

***THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE***

a sermon based on John 14:1-14

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Back in 1979, Violet and I and our four children were living in Renton, Washington where we were serving at the United Christian Church. On Memorial Day weekend, we took off after Worship services to visit with Violet's brother Bill and his family in Sumner, some 30 miles south of Renton. The next day, we all went to the Mount Rainier National Forest and hiked up the trail to a lookout point where we took pictures and enjoyed the breath-taking vista that stretched before us. Our son, Eddie and Bill's boy, Shane, had started back some 15 minutes before we headed down the trail to our car. When we got down to the parking area, we looked around for Eddie and Shane but they were no where to be seen. We looked all around the parking area and even looked out on the road but no luck. We didn't want to worry but we couldn't help but be just a little concerned. Having left before us, they should have been waiting for us when we got there. The forest ranger came by and we told her about the boys and she advised us to wait a while longer. If they didn't show up in the next 15 to 20 minutes, she'd notify the ranger station and they'd send out a search party to look for the boys. This made us feel really queasy. The boys had left 15 minutes before us and 30 more minutes had passed by the time that forest ranger arrived on the scene. That's 45 minutes that the boys had been unaccounted for.

Then, time seemed to come to a stand still. Every minute was like a year. Finally, when 20 minutes had passed and still no boys, we were frantic. We were about to go for the ranger when all of a sudden, the boys came into view about 100 yards down from the end of the parking area. They looked fairly bedraggled and a somewhat sheepish, but otherwise they were no worse for the wear. We ran over to them and hugged them and then we asked what in the world had they done? They said they thought they could get down quicker by cutting across the switchbacks on the trail. They said they lost the trail and soon realized they were lost. We asked how they found their way down. Shane said that his dad had told him that any time he was lost in the forest, following a mountain stream down hill will show them the way.

In today's passage, Jesus told his disciples that when they were lost, all they had to do would be to follow the path he had put before them and that would lead them back home, back to God. The setting for this advice was the Passover meal which he was celebrating with them. He had washed their feet to show them that, as **he** was a servant to them and to the world, **they** were, likewise, to be servants to one another and to the world. He foretold his betrayal by one of his closest friends. Judas was that man. Jesus also predicted Peter's denial. And, with a heavy heart, he told them he was leaving — for good. They were suddenly afraid. If Jesus died, what would happen to them?

Here he was, dealing with the fact that he would soon die, yet he offered a word of hope to his closest friends, the disciples, who, he knew would feel lost without him. He told them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you and will come again and take you to myself. So that where I am, you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Tragedy and hardship have a way of getting our attention. We frequently feel disoriented and afraid. In fact it can almost immobilize us. Jesus understood this. So, he tried to comfort them. He was facing his own death but he was trying to comfort them! He would demonstrate by the calm way he faced his own death that they would be okay. In effect he told them this:

“If you believe God, then believe me when I say that if you follow my way of unconditional love, that will lead you out of the valley of the shadow of death. Following that path will help you overcome sadness, pain and worry.”

As we listen to Jesus' words of assurance to his disciples, we wonder, at those times of great crisis in our lives, if we can believe what Jesus said, that his pathway of unconditional love will show us the way out of anxiety and worry?

While sharing that Passover meal, he looked at his disciples, who had just watched Judas leave the dinner table on his mission of betrayal, and Jesus says, “Where I am going, you cannot come...but don’t let your hearts be troubled.” He tells them don’t be afraid. At that moment when the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, he said there is a haven for troubled hearts within his Father’s house and that includes you. Jesus, who is about to die, spends the last few minutes he has with his disciples to calm their fears. It has been said that worry is the interest we pay on tomorrow’s troubles. That certainly describes the disciples, especially Thomas. Jesus had told them, “and you know the way to the place where I am going.” Remember what Thomas said? “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 but by me. So, if you know me, you will know my Father also. And from now on you do know him and have seen him.’”

You may have noticed that when this passage was read just before I began my sermon, I changed what Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father but by me” to “No one comes to the Father except **by my way.**

“Why would I change this?” you ask. My answer is this. Jesus was trying to reassure his disciples and all those who were his followers and all those who would be his followers down through time that there’s plenty of room for everyone in God’s

house.

