

## “In My Father’s House are Many Mansions: But Who is Next Door?”<sup>1</sup>

Sunday, May 14, 2017

I

“In my Father’s house are many mansions ... if it weren’t so, wouldn’t I have told you? And now I go to prepare a place for you, and the way you know. I am the way, the truth, and the life. And no one comes to the Father but through me.”

Such familiar words. You know, you can’t go to a funeral without hearing this reading. And I think it is comforting that Jesus has gone before and prepares a place first for the loved one who’s died ... and then for all of us to follow. “I am the way ... the truth ... the life.”

But here’s the thing: I think for some, these words also have a kind of smug, exclusive ring to them, don’t they? Maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker that shows an index finger pointing upward that reads, “One way!” One way. My way. Not your way, that’s for sure!

Well let me welcome you to the Gospel of John. If you’ve been here before, you might remember other conversations with Jesus: The one between him and Nicodemus who’s trying to figure out what it might mean to be born again after having grown old, or you might remember the exchange Jesus has with the woman at the well who’s trying to figure out what living water is all about.

See, in John’s gospel, rarely is anything played out straight. Jesus is always talking in riddles, in images, talking past folks, alluding to mystery. So nearly every scene, every dialogue has to be, as they say, “unpacked.” “I’m the way,” Jesus says. “You know the way; come on along.”

But now Thomas ... good old Thomas ... thank God for Thomas! Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know the way.” So it seems to be that if Jesus is this one way, well it’s not so obvious ... it seems it’s not such a clear road to take. ‘Cause I guess these disciples who’d lived and moved with him for three years or so couldn’t for the life of them figure out that way. I mean, Thomas was stumped! Philip confessed he sure couldn’t see the way clearly. So it seems Jesus’ disciples never quite got the point.

And so everything has to be argued, everything has to be thought out, unpacked. So ... maybe here Jesus is meaning, I am the way. The way to the Father runs right straight through me. Or ... I am the way, I who am mysterious, I who am not simple, I who am on the move, I who am reaching out to those you don’t even know, in ways you can’t even begin to figure out.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but by me.” Maybe this has to be unpacked too.

As someone said, if you’re the kind who likes your faith tacked down, literally clear, fundamental, explicit, fixed ... my way or the highway ... then you should probably stay away from the Gospel of John. In fact, you should probably stay away from the Christian gospels altogether. ‘Cause this same Jesus who

says he's the one way, and the truth, and the life, is the same one who tells the story about flinging seed to the four winds.

Now you could say that's no way to sow seed: Some of it on the path, and some all over the neighbor's yard. I mean how untidy! But it seems the sower just loves to throw seed around all over creation. Maybe that's his way.

So before any of us start wielding that text – “Nobody comes to God but by me” – rubbing those words “but by me” into the face of non-believers like a “knife to sever the saved from the damned” – before you do, maybe you'd better struggle with the questions raised by all these gospel stories. What is the way of this wild seed sower flinging faith seeds to the wind? What is this One Way?

Well maybe with Thomas you and I could say, “Jesus, we don't know this way. Give us eyes to see the Father, give us eyes to see. 'Cause how often we've turned your joy-filled, love-filled way into “just another way to make ourselves look good.” Us and not them! You know what I mean?

## II

Which brings me to something interesting that I want to try here. It's a little risky, but let me try it. Food for thought! 'Cause I think it fits with our cultural scene today. And then let's see how this all might make sense with today's Gospel:

A couple of years ago, Malcolm Gladwell wrote a piece for the New Yorker where he drew from a memoir written by a guy named Clive Doyle who wrote *A Journey to Waco*. Do you remember the Branch Davidians, that commune led by David Koresh – that commune of men, women and children that was finally wiped out by our government forces in 1993? I was in seminary at the time. And of course the story was all over the front pages of the papers. Janet Reno was Attorney General and she finally ordered in the troops after weeks of standoff between our government and Koresh and his followers.

Doyle was a survivor of that final Waco assault. And Gladwell says Doyle's memoir “is an account of what it means to be a religious radical – to worship on the fringes of contemporary Christianity.”

See, the Branch Davidians were a splinter group separated from Seventh-Day Adventists. And Doyle was a longtime member of that commune when Koresh took over its leadership. Now following an initial gun battle with government forces who suspected illegal gun dealing that they never could prove – after the gun battle with the Davidians, there was a standoff that went on and on.

But to understand that standoff and the seeming intransigence of this sect, Gladwell points out that you have to understand the whole history of millennialism. Millennial movements – from Mormonism to Jehovah's Witnesses, to the beginnings of the Pentecostal Church in this country – they all believe that within the pages of the Bible are specific clues about when and how the Second Coming will arrive. And they rely on “inspired interpreters, prophets equipped with the Divine insight to interpret these clues and prepare their followers to be among God's chosen.”

