

*Scripture Reading: John 14:1-14*

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe<sup>[a]</sup> 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>[b]</sup> <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>[c]</sup> <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<sup>[d]</sup> 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<sup>[e]</sup> for anything, I will do it.

This is word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

## *“The Way”*

The text that we study today is part of what scholars call Jesus’ “Farewell discourse” for these are the last words, the final instructions that he gave to his disciples just prior to his arrest, trial and crucifixion. It is simply a treasure trove, rich in wonderful things for us have and hold. For instance, I think it infrequent that we have a funeral service without this passage being read. The assurance that Jesus goes before us into eternity to make room for us ALL has to be one of the most comforting of all messages. Indeed, our hearts need not be troubled. And the encouragement from this passage that we can do great, ever greater things than Jesus, because the power of the triune God is giving us strength to do them in his name is what sometimes keeps us going when times are tough. However, there is one verse of John 14 which has caused believers some agony over the years. It has resulted in conflict and even exclusion in the church. I cannot fathom that this could ever have been Jesus’ intent. So, for this reason, let’s spend a bit of time with the passage this morning IN ITS CONTEXT and let the Spirit infuse it with new life.

The phrase we need consider is the one said by Jesus, *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”*. Actually, it’s the interpretation of last part of the verse which has caused problems.... *“no one comes to the Father except through me.”* Generally speaking, the angst has regarded how Christianity is to relate to other faith traditions, and it seems that there are three ways: exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism. The traditional stance has been more of EXCLUSIVISM... that the only way to salvation is through faith in Christ Jesus and that all others are wrong. This stance, unfortunately, very unfortunately has led to a Christian triumphalism and even anti-Semitism, believing that Christians replaced Jews as the chosen people and that the Jews were responsible, liable for Jesus’ crucifixion. The INCLUSIVIST position states that there are wonderful non-Christians who live as Christ, such as Gandhi, who will be saved by God. These may be the surprised sheep to whom the Judge in the parable of sheep and goats says, *“Even as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it*

to me.” The PLURALIST position argues that there are many faith traditions that lead to salvation in their different ways somewhat like bicycle spokes that extend to the same hub.<sup>1</sup>

My feeling is that we actually cannot know who God saves, and we need leave this up to God, but having a personal relationship with Christ and believing that he is the way to salvation AS WE DO, does not preclude an attitude of respect, interreligious dialogue, and religious freedom.<sup>2</sup> After all, we serve a God who is so much bigger and freer and gracious than we can possibly ever fully comprehend, and we Christians know what we know of God most perfectly through Jesus Christ, the one who included those whom others wanted to exclude. He is the one who taught that God loves sinful, unbelieving and “different-believing” people, that God’s desire is not to condemn the world but to save it, and that God cares not just for right thinking, right believing, right acting people but for all people maybe especially for people who are precisely wrong thinking, wrong believing, wrong acting.<sup>3</sup> And because of this, I think, that we need not be threatened by, no, in fact we are charged to gladly share our enthusiasm for Christianity, but neither should we INVALIDATE others’ religious experiences.<sup>4</sup>

However, even going this far is straying from the text a bit. In the context of his last night of conversation with his disciples, Jesus was not talking about other religions. As one preacher has said, “*He wasn’t teaching a comparative religions course*”.<sup>5</sup> He was having a tender, farewell moment with brokenhearted friends. *Episcopal priest and professor, Barbara Brown Taylor, puts it this way, He was “giving them everything he [could] think of to help them survive without him, and he [used] the singular, exclusive language that people who love so often do.” It is language like we use in our tender and teary moments: “You are the best mother in the whole world. You are the only man in the world for me. No one has ever loved a child the way I love you.” This is language from the depths of relationship, spoken only for love to grasp. A*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Wingeier-Rayo. “*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*” In: eds. JB Green, TG Long, LA Powery, CL Rigby, CJ Sharp “*Connections Yr A, Vol 2*” (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2019 ), 268.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Wingeier-Rayo, “*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*”

<sup>3</sup> KC Ptomy A Collection of Westminster Sermons, Nashville, TN. 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Wingeier-Rayo. “*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*”

<sup>5</sup> Shannon Kershner. *Sermon: “The Way”*. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/051417.html> (accessed 5-6-20).

