

“Beyond Binary Thinking”
Acts 4:5–12; John 10:11–18
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Scripture includes what comparative religion scholars call texts of exclusion and texts of inclusion. Exclusive texts describe God’s realm as a limited reality where some will be left out due to a lack of God’s favor or the nature of human response. Inclusive texts describe God’s realm as all-encompassing, ever more than we can comprehend, taking in all people, indeed all of creation. The lectionary readings for today, quite unusually, include one example of each kind of text.

In the reading from Acts, while defending his healing of a man lame from birth before the temple authorities, Peter says he has done so in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and then he says, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).” That sounds pretty exclusive. In the reading from John, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd (John 10:16).” That sounds more inclusive.

So, what do we do with the tension that is created by these seemingly contradictory words of Holy Scripture? The normal practice is to decide that one of the texts contains a higher truth and thus dismiss the other or interpret it in light of the higher truth. It is a binary approach to thinking, an either/or approach, that defines much of our experience. We support law enforcement *or* we believe in racial justice. We trust science *or* we believe in God. We believe in economic development *or* we are committed to caring for creation.

In regard to today’s texts, if we embrace Peter’s words in Acts, we conclude that Jesus is the only way to salvation, period. Perhaps in the reading from John, Jesus is referring to Gentiles, since his first followers are Jewish, but no matter whom he is referring to, Jesus is the only way. Peter says so, or at least the author of Acts claims that he does.

However, if we embrace Jesus' words in John, we may conclude that there is always more room in God's realm. When Jesus refers to having sheep not belonging to this fold, he may be referring to Gentiles. This is the most obvious understanding, but we don't know for sure. The text does not expand upon the statement. And even if this is the initial meaning, this would not exclude broader understandings over time. Perhaps God knows and works with people outside the Christian fold. Perhaps Peter's statement in Acts can be viewed in another way.

The point is whichever text we claim, we claim one and discount or relativize the other. And there are times when we need to make a choice. But there are also times when either/or thinking is not helpful, times when it is beneficial to move beyond binary thinking. For example, we can and should support responsible law enforcement *and* pursue racial justice at the same time. It is not really an either/or choice. Sometimes we can hold on to two seemingly contradictory claims.

In his book *Maybe (Maybe Not)*, Robert Fulghum lists a series of contradictory claims we often embrace (pp. 21-22).

Look before you leap.
He who hesitates is lost.

Two heads are better than one.
If you want something done right, do it yourself.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
Better safe than sorry.

Out of sight, out of mind.
Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

You can't tell a book by its cover.
Clothes make the man.

Many hands make light work.
Too many cooks spoil the broth.

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
It's never too late to learn.

Never sweat the small stuff.
God is in the details.

Fulghum then adds that when he taught art, he wore two buttons on his smock. One read, "Trust me, I'm a teacher." The other read, "Question Authority." Sometimes it is wise to move beyond binary thinking.

So, if we are to do this with the claims of today's texts, what might this mean? It begins with embracing the truth of Acts 4:12 — that there is salvation in Jesus. That is Peter's real point, not to negate the beliefs of others but to assert the value of faith in Christ. This is the salvation we have known, and thus, this is the focus of our witness to the world.

In the larger narrative, Peter and John are in the strange position of having to defend themselves for the "crime" of healing a man on temple grounds. To be fair, Peter has also insulted temple authorities by saying they have contributed to the death of the Messiah because of their ignorance. They don't believe he was the Messiah and they certainly don't like being called ignorant by an uneducated fisherman!

But the healing itself is an affront to temple authorities since it is done by unauthorized people. So, Peter and John are arrested and now they have to defend themselves. Their best defense is the healed man, he is as good as a videotape of a murder, they have the power to heal! But they are asked how they have this power, perhaps they are in league with evil. It is the power of Jesus Christ that is at work in and through them, Peter says, he is the source of their faith and the man's healing. Jesus who was crucified and then raised by God is the basis of it all!

