

Easter 5, Year C
May 18, 2025

Over and over again, we are witness to God's merciful loving kindness: it reaches to the highest mountains, the psalmist tells us. No mountain high enough; no valley low enough. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And yet, we Christians can be so exclusive in our pronouncement that only those who acknowledge Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior will be saved: saved from death, saved from pain, saved from burning in everlasting hell; that only we will be welcomed into the heavenly kingdom and given eternal life. To say nothing of the Gospel of Prosperity: your financial success, your expensive education, your impressive collection of real estate holdings, your thriving children – you have everything anyone would need and seem to be acquiring ever more and more because you go to church on Sundays, put money in the plate, and occasionally volunteer at a soup kitchen. All this translates to if I go through the motions of loving God, he'll give me everything I want: transactional. Which also means if God doesn't give me what I want, he's not answering my prayers and I will stop believing in him. And the flipside is if you didn't have the opportunity to go to college, if you rent an apartment or are homeless, on food stamps, if you have three jobs and still cannot pay the bills, you are not worthy of God's love.

We have in John's Gospel the "I am" statements: I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate for the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and life; the way, the truth, the life; the true vine. For Christians who believe Jesus is the Son of God, who strive to live not only the ten commandments but the summary of those rules - you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself – it rings true that Jesus would be our source of food, our light in the darkness, our gateway to safety, the one who shows us which way to go, that his words are true because they have been given to him by God, that he is the source of life through creation and resurrection from the dead, and that we are connected to Jesus and God as fruit-bearing-branches which occasionally need pruning.

But what about all those non-Christians? Muslims who number about 25% of the world's population; 500 million Buddhists; 16 million Jews. There are estimated to be an additional 10,000 worldwide faiths. All in a world of about 9 billion people. And a world of about 2.4 billion Christians. Presumably, that means to some that nearly 7 billion people are going to hell because they don't know what truth is, they don't love their neighbors, they don't believe in God or even a higher power. We still haven't even considered those who do affiliate with one of the world's religions but are non-practicing, or lapsed; and determined atheists and agnostics. Is Jesus, the

Son of God who commands us to love one another talking about only those of us who are like us, who believe as we do? If you don't acknowledge the existence of God or call God by a different name does that mean you aren't a good and kind person worthy of love?

The Apostle Paul's travels to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ took him to cities where he made a point of making his first stop the local synagogues and preaching to Jews, where he was most often rejected and driven away, if not arrested, and so Paul turned to the Gentiles to preach the Word. In contrast, until the vision we read in Acts this morning, Peter argued that non-Jews were not worthy to receive the Good News, that only Jews were meant to receive the Messiah they had so long expected, that Gentiles were unclean and unworthy of God's grace. Apparently, there was quite a significant and public disagreement between Paul and Peter over all of this until God's revelation to Peter that everyone is entitled to God's love, the account we heard this morning.

There is a longing, a yearning in every human heart. Some of us spend our entire lives trying to find what is causing that yearning: we sample this and that person, drug, chemical, lifestyle, diet, profession, different forms of worship, call a variety of locations home, hoping to feel settled somewhere – and yet nothing fills that Empty. I believe God temples within each one of us – Christian, Muslim, Jew, believers, non-believers - that the Holy One is the heart of our being - the blood in our veins, the breath in our lungs - and that longing feeling within us is God yearning for our realization that we are God's. What if Jesus' statement that he is the way might mean I'm showing you the way, not forcing you to believe that I am the only way: I'm showing you the way to behave; I'm showing you what "Love" looks like; I'm showing you who your neighbor is. This is the way to the green pasture and to you who are thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. God has given us the understanding that there are different cultures, different nations, different tribes, different ways. God's ways are not our ways. Who of us can judge the true way to God? As Christians, our way to God is through Jesus. But the God whose merciful kindness reaches to the highest mountain has communication skills, far surpassing human understanding and surely makes his truth known, no doubt in different ways to all the 9 billion of us, each one of whom God loves.

*In Christ there is no East and West, in him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.*