And of course for the Davidians in Waco, Koresh was their inspired prophet. And they spent hours and hours with him every day trying to puzzle out especially the book of Revelation and the mystery of the Seven Seals. But still – in addition to Bible study – the Davidians did engage with the world around them, starting small businesses around Waco – they'd been there for decades – and trying to be good neighbors to the larger community.

In the government's eyes, however, the Branch Davidians were a threat. They saw their entrenched beliefs as "Bible babble" and that Koresh was a con man and a liar. So they tried to use standard negotiation tactics to reason with Koresh to "surrender his hostages" – whom Koresh insisted were free to leave at any time.

The problem was, they didn't want to leave. 'Cause their whole world of reality was organized around the value they placed on his and their religious vision. So finally, exasperated beyond reason, the FBI assembled what has been called "the largest military force ever gathered against a civilian suspect in American history." Ten Bradley Fighting Vehicles, two Abrams tanks, four combat engineering vehicles, 668 agents and six U.S. Customs officers, 131 officers from the Texas Department of Public Safety – anyway, you get the idea – for a total of 899 officers and such ... to compel Koresh to submit to their demand to quit the compound and surrender.

Which he agreed to do, once he'd finished his essay trying to reconcile his understanding of the Seven Seals of Revelation with the opinion of a couple of Biblical scholars who had finally taken him seriously and treated him with respect.

Anyway, he never got a chance to finish his essay – which, according to Doyle, would have taken probably a couple of weeks – because the government decided to raid the place, using explosives to batter down the walls and "free the captives" – with Koresh and 73 of his followers, including 25 children, dying in the flames.

Now don't get me wrong here. I'm not saying Koresh was a saint. In fact, he was, to use a technical term, a bit of a nut – a bit delusional, you know? At least in my world. But he and his followers clearly marched to a different drum and saw their world in a very different light than mainstream Americans.

But then, Americans thought the Mormons were different from them – mainly because the Mormons themselves said they were different and because their claims, often put forth in the most "obnoxious way possible," as Gladwell says, prompted others to agree and to treat them as such.

Just like other religious visionaries over the years have established their identities by accentuating their otherness, Gladwell concludes that "Mainstream American society finds it easiest to be tolerant when the outsider chooses to minimize the differences that separate him from the majority. So the country club opens its doors to Jews. The university welcomes African-Americans. Heterosexuals extend the privilege of marriage to the gay community. Gladwell says that whenever these liberal feats are accomplished, we pat ourselves on the back.

But then on the other hand, it's not exactly a major moral victory for Waspy golfers to accept Jews who have decided that they, too, would like to play golf. See, his point is that it's much harder to be tolerant and to accept an outsider group that chooses to maximize its differences from the broader culture. We aren't very good at respecting the freedom of others to be so – in our eyes – obnoxiously different.

But again, don't get me wrong. There are fringe groups that are truly evil. Taliban fighters who force others to conform against their will; white supremacists who view any other skin color with hatred and see it as a threat to their way of life. I mean, our history is riddled with evil under the guise of perverted religion.

But: By their fruits you shall know them. And Koresh's group was not a threat to anyone. Just way different. And finally incinerated by authorities who could not abide their obnoxious differentness.

Now I think there is a lesson here in our pluralistic society today. We remain suspicious of those who are different, don't we – especially in today's political climate – with fear heightened against terrorists, but also fear against foreigners, fear against Muslims, fear against others we don't understand, and thus, don't like. ... So I think there's something to think about here in our own history – from interning Japanese citizens during World War II because of how they looked ... to fear-mongering against aliens now in our midst: Burcas in Kroger's aisles?

Which brings me back to today's Gospel.

### III

This, finally, is my point. And maybe the Gospel's point: God loves, God seeks, and God's way leads you and me way outside the boundaries, searching out all in his loving embrace. And so we are here today. Leaving the faith of those who have never heard the Christian Gospel – or who worship in a different way – leaving them to a God who is equal to the problem, trusting in God's mysterious ways of self-disclosure to all the peoples of the Earth.

But here you and I are at this turn of our road, struggling to keep track of ... struggling, like the Disciples, to walk down this road through a world where there are lots of roads to follow.

And yet here we are, you and I. Having picked this road. Or ... maybe instead, maybe this road has picked us. This one road you and I are called to follow ... 'cause it's our road, it's his road. And in the end, for us ... it's the only road that matters.

Food for thought. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources Used: Malcolm Gladwell, "Sacred and Profane," *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2014, pp. 22-26; Gerard Sloyan's volume on the Gospel of John, Interpretation series.