This is what they claim because it is what they believe to be true, and this is what we claim. Jesus is at the center of our understanding of who God is and what God is about in this world. Jesus is at the center of our salvation experience, our movement toward healing, hope and eternal life. And thus, Jesus is at the center of our witness. We can only give witness to what we have known personally. We don't have to deny

the experience of others to affirm our own, but we must affirm our own. We follow the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

A rabbi I know led an interment service right after Lynn Lingafelt and I led the primary service for one of our members. He spoke eloquently and from a deep spiritual place. He offered comfort, but when he spoke of eternity, he was very clear to say that in his tradition, this points not to an afterlife but to continued existence in the lives and memories of all who have known us. From a Christian perspective, we might think this is an inadequate view, but I deeply respected the rabbi's authenticity. He could not speak of more than he believed.

Nor can we, but we can speak of what we believe, and it is rooted in the Jesus story — his life, death and resurrection. Perhaps always, but in this Easter season especially, we speak of the resurrection and all it implies — our hope for eternal life, love's victory over fear and hatred, God's decisive acts of redemption. We speak of these realities because they are what we know and because no one else will speak of them.

I will never forget a sermon Old Testament scholar Alberto Soggin preached while I was in seminary. His message was that we need to tell the world about Jesus. This was a normal thing to say in a sermon, but I expected Soggin to talk about prophetic literature and social concerns, key themes in the Hebrew canon. These issues come up if we talk about Jesus, but Soggin's focus surprised me until he talked further. Other people will help us with noble causes, he said, but if the church does not tell the world who Jesus is, who will? That message hit home. Jesus is the focus of our witness because he is the source of our salvation.

But while we begin to move beyond binary thinking in regard to today's texts by embracing the truth of Acts 4:12 — that there is salvation in Jesus — we continue by embracing with equal conviction the truth of John 10:16 — that Jesus has other sheep not of this fold. The traditional thinking has been that he is talking about Gentiles, and this may be, but who knows? They are the most logical choice in John's time when the church is divided between those of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, Gentiles are the outsiders to the first followers of Jesus. But who are the outsiders in our time, the people we cannot imagine

God being willing to include? Jews and Muslims, immigrants and refugees, LGBT people, our political opponents? Are they really beyond God's concern?

God's ways are not our ways, the prophet Isaiah says, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Salvation is God's business, not ours, and God will include whomever God chooses to include. But one thing we know from sacred history is that more and more people seem to be included over time, not less. It is not that God changes but that our understanding of God changes and grows.

That is one way of reconciling a broader interpretation of John 10:16 with a straightforward reading of Acts 4:12. Peter says there is only one way, but Peter's understanding is limited. The text says Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit when he speaks, but is any human being ever ready to hear all that the Spirit has to teach us in any moment? Are we not all like the blind men examining parts of an elephant in the old story, each thinking the part of God we touch is the whole story?

Yet rather than trying to reconcile these teachings, what if we were simply to hold both claims and allow the tension to exist? Jesus is the way to salvation, but God will include whomever God chooses to include. That might be the most faithful response. Some of the deepest truths are difficult to comprehend, much less describe with words.

Reflecting on Jesus' silence before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, Rowan Williams says this. "Jesus knows more than he can say; he is like a naturally gifted musician trying to explain to slow or even tone-deaf listeners how basic harmony works. And when the transforming power of his presence breaks through in healing, he hurries to forbid people to talk about it. It is as if he knows they will only find the wrong words, the wrong categories (*Christ on Trial*, p. 2)."

About some matters we are better off remaining silent. There are some questions we cannot answer. But that's okay. We don't have to answer every question. We don't have to resolve every tension, not even the one we are talking about today, because judgment belongs to God. Our only calling is to give witness to our experience.

Boston University School of Theology professor Bryan Stone concludes an article on preaching in a pluralistic world with these words. There is no contradiction between a willingness to bear faithful witness to Christ and a genuine openness to the non-Christian, even to the extent that, Lesslie Newbigin has suggested, ‘We are prepared to receive judgment and correction’ and thus to put our own Christian faith at risk. The preaching of the good news, however, must reject the temptation to compete for space in the world or to achieve victory over other faiths in a crowded marketplace of options. On the one hand, the good news of Jesus Christ can never be at home and will always be a strange new word that risks distortion the moment it is spoken. On the other hand, Christ has already secured a place for the good news in the world – among the poor and cast out, among those who are tormented by demons, at weddings with friends and dinners in the houses of known sinners, at the foot of the cross and the door of the tomb. (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2020, pp. 22–23)

Indeed, Christ has already secured a place for the good news. We don’t have to do that. All we have to do is give witness to the love we have known in Christ and then leave room for God to be God.