Anyone cringe at the reading this morning? A reading filled with such comfort and such offense, depending how you read it.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “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. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

The elephant in cozy living room of this text is: “I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”

Two common readings of this text: Triumphalist & Pluralist

**Triumphalist Reading**: If you don’t accept Jesus (*how* that is done is usually stipulated) you are banished from God. Jewish friends, Buddhist friends, Muslim friends, secular friends...outta luck.

We inhabit Inter-Faith space here. Hosts are a Christian parish and a Jewish congregation that share building. If either one took a triumphalistic reading, TBE could say “We’re the chosen people and you’re outta luck unless you leave St. Clare’s to join us.” SC could use their text to say, “Whoever it is you’re worshipping over there it’s not the real God!” Place would be a breeding ground for religious conflict...we’d run for the hills and rent a bowling alley.

I didn’t see Maher’s movie *Religious* because I knew I’d agree with too much of it.
Priest friend Susan Bock saw it and said, “It’s hard to watch!” She quoted Maher at end: “Religion must end if humankind is to live. Grow up, people, or die.” Soviet Union and Mao’s China tried the end religion bit and didn’t work so well. Atheists have their own version of fundamentalism.

**But his main point is taken:** If religion is so good why does religious conflict seem like our greatest threat to survival?

Many with a Triumphal list reading are more loving than their theology. Great Aunt Mary had a work-around. When someone died she always found some reason to think they had accepted Jesus: “I sent her a card that said, ‘May God grant you the peace of Christ’ and she later told me ‘Thank you so much for that card, it meant a lot to me.’ Sometimes she had to really stretch it: “Maude sneezed just before she died, and I said, ‘God bless you!’ and she squeezed my hand.” Anyone else have an Aunt Mary?

**Pluralist Reading.** Pluralism: a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist.

Different versions of a pluralist reading. Most common is Delete Key version. Read bit about many mansions and leave off at “I am the way, truth, the life. No one comes to father except thru me”

Most pluralist readings don’t grab me. I don’t find them compelling, they don’t seem to fit what’s going on here.

**Jesus is not saying this as evangelical mega church pastor in Ohio,** loaded with privilege & prestige. He’s a marginalized Jew among Roman occupations forces. A Galilean Jew from the hicks, not a member of Jewish aristocracy in Jerusalem. He leads a little sect losing members faster than Mitt Romney lost FB friends after his loss to Obama in 2012. When he says, “I am the way, truth and life, no one comes to the father except through me” it has a completely different resonance to original hearers than the billboard on the way
to DTW that “I am the life”—Jesus. Which makes him sound like the Narcissist in Chief.

What is the context that gives these words a meaning we might actually embrace? Call this a Costly Grace Pluralist reading.

Jesus is speaking on or near the night of his betrayal. Eyes wide open, he’s walking right into a scapegoating event. Jerusalem was an anxious city wracked with internal conflicts. In that condition, people look for a person or group to blame, project their own anxieties onto an innocent victim, declaring him guilty. If charges stick and spread through age-old group dynamics, the target is banished, the tension relieved, and community returns to equilibrium. Until the next build of conflict.

During the phase when the mechanism is triggered, anyone who stands with the scapegoat becomes a target themselves.

Words immediately preceding: “Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward. Peter said to him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’ Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.’” {Peter is main audience for words that follow}

As predicted, Peter would do what most of us would have done: played it safe, backed off, and saved his own neck. He chose warmth of fire in the courtyard of high priest over stigma of scapegoat. I think Peter is primary audience for our text: “In my father’s house are many mansions...I’m going to prepare a place for you.” Peter denied Jesus for belonging reasons. Jesus is offering a better community to belong to than scapegoating mob.

I talk with evangelical pastors conflicted over policies that discriminate against LGBTQ people. I used to try to help them see the Bible statements on same-
gender sex have nothing to do with loving gay couples today. Their eyes would glaze over.

Yet another tormented pastor came to me. He had a close family member who was gay, so he was tormented. “I love my sister, but the Bible says...” I didn’t go into sorting out the texts. I just said to him: “You won’t challenge your theology until you are willing to bear the stigma of your sister, even if it means losing all your religious privilege, which it will.” I didn’t say it, but vast majority choose their group. I know. I was among them too long.

What is Jesus doing when he speaks these challenging words...I am the way...no one comes to the father except through me?

Taking the risk that if he walks into the trap, God will vindicate him in some way. I’m not sure he knows how exactly; it’s a nearly blind leap across a deep and wide chasm. Jesus wants to strike a blow against this mechanism, with words of John Baptist ringing in his ears, “Behold the lamb of God”—who before its shearers is dumb.