Jesus was a human being who lived in a time certain. His primary goal was to proclaim God's unconditional love for all people. He reached out to the Gentiles as well as his fellow Jews. The New Revised Standard Version has the first line in this passage as, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." There are some translations which read, "Believe God, believe me also." In other words, "If you believe the promises God has made to you then believe me when I promise you that I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus always pointed to God, not to himself.

John's Gospel is the only one that has Jesus saying, "I am the way." Why is this? First of all, remember that John's Gospel was probably recorded about 70 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, it was recorded in a time of great peril for all followers of Jesus. The Roman government had decided that anyone who didn't recognize the emperor as a god were guilty of treason and were to be executed.

For this reason, the author of John wanted to erase any doubt from their minds about God. He wanted to give them absolute assurance that, even after they died, whether by natural causes or by execution, God would and will take care of them. The Gospel writer, John was saying that if you are a sincere follower of Jesus, you can be certain that God has reserved a place for you in His realm which has no end. Putting this in the present tense, Jesus is saying "Believe God, believe me also when I say that I am going before you to prepare a place for you, so that where I am, you shall also be."

But, we who are Christian in today's world, are not persecuted for our faith. Why do we need to believe his promises? Because, whether we are persecuted or not, we too shall die. We need to hear his words of reassurance that there is a place for us in God's realm which has no end.

But, it seems that Jesus' words of reassurance were not enough for at least some of the disciples. After Thomas asked, "How can we know the way." Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. ... If you know me, you will know my Father also. And from now on you do know him and have seen him."

Then, as if he hadn't heard a thing all evening, Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Jesus seemed to be exasperated. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Now, did Jesus mean this literally? No, not at all. To see God in Jesus was not in his physical being so much as in his spiritual being. This human being Jesus embodied the spiritual truth of God. He embodied the promise of life eternal through the unconditional love of God. To see God in Jesus was to see Jesus as **the Christ**, which means "Savior," "Messiah," "the Anointed One of God." Jesus told them that he was in God and God was in him and when we receive this unconditional love of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ, we not only can see God, we are **in** God and God is in **us**.

Now, why is it important to clarify what Jesus actually said? Just this. Jesus taught that God's love is inclusive, not exclusive. In other words, the love of God that Jesus proclaimed, includes all humankind ... not just his followers. Later in John's Gospel, chapter 13, Jesus tells his followers, "A new commandment I give to you: that you should love one another, even as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

I want to tell you about an experience Violet and I had one evening. We were the guests of good friends, Rabbi Shalom Podwol, and his wife Dalia for the celebration of the Passover Seder. Also present were two of their daughters and Dalia's mother. As you may be aware, there is a ritual called a haggadah which explains the Passover and the symbolic foods that are a part of the Seder ritual. Jews are encouraged to have a discussion throughout the Seder about freedom. So, we talked about freedom from the perspective of our faith. At one point, I mentioned a documentary I had seen on Public Television concerning Holocaust survivors going back to their home towns and villages 50 years later. There were quite a few people who were living in those towns at the time of the Holocaust who are still living there. The documentary showed the Jewish survivors talking to their former neighbors, many of whom had known the survivors back then and had done nothing to help. Most of the German townspeople said what a shame the Holocaust was but very few accepted any responsibility for the genocide, even though most of them benefitted by it.

Rabbi Podwol replied, “But, there were many people who risked their lives to save the Jews.” He added, “Very few Jews were arrested in Bulgaria because the entire nation banded together to protect them from the Gestapo.” I was touched that Rabbi Podwol was helping me to see that there were also many Christians who, as the Jews say, were “righteous people” who helped save the lives of Jews at great risk to their own lives.

In terms of today’s Scripture from John’s Gospel, those Christians were in Christ and Christ was in them and they embodied the unconditional love of God. So, when Jesus said he was the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except by him, he was saying that his followers -- and that includes us! - come to God by way of the unconditional love that Jesus lived and taught and bestowed upon everyone he met, Jew and Gentile, believer and non-believer alike. As he said then, he says to us today, “you should love one another, even as I have loved you.”

And let the people say, “Amen.”