*child in need of reassurance asks his mother, "Do you love me, mommy?"....A mother's answer, "Of course, son, I love all children" would not be the most helpful one. If Jesus had used similar language with the disciples, they would have been filled with anxiety and fear. Instead, he said, "I am the only one for you. You have made the right choice. No one can lead you to God better than I. I've got you covered."*<sup>6</sup>

This contextual insight I find helpful. But it is also important to simply note that when Jesus was asked by Thomas how they were to know the way to where he was going, Jesus' answer was *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* He did not say, *"Christianity is the way, the truth, and the life."* As Frederick Buechner observes, *"Jesus didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. HE SAID HE WAS...he said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way."*<sup>7</sup>

So, what we really should be talking about, what we should be coming away with after reading this text is what it means for us to live the way, the truth and the life of Jesus, isn't it? That's what Jesus intended for his followers to be learning and then putting into practice in this world that he so loves after he was gone.

Well, then, is not living the way of Jesus giving of ourselves as did Jesus to others, doing unto them as we would have them do unto us, reaching out with hospitality to the marginalized, welcoming the stranger as family, forgiving the sinner as we have been forgiven, caring with passion for the sick and wounded, walking alongside the grieving, visiting the imprisoned, accompanying the afraid and lonely, encouraging the downtrodden? Is it not standing as he did against injustice, speaking for the voiceless, being the peacemaker in conflict, putting God above all allegiances in life? This is living the way of Jesus.

Is not living the truth of Jesus embracing the relationship we have with the one true God who has acted in him in history? For God is in Jesus as Jesus is in God and God in Jesus has

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Sermon: *"The Only Way to God,"* (Duke Chapel, May 2, 1999). Quoted in Amy Miracle, Sermon: *"Last Words"* <https://www.granpres.org/sermons/2017/5/15/last-words> (accessed 5-6-20).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Buechner. *"Wishful Thinking"*. (New York: Harper Collins; 1993)

taken us and all humanity into his very self, all of our messiness and ugliness into himself and given us instead an inheritance with him in glory. Living in this truth means that we believe on the God who is this love. This is living the truth of Jesus.

And is not living the life in Jesus receiving the abundance and goodness that is given us and running with it? It's about waking each day without fear and shame but with a sense of hope, and then seizing the opportunities to spread the good news to all who need to hear it. This is living the life in Jesus.

Yes, the bottom line here, brothers and sisters, is that Jesus' famous words in John 14 are not at all about the Christian religion. They are about Jesus. They are about the one whom we, Christians, follow and serve. They are about the one whom we Christians follow in the way we act, the truth we stand and the lives we seize hold of. Imagine, just imagine the compassion and reconciliation and justice that could be unleashed into this hurting world, especially now, especially now. Imagine the joy and wonder and peace that could be uncovered if Christians fully and generously put this way of living into practice. Brian McLaren, author of the book we studied last summer, wrote, "*Imagine what it could mean for Christians to rediscover our faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but rather as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all.*"<sup>8</sup> For the present time, I would imagine that this might look like us loving our neighbors enough as to go well out of our way to not ever infect them, right? I would imagine that this might mean we would work to mediate peace and understanding when stress and panic are resulting in even deeper divisions and conflict. I would imagine that this would mean that we would find our voices and the courage needed to speak against injustices, never allowing comfort to settle in with lives lost, with jobs lost, or with the quiet suffering of the helpless. I would imagine that we would lift up the sacrifices of our neighbors on the front lines not just by saying "thank you" but by giving them a sympathetic ear and a word of hope and encouragement. I would imagine that we would be

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<sup>8</sup> Brian McLaren. "*The Great Spiritual Migration*" (New York: Random House; 2016 ), 2.

empowered by the Spirit to do even greater works than these in the Lord's name for he has gone to the Father and promised us this. Let us go then. Let our hearts not be troubled. Let us go then to do more than imagine. Let us go to live in his way, his truth and his life. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.