

Well, the world did not end yesterday, so I guess I'll preach this sermon!

We've just returned from a family trip to Scotland to see our daughter who is at the University of St. Andrews. One evening just before dinner, we saw a beautiful, full double rainbow. The rainbows arched over the town with its 1000 year old castle and cathedral ruins and plunged, radiating, into the North Sea. It was spectacular.

There is a You Tube video that went viral some time ago about a guy filming a double rainbow. It really is funny and ridiculous. The guy films a double rainbow in the mountains and then just breaks down weeping at the beauty of it. Then he wonders what it means. Sobbing, he says over and over, "*There's a double rainbow in my front yard. It's too much! I don't know what it means!! What does it mean!?*"

People make fun of the double rainbow guy. But I think he's just expressing a universal desire for connection with something, some meaning, someone outside of ourselves. The double rainbow guy is a little like Thomas in today's gospel. Thomas is lost but yearning. He asks Jesus "How can we know the way?" - just another form of "what does it mean?" Jesus' answer is clear and plain. He says, "I am the Way." *I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Let's just talk some turkey here. In today's multicultural world, Jesus' plainspoken claim to be the only way to God is at best embarrassing to most Christians and ludicrous at worst. People who like to portray Jesus as a wise teacher routinely skip this teaching. Jesus is clearly at odds with the religious sensibility of our culture.

A few years ago I came across a funny and telling poem by a New York City performance poet named Taylor Mali. It sets the tone for the tension I'm talking about - Jesus' scandal of particularity in a pluralistic world. The poem is called *Totally Like Whatever, You Know?*

*In case you hadn't noticed, it has somehow become uncool
to sound like you know what you're talking about?
Or believe strongly in what you're saying?*

*Invisible question marks and parenthetical (you know?)'s
have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences?
Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions? You know?*

*Declarative sentences -- so-called because they used to, like, DECLARE things to
be true
as opposed to other things which were, like, not - have been infected by a totally
hip
and tragically cool interrogative tone? You know?
Like, don't think I'm uncool just because I've noticed this;
I'm just inviting you to join me in my uncertainty?*

Jesus is not inviting anyone to join Him in His uncertainty. *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* I’m sure that his words were as offensive then as they are now. He is claiming to be the only Way to God.

Do you hear what He is saying about Himself? He is proclaiming that to know Him is to know God and that the only way to know God is to know Him – in every epoch, for every nation, in every age, for everyone, without exception. He is saying that you do not and cannot come to God through Buddha or Mohammed. He is saying that the Jewish Law and the Prophets alone cannot lead you to God. He is saying that you cannot come to God through transcendental meditation or a double rainbow or a walk through the Redwood Forest. He is saying you cannot come to God through philosophy or good works or world peace.

To proclaim this message in our global village today (not to mention Charlottesville of all places with its mix of liberal academia and wealthy bohemia) is to strike the note of power politics, arrogance, narrow-mindedness, fundamentalism, and every other nasty name the age gives to followers of the One who spoke about Himself with certainty.

The most common charge against those who believe what Jesus says about Himself is the charge of arrogance. How can you think your way is the best? And most definitely: Christians have been arrogant and used violence and started crusades and bad mouthed other religions and been pigheaded and bigoted from day one and will be until the Last Day, since the Last Day didn’t come yesterday. No question. Nietchze, the famous atheist, said, *“Show me that you are redeemed and I will believe in your Redeemer.”* It would be ridiculous to defend the church

against the charges of unredeemed arrogance and cruelty and imperialism and violence in the name of Christ.

But the arrogance of the follower does not impute arrogance to the One who says "*I am the way.*" Nor does the misuse of the many speak the final word. In fact, it seems to me that accepting Jesus' claim as it is requires not arrogance, but just the opposite! Believing Him requires a great humility.

It means taking the way God has given rather than putting ourselves at the center of our own religious construction. (By the way: How do we know Jesus was a Californian? 1) Never cut his hair 2) Walked around barefoot all the time 3) Started his own religion). We don't get to start our own religion – that is the definition of pride and arrogance. Instead, in humility, we accept the way God has given us. At least there is a way! There could have been no way!!

Most people in our culture believe all roads lead to God – every way leads to God. It's just as arrogant, if you want to put it that way, to say that all roads lead to God. That is just as much a truth claim as Jesus' claim about Himself. Talk about a power play!

When you think about it: there is extraordinary arrogance in those who would conflate all religions into one, doing extreme violence to the integrity of each of the religions. Try telling a Muslim that Allah and Yahweh and God the Father of Jesus Christ are one in the same. To claim that Buddha and Jesus are enlightened beings of the same order is not only nonsense, it's arrogant. Please give the Buddhist some respect, not to mention Jesus. C.S. Lewis is helpful here. Jesus deserves enough respect to taken on his own terms. He is either a liar, a lunatic, or The Lord: the one He says He is - the Way, the Truth and the Life.

I've tried to appeal to your mind so far in this sermon. I'd rather appeal to your heart. Because, fundamentally, Jesus' statement is not just a theological or philosophical claim. It is a pastoral claim – meaning God is concerned with your heart, your lives, your emotions, your well being. No one is ever argued into the Kingdom anyway: we are always loved into the Kingdom. And Jesus proved His love by going to the cross. His only power play was to die. The irony about Jesus' way is that it is the most inclusive way there is. We don't have to do anything; He's done it all for us!

Jesus says I am the Way. He is the Way for those who are lost – and which of us is not lost from time to time, like Thomas who asks, "How can we know the

way?” Jesus says He is the Truth. He is the Truth for those who seek the meaning of our existence, who ask, “what does it all mean?” Jesus says He is the Life. He is the Life, for all whose lives will end in death – in other words, for everyone. Through his death and resurrection, He has conquered death.

What we know about this One who says He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life is that He is not content to let the lost wander in their lostness, the doubters linger in their meaninglessness, the dying suffer in the face of their extinction. He is the Shepherd that pursues His lost sheep, the Shepherd that lays down his life for his sheep, so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Remember after the resurrection, He comes to personally to Thomas, seeks him out, and says, “do not doubt, but believe!”

Thomas a Kempis, an earlier sort of performance poet, picks up the invitation. It is an invitation that rings with both humility and with authority.

*Follow thou me. I am the way and the truth and the life.
Without the way there is no going; Without the truth there is no knowing;
Without the life there is no living.*

Amen.