

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

John 14:1-14

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
10 May 2020
(online worship only)

This Sunday and next Sunday we are going to read from the gospel of John, chapter 14. This portion of John's gospel is called Jesus' Farewell Speech. The context of this speech is the Thursday night of Holy Week, the night before Jesus is crucified. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we're given very similar descriptions of the last supper Jesus shares with his disciples in the upper room. John's version of Thursday night is quite different. In John's gospel, the meal is barely mentioned. Instead, John emphasizes the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. He predicts the betrayal by Judas, then Judas leaves the room, and John gives us a long speech by Jesus - these are words of both comfort and advice for the disciples. Jesus is saying to them, "I won't be around much longer, but you're going to be ok. Here's what you need to remember."

And in just this portion of his long farewell speech, Jesus says enough for five or six sermons. He starts with this: "Don't be troubled. Live in trust."

And then he says, "I'm going away but we will still be connected in spirit." I've read these words at hundreds of funerals. "In my father's

house there are many rooms - I am going to prepare a place for you.”

These are words intended to comfort the disciples. Jesus knows he will no longer be physically present with them, but he wants them to know that God’s love exists beyond this life, that they will be physically apart but spiritually still connected.

It’s hard to understand, and Thomas, one of the disciples, clearly doesn’t understand. He says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” In other words, [as one writer puts it], Thomas is saying, “Lord, we don’t know what in the heck you’re talking about.”

Later, Philip, another of the disciples says, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.” And you can hear exasperation in Jesus’ voice when he says, “Philip, come on - haven’t you been paying attention? You’ve been hanging around with me for three years. I have been showing you God every day. Every act of love, every word of love, every promise of love - that’s all God!”

There are two problematic verses in this passage. One is the very last verse. John chapter 14, verse 14 gives us Jesus saying, “When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.”

There’s so much to talk about in this 14-verse passage that we could easily gloss over this one sentence, but I can’t. Because verses like this

one in the Bible can cause so much pain. This one verse would seem to say to us that Jesus operates like a magic vending machine. Pray in the right way, using the right words, and out will come your miracle, whatever you've asked for. Your new job. Or you're able to rewind your past and undo your mistakes and get your marriage back. Or your child's cancer is cured. This verse seems to say that, if you are good enough, and pray hard enough often enough, you'll get what you most want. We know logically that life doesn't work this way, but when we're desperate, we'll pray as if we believe it, and then when we don't receive the answer we want when we want it, we say, "What's wrong with me?" "Why didn't God answer my prayer?" "What did I do to deserve this?" "Why am I being punished?"

No verse in the Bible is understood without context. The context here is Jesus' answer to Philip's question. Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father." And Jesus says, "Guess what, Philip? Not only have you seen God at work through me, but in the future, you will be able to do even more than I have, in my name. I will strengthen you and make it possible for you to carry on my work in my name." It's really astounding. Jesus is full of love and humility and hope, looking to the future, empowering the disciples to carry on his work of compassion. It's in this context that Jesus says,

“Lean on me, Philip, and the rest of you...connect with me, and you will be energized and inspired to carry on.”

This verse does not intend to tell us that we will receive everything we ask for. What the passage promises us is that, whatever we face, God will be with us. Nothing will separate us from the love of God - certainly not death. AND...as long as we are alive, we are connected with the divine spirit, giving us the power to love one another and to love this world in the name of God whose very name is love.

The second problematic verse comes in response to Thomas' question. He asks a geography question, “Lord, we do not know where you are going? How can we know the way?” Jesus answers by saying, “Thomas, it's not about a **ROAD** map; it's about a **LIFE** map. It's not so much about **WHERE**, but **HOW** you walk. I am the way, the truth and the life.”

