

Varied Means on a One Way Street

Gates Presbyterian Church

April 20, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Please Note: This sermon does not *read* well. The reader can not experience the free-association, free-flowing nature inherent in the pauses, gestures, and ad-libbed additions. The text below does, however, offer broad strokes of what was shared this Sunday. *RSE*

Hymn: "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee"

Gospel Lesson: John 14:1-14

One of our neighbors here in Gates is a wonderful man who is religious about two things: he is religious about his religion, Roman Catholicism, and he is religious about his yard, his trees, his flowers, his vegetables. For this young man, the two seem to be two sides of one coin – for his love of nature reflects his deep love of God. This younger man is a product of this diocese – and let there be no mistake about it – this is one of the most liberal, ecumenically-minded, all embracing Catholic Dioceses in the entire world. Suffice it to say that The Most Rev., Bishop Matthew Clark has been summoned to Rome more than most bishops because of the seeming waywardness of his flock. Our neighbor and I have numerous conversations about faith. He is a sincere, devout Catholic man – who would make a superb priest.

Yesterday, our neighbor had a little problem. Pope Benedict was celebrating mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. In the middle of that live and televised two hour mass, our neighbor found himself looking outside at the even then 80 degree sunny weather – his plantings, his trees, his garden – all that he cherished as gifts from God were calling him. Pope/Garden ... Pope/Garden ... Pope/ - oh one can hear the Pope in Mass anytime – Garden!

Still conflicted, my neighbor asked me for forgiveness – and so I granted it. It was not facetious, and my friend took it as intended: "In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen."

That, my friends, is unity in Christ!

That Jesus is the way, the truth and the life is what we affirm here today. That there are various ways to walk that one-way path, we need look no further than what I have put on this table –

When it comes to worship, for example, the classical distinction since the Reformation among Christian denominations is whether worship is centered, has its primary focus, that to which everything else leads – whether it is the Eucharist, that is Holy Communion, The LORD's Supper [holding up the cup and platen) or the word as read – and interpreted [holding up a Bible]. It is pretty clear when you attend Christian worship, which is primary. The simple fact that we do not celebrate Holy Communion every time we worship reminds you that we are Word-Centered. That Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and many Lutherans celebrate the Eucharist every occasion they worship tells you where they put emphasis.

Of late, however, one wonders if there aren't Christian traditions whose emphasis is neither of the two now classical. Are there not churches where the end-all is conversion, baptism – I have here my grandfather's baptismal and a small vial of water from the Jordan River to represent those for whom that Sacrament is paramount for their worship and their faith. There are those for whom stewardship is primary [holding up an offering basket]. I couldn't help myself. Two days ago I was flipping through channels and, with this idea in mind, watched a televangelist speak of nothing but how people needed to give, to plant a seed, indeed, his words were: "what ever you planned to give, that is not enough, you need to give some sacrificial, something special, something beyond." This is not a pejorative commentary on that – it is just a reminder of a different emphasis in some peoples' walk in faith. Then, for lack of a better prop, I have this CD of Praise Music. God knows how I love music. I can find myself in worship listening to the organ, piano, hymns – and yes, I have grown out of the limitations of classical music and enjoy a far wider range than once was true – but there are Christian churches today, where it seems as though the highlight, the focus, the *point* of worship is to be a people of praise in music.

Once I started down this path, I was not sure where to end and indeed there are those whose faith life isn't about worship at all – but about mission, evangelism. There are those whose reading of Scripture is centered on "end times" readings from Daniel and the Book of Revelation to John. There are churches that never seem to get out of the Pauline epistles – the letters Paul wrote that do indeed edify church life.

My invitation today is for us to find the path, the walk with Christ that works for us – not neglecting all of the other means – indeed, perhaps, embracing more of the means I have just described so as to stretch ones wings, broaden ones horizons, and in so doing, embrace peoples whose walk is different from ours, whose emphasis on this Christian faith might be nuanced differently – but who, like each of us, is a Christian, one who knows an emphasis Christ as the common thread that binds us together. We, in the words of the solo to follow [Kathy Wakeman singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" from Rogers and Hammerstein's "Carousel"], do not walk alone – we walk with each other and we walk with Christ. In doing this, we set aside that which divides us, we embrace that which unites us, and walk together as the people of God.

This past Friday afternoon, a metaphor found in ParkRidge Hospital's new name was not lost on me. At *Unity* Hospital, Chuck Getman, free of most of the tubes and other medical paraphernalia that had bothered him so, was able to sit up, breathe, albeit shallowly, on his own – to be with family, his family. It mattered little how those gathered were American Baptist, Episcopal, Catholic, Congregationalist or yes, Presbyterian. What mattered was that we were all Christians, followers of Christ, those who walk with Christ in so many different ways – but ever with, on behalf of, and towards Christ. What mattered is that we prayed together, as part of Christ's one family, thanking God for the journey all of us take in this life and in the closing days, the end of the journey that draw us nearer to life eternal, to the place of which Jesus spoke, the place where Chuck Getman now walks with his Christ, in that place of which Jesus spoke when he said: I go to prepare a place for you.

In moments like that, we – I think all of us – really get the message right – that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. *That* is what matters. In and with Christ, we have our walk of faith in the here and now – and with Christ we will have the walk that lasts forever.

Amen.