

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Jesus has just finished washing the disciples' feet. He's told them what is ahead for him, and they are deeply distraught. We've all been there at one time or another and know what that's like. It's left the disciples anxious, grieving, fearful, in despair. And Jesus has given them the new commandment, 'love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another.' But it's hard, because they know what is to come. So, he says to them with great compassion, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

It's not easy. In fact, without God's grace, it is impossible. But Jesus gives them the way to be lifted from their fearful state. Jesus himself is the route to God – the path, the navigation, the destination, and the reason for the voyage. The way, the truth and the life. He says "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

That's comforting but it's also puzzling that Jesus says he is the route to God.

Sometimes the idea that Jesus is the only way to heaven has been misused to draw lines about who gets into heaven and by what sort of test. But Jesus is using his pastoral, loving affirmation to support his anxious disciples. 'I will draw you to myself in my father's house, where there is enough room for all. Believe in God, believe in me, stay on the narrow way.' Remember God's vision of the new kingdom where there will be love, joy, peace and justice.

Jesus stands up for his disciples and brings them to himself. In the same way, he stands up for all of us and brings us all to himself. There is room, he says, for all.

We have found that path to God and can proclaim where we stand and where we believe Jesus stands. That seems better than proclaiming an exclusive "one-way-to-God-as-described-here" path on which everyone should stand. Jesus graciously offers us that narrow gate, but it is open. It's not dictated as a command. But why wouldn't everyone want to know about a God who promises the Kingdom of heaven, in our times of trouble?

Most of us don't tend to stand on a street corner with a placard saying 'Repent, believe in God and be saved.' But how are we to share the good news that Jesus proclaimed? How are we to be Christians in our multicultural and pluralistic society?

Is being a Christian being tolerant of everything around us? In that case we could be seen as standing for nothing. We would be the 'one size fits all' generic version, where the 'foundation' Christ is not unique, and can be found in any reasonable human reflection, religion and philosophy. If we proclaim our faith, how do we respond when some folks get upset and say – 'don't thrust Christianity down my throat – I can live a good, honest, caring, and thoughtful life even if I don't happen to believe in your 'God.'"

And if we are tolerant of everything, then what is the role of the church? Maybe a clue to what the church ought to be is found in the simple act of Jesus, in today's gospel reading. "I go and prepare a place for you (in my father's house and), I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

Jesus stands up for us and brings the church to himself. That often means that the church is to stand in complete opposition to the culture it is within.

We in the church witness to our risen Lord who calls us to proclaim God’s Kingdom here on earth. That can mean stoning, as St. Stephen was subjected to, or to living a life set apart as do our Mennonite and Amish friends. Or it can mean not accepting the simplistic moral aphorisms that we hear in our Western culture. You know, the things like ‘God doesn’t give you more than you can handle,’ or ‘it was meant to be,’ or ‘everything happens for a reason.’

Christian service is costly and not ‘cheap grace’ as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us. ‘Cheap grace’ is understood as forgiveness without cost. An example is the view that Christ asks us only to show up on a Sunday morning – a convenient and easy Christianity that allows us to blend in with our culture on other days. We might stand up against poverty, but nothing may distinguish Christians from the general culture in terms of wealth or privilege. The life of first Christians was very different from ours. They were so faithful in supporting the poor in Rome that they embarrassed the Roman civic leaders.

So if not ‘cheap grace,’ what is ‘costly grace?’ That price God paid for our liberty – Christ on the cross. It invites the church to hear, pray and then act so that it can find its theological mission. It calls the church to a deeper commitment of resources and time. And we are invited to see the church as Stephen did, majestic in God’s future. Not Jesus as a good luck charm in our pocket, who we ask to spring into action when we are having a difficult day.

Our vision and faithfulness to God’s church invites us to hear and respond when Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you know me, you will know my father also.”

Then, our hearts will not be troubled.

AMEN