

I AM...THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

John 14:1-6a

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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A young man who lives with Down's Syndrome is all dressed up for prom. This month, three churches in Lorain county hosted "Night to Shine" dances for people with special needs. This is no shabby substitute for the real thing. Every guest of Night to Shine enters this complimentary event on a red carpet complete with a welcome from a friendly crowd and paparazzi. Once inside, guests receive the royal treatment, including hair and makeup stations, shoe shining areas, limousine rides, corsages and boutonnieres, a catered dinner and karaoke. Volunteers from local high schools participate and help.

There are some ideas, some experiences that just seem right. When I saw the news story about Night to Shine, I felt happy. Happy that in our world where bad news dominates, there are still so many good news stories to celebrate. I felt grateful that in our time when so many people are turned off to church because of the judgmentalism and hypocrisy of too many Christians, there are churches that will transform their Fellowship Halls into dance

halls and create a memorable evening for people who don't often feel celebrated.

Is this what it means to follow in the way of Jesus? I think it is. I feel the same way when I hear that one of our youth group alums has chosen to spend her or his college spring break, not in Daytona Beach, but on a mission trip, hammering nails for Habitat for Humanity.

Right around Christmas time, a family in this church told me they'd decided - all four of them together - that they wanted to go to Puerto Rico for their spring break and participate in some hurricane recovery work together as a family. This is what it means to follow in the way of Jesus.

It means walking through life with eyes wide open, noticing those who seem to be neglected, forgotten, abused, and reaching out to them in love. It means extending yourself, beyond your comfort zone, to make a difference for the neighbor who's lonely, the church friend who has no one else to turn to, the relative you frankly don't enjoy spending time with. When I hear that one friend has made time for another in the midst of a busy week, just to listen while someone else talks and occasionally cries, I know that I'm witnessing the living out of the way of Jesus.

As you've heard, our passage for today comes towards the end of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He knows that he's going to die soon, and he's saying "goodbye" to his disciples. They are stricken, not just with grief. They will miss, terribly, the presence of Jesus who has become their friend. But they are also students who aren't ready for graduation. They thought that they had a few years left - they don't remember most of what Jesus has told them. They sound desperate when they ask Jesus, "But what about us? What's going to happen to us? What will we do without you?"

Jesus' answer is patient but firm. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message version, "Don't let this throw you." Jesus talks to them about eternal life, abundant life, this life which is described as a mansion with many rooms. Always, always, when Jesus talks about eternal life, he is talking about two things at once. There is life in this world and there is a life that goes on beyond this world. The difference between the two is not that stark for Jesus. Eternal life beyond death will take care of itself. He's much more concerned with how we are living in the here and now. That's what our focus should be.

It's as if he's saying to the disciples, "Have you been watching? Have you paid attention at all?" "Have you noticed the way I treat people, as if each one was worthy of healing and good news, dignity and respect?" "Have you noticed how I haven't allowed myself to burn out and become irritable? You know how I do that? I practice the Sabbath. I take time, whenever I feel like my own resources are running dry, to spend time with God. I was always getting away by myself, out on the lake, out in the desert, up the side of the mountain, to pray and listen. And then when God had refilled me, I'd return. Practice that in your own lives." "Have you noticed how I spend time with everyone, not just with the people with whom I agree? I had dinner with Zacchaeus the tax collector, I had dinner in the homes of Pharisees, I spent time with women like Mary and Martha. Don't just hang around with the people who already like you. Learn from those who are different from you. Be about the sacred work of bringing people together." "Have you been watching the way I live? Do you notice how often I sit in temple, listening to scripture, hearing the rabbis interpret it? I need to know the word of God, inside and out. I need to hear the Psalms over and over again until they are as familiar to me as the sound of my own heartbeat. When we're walking from village to village, and you all are engaged in bickering or gos-

singing, what I'm doing is saying them over and over again to myself." "I've been living my life," Jesus says, "in a very intentional and particular way. That way is available to you as well." "Live this way and you'll always feel close to me."

