word “am” except in “I am.” It’s an interesting idiosyncrasy, among many in the English language.

Something similar is going on in the redundancies “I, I,” and “I am, I am.” But that’s only the grammar. What’s *really* going on is apparent in the Aramaic version of “Yahweh,” which is the “name of God.” *That’s* what Jesus is saying: “The name of God” in Aramaic. So then he says “ena ena,” which is the urha translated as “way” – not a bad translation, but it’s more like “path.” In this language there are multiple nuances, multiple meanings. Aramaic is a really insipid language if you want to be very precise in your speech. On the other hand it is a mellifluous language if you want to be poetic or to be evocative or to evince multiple meanings in the listener’s mind.

“I am the way” happens to have the same root in Aramaic as the word “light,” so the nuances are: It’s your path, but it’s also the light upon that path. It’s safety. It’s knowing where you’re going. It’s a feeling of security. So God is, I am, this path, but it also means showing when the path is unclear. You’re walking through, and the blazes on the trees are missing. Suddenly you’re not sure, but this is a word implying certainty that you see the blazes, you see the beaten path, you know where you are, and you have a sense of security.

God Is the Sherara and the Hayye

I am the path. I am the truth. “Sherara” means that which liberates, that which opens up possibilities, that which is strong and vigorous and natural and harmonious. It conveys a sense of the right direction. God is *that* also. And so they are the decisions along the path, the forks in the road that we encounter, big and little. Thus, God is sherara, which means the decisions along the path that liberate, that open up possibilities, that strengthen and invigorate, that are natural and harmonious, and that don’t veer off into a dead end.

Finally, God is hayye, translated as life – again, not a bad translation, but it’s much more than that: sacredness, sacred to the life force. It’s roughly the equivalent of the eastern notion of the key – the life force, the life energy that you want flowing within you. That’s what this word is really about – the primal energy that pervades nature. When God breathed into Adam, and Adam became a living being, as it says in Genesis, that’s what hayye is. Or when Jesus breathed upon his disciples at the end of the Gospel of John and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” that’s what hayye is.

So God is “The way, and the truth, and the light.” And then Jesus concludes with the last phrase of the verse, the one that has a sort of kicker: “No one comes to the Father, but by me.” This is

the same “me” that said, “I and the Father are one.” The same “me” that said, “I am in the Father and the Father in me.” The same “me” that said “You in me and I in you and the Father in us.” So that’s the “me” of this teaching.

What Does the Answer Mean to You?

So that’s the explanation that I never got around to during the dinner. Let me say again: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.” Now if somebody were to ask you what that means, what would you say? I hope you get a sense of the poetry of it, the fullness of it.

In a way, that question is actually inappropriate because all you can really ask is: What does it mean to *me* in my present situation, my present time, right here and now? I’m on this path. I’ve got forks in the road behind me, and I’ve got forks in the road in front of me. I’m going along with energy on my path, and I’m asking: Where am I now? What does it mean to *me* here and now? There isn’t a universal interpretation of it. There isn’t a universal meaning.

A better question would be to ask this instead: How is it that God *is* your path and the light upon your path? Think about some of the decisions you’re facing. How has the Holy Spirit guided the decisions along your path in the past? Ponder this in such a way that it invigorates, that it makes harmony, that it liberates, that it feels natural and good.

And then finally, do you feel, have you sensed the sacred life force infusing and surrounding your life’s path?

My wife put it best. Very simply, she has a gift for this. She said, “Oh, I get it. You’re the car, and God is the road, the map, and the gas. You see, I could have saved you 15 minutes of puzzling through a deep sermon. I could have simply said just that. God is the path, the decisions, and the sacred life force.

Here’s the Connection: the Eyes of Love

This connection can only be *seen* through the eyes of love. “Love one another as I have loved you.” When you see this, the wholeness of it, the result is “Greater things than these will [you] do.” I offer that to you as the *whole* Gospel. It doesn’t have the Crucifixion story or the Resurrection or Christmas, but I offer it to you as a very concise version of the whole Gospel. Love opens up the eyes to see the wholeness of it, the unity of it, and the interweaving of it that then results in miracles.

“Greater things than these will [you] do.”

The Legend Surrounds a Great Preacher in John

The title of this sermon is the “Legend of the Old Man.” I mentioned that the Gospels were written between 60-90 or so, and the following two paragraphs constitute the legend surrounding

John. It's not biblical, and it very well might not be true, but the legendary story is that the youngest of the disciples was John. So if you look at daVinci's "Last Supper," John is the one without a beard, a very young guy. He was in his late teens, maybe in his 20's at the time of the Last Supper. So that would be around the year 30 if the Gospel of John was written in the year 90, so if he was 20 at the Last Supper, he's was 80 at the time of writing his gospel. That would have been very old for the period. The vast majority of people died long before anybody hit 80 years old back in the first century.

The legend is that John was a great preacher. You see his eloquence in the Gospel of John and in the Epistles of John. As he became old and infirm, he had to be carried wherever he preached. Finally, John became so infirm that his sermons got shorter and shorter. I'm very healthy right now so you get long sermons from me. In John's case his got so short that it was just simply, "Little children, love one another." End of sermon. You'll find it in the Gospel of John. You'll find it also in the Book of Revelation. "Little children, love one another." Finally, one of his listeners couldn't stand it anymore and said, "Is that it?" to which John is said to have responded, "Do that and all else will follow."

End of sermon. Amen.