So far, so good, but then he continues, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Those nine words have caused religious wars. They're still used as weapons. They have been misinterpreted to mean that anyone who's not Christian is going to hell. And they are among other verses in the Bible which have been misused to justify hatred, bigotry and anti-semitism. Again, the context is critical. Jesus has described God's realm as a house with many rooms, plenty of room for everyone, for a

whole variety of people. And this is his personal, intimate farewell speech to his closest friends. He isn't making a blanket statement about world religions. He's saying to these disciples, "I've got your back. No one can lead you straight to the heart of God better than I can."

Those of us who call ourselves Christian find Jesus to be the best way for us to know God. But I love the way one church puts it in their mission statement: "We find our approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ who is our model for living. We recognize the faithfulness of other paths which may also lead people to an experience of God." Jesus' nine words, spoken the night before his crucifixion, are not meant to negate everything else he had to say about inclusion and love.

Anti-semitism, racism, and fear of the other continue to tear at the fabric of our communities, threatening to split us apart completely. Each day brings another example. Last week a protestor stood at the front of Dr. Amy Acton's house carrying a sign that included a verse from the gospel of John. When the Bible is used as a weapon, when religion is used as justification for hate, or an argument against science, not only is it wrong, but it drives people away.

I assume that you are watching this service today because the inclusive, life-giving message of Jesus inspires you. I assume that the prophetic voices in the Hebrew Scriptures help you understand the heart of

the God of justice. I assume that you have found comfort, encouragement and guidance in the life of the Christian community, in the practices of the faith. I also assume that you have encountered doubts along the way, but that you allow those doubts to strengthen your faith in a God whom we know as love.

The logical conclusion of all of these assumptions is this. Because you have experienced the transforming power of the Christian life, you want to share the good news with others. Therefore, I have a request. I hope that you will spread the word that there are Christian churches - many in fact - who are speaking up against prejudice of any kind. Spread the word that there are Christian churches who see no incompatibility at all between the wisdom of faith and the wisdom of science. Spread the word that there are churches who are, right now and right here, sharing generously with those who are hungry and advocating on behalf of those whose voices are not being heard. Do everything in your power to contradict the stereotype that all Christians are intolerant and narrow-minded.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth and the life." Let's look at each of those three words before we close.

The early church held onto this definition of their movement for a long time. They often called themselves "Followers of The Way." When Jesus says, "I am the way", Jesus is letting us know that following him has

everything to do with our everyday lives, with how we talk and interact with each other, with the everyday decisions we make about how we spend our time, and with whom. The life of faith is not so much about a destination — like making it to heaven — but about the **WAY** we live as we journey through life, one day at a time.

Jesus says, “I am the truth.” What is most true to you? Do you feel you can speak the truth of your life? Do you know how to speak truth to power? Can you speak the truth in love? This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus - that Jesus will give us the courage to live our truth.

And finally, Jesus says, “I am the life.” Jesus has said elsewhere in the gospel of John, “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly,” reminding us that we are not on this earth to merely endure or survive, but to thrive, to be creative, to leave this world a more loving place than we found it. Here Jesus says, also, that this life we find in God does not end when our hearts stop beating...there is a life beyond this life, and that connection we have to the divine and therefore to each other will never end.

I have been with many people when they were dying or close to dying. This week I had my first experience of a FaceTime visit with someone in hospice care. Jim Wise is a beloved longtime member of our community. He is now in the beautiful Ames Hospice facility in Westlake.

On Friday I communicated with him via FaceTime, thanks to the help of his daughter Jamie. Those of you who know Jim remember his sense of humor. I told him that I'd been in touch with God, and that God had two messages for him - one, the heavenly choir is waiting for Jim, and two - God needs to hear a good new joke. It was my way of telling Jim that there is a room in God's house which has been prepared for him. That promise gives me great hope.

The other source of my hope is the faithfulness of this church community at this moment. You are walking and living the way Jesus taught and lived when you stay in touch with one another, when you give to those who are hungry, when you call out racism and bigotry. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and following Jesus keeps us on firm footing in these uncertain days.

Let us pray. Holy God, in whom we live and move and have our being, help us to pattern our life after Jesus. May the words he spoke and the love he shared inspire us to lives of truth, generosity and compassion. Amen.