When he says, a few verses later, “I am the way...” this is the way he’s talking about...

When he says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” he’s using passageway language. It’s like that old movie, the Great Escape, the POW’s are building a tunnel to freedom, and when it’s ready, they start sending people through the tunnel. Always the claustrophobic guy and they have to say, “there’s no other way but through it”

Jesus is digging a tunnel, forging a path, that will only change the world if people follow. We cannot know the Father who is leading him unless we take this path too. (Peter is his primary audience)

I don’t think “Father” means God in abstract/philosophical sense.
That word, Father, he also used Abba (dear Father) describes his spirituality—meaning his experience of the divine. From the time of his baptism in the Jordan and probably long before, Jesus had an experience of God, so intimate, so tender, so intense at times, that he didn’t fear his own vulnerability as a human. He embraced it: *we are all little children in the hands of this God I experience.*

Could easily have used the term **Mother**, if the culture of the time wasn’t so patriarchal. Jesus use mother images for God.

He came to believe, through this experience of the divine, that he was called to stand with vulnerable-marginalized people, sharing their fate if necessary because God was with them, declaring their innocence when everyone around was declaring their guilt.

He was so trusting in this experience that he was willing to die, trusting that whoever was sending him on this path would take care of him...and it would all work out just fine.

This reading is confirmed 8 verses later when Jesus introduces his new name for the Spirit: Gk. *Paraclete*: Advocate for the Defense. (Like Defense Attorney, pleading for your innocence.)

> “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate [Gk. Paraclete, “the one who speaks in our defense”] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I said to you.”

Tom & Eddie are an older gay couple who came to Julia’s church. Eddie is a devout Catholic but Tom had stopped any religious affiliation as a young man. He was studying to be a preacher when he heard his first sermon condemning homosexuality. He thought, no room for me with this God! Meanwhile Tom and Eddie lived a conventional married life in secret—the only safe way for them to do so. Very conservative neighborhood Dearborn Eddie didn’t leave the house for a couple of years, he was so terrified.
They raised two grandchildren whose parents couldn’t raise them.

Julia and I are having dinner with Tom and Eddie after Tom is home from hospital after cancer surgery that removed his leg. Place is filled with religious Christmas decorations. I ask Tom his story of returning to faith since he started going to Julia’s church. What was the internal experience that allowed you to give God another try after all those years? He said: “I realized in my heart I’m not so bad.” Maybe he would come give his ty.

I know this isn’t a standard evangelical conversion story. But it illustrates the work of the Spirit that Jesus named Paraclete. In order to function, the scapegoat mechanism assumes the guilt of the targeted people. The Paraclete/Advocate/Spirit of truth, coming into the world through what Jesus is enacting, is the Spirit who says—uh-uh, not guilty, these people are innocent. God is with them. You want to be with God? Stand with them.

Remember the spirit opposed to the Holy Spirit is a spirit Jesus called ha’ satan, which means, the accuser. What do scapegoating mobs spread? Accusations against people they want to blame for all of their problems. Just watch the POTUS at his rallies and on his Twitter feed—he’s putting on a clinic for us...

There’s an edge to this saying, but Jesus is an equal opportunity offender. A Muslim, a Jew, a Hindu, a Sikh, an atheist, Bill Maher, who stands with the scapegoats of our time is closer to the God Jesus knows than the Christians who stand idly by while it happens under their pious noses.

Triumphalist Reading is a Cheap Grace Reading. Cheap Grace is feeling like an insider because those “other people” are outsiders. What I have offered is a “Costly Grace Pluralist Reading”
I want to suggest that we take a few minutes now and reflect on that story I told about Tom & Eddie. Eddie realizing he wasn’t so bad as those preachers told him he was, and that giving him the space to give God another chance...

Picture anyone you know who reminds you of Eddie...someone who is as messed up as any human being is...but who went through life with the added burden of having to battle accusatory thoughts that wrapped themselves in a religious costume.

Is there anything in your own experience that reminds you of Eddie’s experience? ... having your own struggles like we all do, plus the added burden of having to battle accusatory thoughts wrapped in a religious costume?...

For many of you...it might have to do with friends or loved ones who disapprove of the way you understand God...your views on hot topic issues...and the way those loved ones feel about you are like little mosquitoes that buzz around your ear from time to time...you wonder “maybe they are right....” or you feel vaguely guilty because you are displeasing them even.

It’s not unusual to be falsely accused...
or to be correctly accused by someone with false motives...

None of it is pleasant...

Imagine the Spirit that Jesus named Paraclete—Advocate for the Defense—standing between you and those accusations.