Living the way of life that Jesus taught and lived is both simple and hard, both at the same time. Anyone can do it. There are no prerequisites, no entrance exams, nothing that can disqualify you. You can begin at any time. You can begin again at any time. It's putting one foot in front of the other, one day at a time, every day, on days when you feel like it and on days when you don't. Living intentionally, practicing hospitality, patience and generosity. It's failing and falling, remembering you're forgiven, and getting back on the path. There are no shortcuts; that's the hard part.

It's not so much a set of rules to remember or creeds to memorize as it is adopting a way of life. This idea of the way is found in the Hebrew Scriptures, too, in our Old Testament. There it is synonymous with the concept of wisdom. The word for "way" or "wisdom" that is used in Hebrew calls to mind a path worn by constant use. The implication is that wisdom involves patterns of behavior, not just isolated acts.

“We continue, throughout our lives, to ask and ask again the basic questions like “Am I on the right track in life?’ and ‘How can I know God in my life?’” The answer Jesus gives is both simple and profound: “I am the way.” One writer puts it like this: “We grow into the answer as we live out the months and years of our lives, first wading in it and then swimming. Every time we return to these basic questions, it can be with faith that is deeper since the last time we asked them.” (Alyce McKenzie)

Jesus is the Way, the Way that leads to abundant life now and in the future. Life that really is life. Life that is thriving, not merely surviving. Life that is abundant in joy, not drudgery.

And Jesus is also the Truth. In this world of fake news, it’s good to remember that there is a source of real truth. In our time, when we hear one story from one news outlet and something sometimes 100% different from another news outlet, when everything seems biased and subjective, it’s reassuring to know that there is a word that is true.

It’s important today for me to address one of the most common misinterpretations of this passage. At the end of John 14, verse 6, the author has Jesus continue to say, “I am the way, the truth and the life AND no one comes to the Father except through me.” Some Christians have argued that

this passage means that no one except those people who are Christian are embraced by God, and only Christians will experience heaven or eternal life. It is interpretations like that which have caused religious wars and have turned people off to the message and the way of Jesus. What most scholars believe, and I strongly concur, is that the author of the gospel of John was speaking to the Christian community only. He was emphasizing the importance of Jesus, not condemning other religions. The main claim of the Bible is that our God is a God of love and inclusion, not a God who excludes and rejects. Jesus is THE WAY for Christians; we affirm that there are other paths towards God, other ways that are true and valid for other people and cultures.

Last year, my daughter and I went to a fundraiser luncheon for the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center. We were happy to support that organization, but the truth is that we were there to hear the writer Glennon Doyle. When you see her and hear her, and watch the throngs who adore her, it's easy to imagine that her life is perfect. She's attractive, her books are best-sellers, and she has friends like...Oprah. But if you've read anything she's written, you know that her life has been far from easy. She has lived with an eating disorder, she has lived with alcoholism and drug addiction. She has found

her way into a life that is much healthier and happier, and part of her path has included Christianity. In fact, she is a member of a UCC congregation in Florida. In her writings, she is brutally honest about her past, and about the challenges she continues to face in the present. She tells of her rock-bottom experience. Still drinking, realizing she was pregnant, crying on her bathroom floor, something caused her to pray. She told God she couldn't survive on her own any longer and, as she puts it, "I walked out of the bathroom holding God's hand." One day when her son was two, she received a postcard from a church that said "here we let people eat and drink coffee during the service." For her, that was what got her in the door. Once there, she loved the women who cared for her son in the nursery, the coffee was good, the music made her cry, and the people seemed real and accepting. Eventually she decided to become baptized, and her journey continues. Of her faith, Glennon says, "I still fight feelings of inadequacy and isolation. My struggles and pain haven't vanished. But, at the same time, everything has changed because God has put some things into place for me that allow me to live my life to the fullest in the midst of my pain and struggles."

That's the truth that is found in Jesus. Not just a truth found in a book, or a truth spoken thousands of years ago, but a living truth, that connects to

the truth of our lives, today, where we are. When we are brave enough to speak the truth of our own stories, we will find God present there.

The root of the word courage is cor – the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Over time, this definition has changed, and today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroism is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroism is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today's world that's pretty extraordinary." (Brene Brown)

At its best, the church should be a place where we practice a way of life that values honesty and integrity, where we can share the joys and sorrows of our lives with one another, knowing that in this community we will be accepted as we are and encouraged to grow more and more into the people God created us to be.