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St. John's Episcopal Church  
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## CATBIRD JESUS

A week ago, Deborah and I heard a startling bird song coming from the lilacs next to our deck. The melody was lively but erratic, almost frenetic, skipping rapidly from one short phrase to another. What kind of bird could have so many musical sides?

The source of this wild music was an unimpressive looking, grey catbird. Don't judge a bird by its hairdo. This fellow could sing.

I did some research and found this:

The gray catbird, *Dumatella Carolinensis*, belongs to the Mimidae family, which also includes the Northern Mockingbird and the Caribbean Thrasher.

While the Northern Mockingbird repeats strophes, musical lines, three or four times, and the Caribbean Thrasher, its cousin, two times, the melodic hallmark of the gray catbird is rapid hopping from one phrase to the next without repetition, like a radio dial moving from one station to the next. It mimics the calls of other birds and invents some of its own. One would be challenged to "name that tune"! Since it sounds like so many birds it would be hard to say what kind of bird it is. It is hard to pin it down.

Now I'll warn you this is going to be an ambitious segue! What does the elusive musical identity of the catbird have to do with Jesus? Because the authors and editors of the four gospels present Jesus in sometimes markedly different ways, it can be really difficult to figure out which "tune" belongs to the real Jesus. Like the catbird, there is no one song that sticks, and different groups of Jesus' followers often pick the tune they like best. Jesus also is hard to pin down.

The contrasts between different presentations of Jesus are most striking when the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are placed alongside of John.

Today's gospel reading from John has one "tune" that I have found difficult to hear for a long time. It is part of Jesus' long farewell address to his disciples. It begins in a pastorally comforting and theologically generous tone. Jesus says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.*" This line suggests that "*There's wideness in God's Mercy.*" And "*In Christ there is no East or West.*" His words seem to draw no line in the sand ... between insiders and outsiders, haves and have-nots, sinners and non-sinners, Jews, Christians, or those of other religious traditions. Here God is big, inclusive and profoundly hospitable. The generosity of these lines is the reason

that this passage is read at funerals more frequently than any other gospel reading.

The problem arises later when Thomas inquires of Jesus about the way to the place where Jesus is going after he dies. Jesus replies, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."* So a passage that starts out with the spirit of forgiveness and inclusive salvation suddenly narrows down to a very exclusive and tight definition of who can be saved. It looks like it's *only* the Christians who can be saved. Jesus is *the* way, *the* life and *the* truth.

This may have made sense to John and John's community in 90-100 AD, but in a modern, religiously pluralistic world these assertions could be an offense to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. If John felt there was any doubt or possible misunderstanding about this pronouncement, he removes it in the next line, *"No one comes me except through the Father."* This is not the only time John makes forceful demands on behalf of Jesus.

There is a world of difference in an *article*, the grammatical kind. When you remove the word, "the", from the first pronouncement its meaning shifts dramatically. If John's Jesus had said, "I am way, truth and life." instead of "I am *the* way and *the* truth and *the* life", the message would have been very different. The article, "the", denotes "only", such as *I am the only way, the only truth, the only life*. In the opening lines of today's gospel, those who worship the Jewish God, Yahweh, or Buddha, or the Hindu God, Brahma, would have found a "dwelling place" in God's house. But such a dwelling place appears to be denied here.

Nowhere in the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are exclusive claims made the way they are in John. In fact, in the synoptic accounts of Jesus' life, there are stories that show him risking censure by going way outside of the acceptable religious boundaries of his time. The story of Syrophenecian woman, the parable of the "Good Samaritan", the healing of the Gerosene demoniac in Gentile territory, all portray Jesus' extension of love well beyond his own Jewish background and the strictures of Temple religion.

So, you might ask, "What is the big deal?" We are all Christians. Doesn't it make sense to say Jesus is the only way? Yes, if one is claiming that Jesus is the way for *me* or for *you*. But who am I to speak for God on behalf of our brothers and sisters from other faith traditions or even for those who have no such traditions? To claim that Jesus is the *only* way to God is a fundamentalist assertion that is energized by the notion that, *"my way is the right way. If you don't agree with my position we have little to talk about."* This inflexibility characterizes all brands of fundamentalist thinking; even in the ways you and I stake out unbending opinions in our day-to-day lives. To assume that our way to

God is the only way to God is to affront the divinity. Also, however, to write off those we deem fundamentalists is fundamentalist itself.

Commentator, Peter Marty (*The Christian Century*), writes, "When the focus is on absolute certainty (*the way, the truth, the life*), the journey of faith quickly becomes impoverished. (The catbird's repertoire is reduced to one song.) All that is incomprehensible and all the unanswerable questions have to be ignored or shortchanged. The wonder and glory of mystery is shelved."

John's gospel is the most *un*-literal of the four gospels. It is a mystical work. No doubt, its message brought great reassurance to Christians who lived in times of persecution and internal division. Moreover, I believe that first century people thought differently than we do. They knew and were comfortable with the power of myth and with imagination as a credible means of interpreting the world of invisible truths. They had not been introduced to arid, Cartesian thinking.

If John's gospel is seen through a *mystical* lens, then it may be experienced as an inspired work of faith and poetry, rich in metaphor, ambiguity and inspiration. But too frequently it is not read this way, and the destructive forces of fundamentalism find sympathetic soil. Over the centuries, much injury has been committed in the name of a biblical literalism. We live in a Post-enlightenment era in which the simplicity of literalism promises both the eradication of complexity and an absolute certainty to assuage our anxiety.

So why is this important? A few days ago, driving on the highway, Deborah and I passed a (no it wasn't another catbird!) large billboard with a bold message: "**THE BIBLE: INSPIRED. ABSOLUTE. FINAL.**" So much for the wideness of God's mercy. I surmise that "The Bible" in this case refers to the *Christian* Bible and does not recognize its Hebraic origins. Put yourself in the driver's seat of a Jew, Muslim or someone who has left the Christian path, driving by this sign.

Why is all this important at St. John's in Salisbury? Last year, I was dis-invited to lead a prayer at the Memorial Day observances. I had urged the organizer to include a Jewish veteran as a prayer leader. He had lost a brother at the battle of Gallipoli.

There being no rabbi available, this veteran had prepared to read the Prayer for the Dead in Hebrew as one of the prayers in the ceremony at the cemetery. Apparently, I had exceeded the proper bounds of my role by taking this initiative and by pressing for interfaith representation. As of this writing, I have not been invited to lead a prayer at this year's observances. More importantly, to the best of my knowledge, nor has any member of the Jewish Community Group been invited.

This could still change and I hope it does.

If one believes that Jesus is the *only* way, then why bother with interfaith participation or religious tolerance for that matter? It is essential that we use our faith to build bridges with other faith traditions, not blow them up.

I know that I have my own of biases and prejudices. Knowing that gives me a little start in addressing them. I also know that the catbird/Jesus I hear sings many songs, but I believe they are love songs for *all* human ears and hearts.

### **John 14:1-14**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>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? <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

<sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” <sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

<sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.