The Way, the Truth, and the Life

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

John 14:1-14 ~ May 7, 2023

Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my father’s house are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you. I am the Way, the truth, the life. Evocative, comforting, this text has shaped the hopes and imaginations of countless souls. A house with many mansions…? The poetry creates room for imagination; what sort of place do you picture? Enticingly, the word “Way” is capitalized. Person and path; life on the Way in Christ. A call to prayer, to holiness, to possibility. This is the chosen text for funerals. We’re in the heart of what scholars call the farewell discourse. Before being taken up to death, Jesus reassures his disciples of his abiding love. John’s imagery, Jesus’ words, invite us into a mystical realm. Yet, not mystical only. I ran a shelter for homeless men. Night after night, the men chose this passage. What is more essential than a place to dwell? God’s promise, God’s love given differently to each of us, as each have need.

But, then right in the middle of it: “no one comes to the father except through me.” Ugh! Really? Why this condition? Is this John’s Jesus whispering sweet words of chosen-ness to his beloved? In his zeal to comfort, are these words of excess, love gushing? You know me! Or is it a startling reminder that the Way, the truth, the life is narrow; that many are called yet few chosen? Not all will make it.

Even the originalist impulses of biblical scholars will not satisfactorily resolve the intent behind the words. So what are we to do with this phrase? What do we do with any portions of scripture that seem to us to run counter to the whole? Thomas Jefferson simply cut or struck out those passages that did not comport with his view. In truth, those who prescribe our Sunday readings have effectively omitted some of the ickier, uglier bits in the Bible. On more than a few occasions, I’ve simply lopped off this particular phrase, letting the sentence end with I am the truth and the life. I won’t ask for a show of hands as to how many have their fingers crossed or mumble their way through portions of our creed.

I want to address the hard bits. First, to say: ask your questions; probe. Today, we’ve got both Thomas – patron saint of those who ask hard questions – and Philip, saying, “we don’t get it; how does this work?” Any questions we may have, any doubts no matter how profound and serious they may feel to us… God can take it, God can handle our wonderings or waywardness. The institutional church might panic; a friend or priest might cry, “heretic!” But God is not worried. The Buddha taught, “just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it, so you must examine my words before you accept them for yourselves.”

Ask questions. Second, discern and continually seek to refine the primary lens through which you read or hear the Bible. What do I mean? Through our life’s experience, through parents and teachers, hardships and victories, we each bring certain expectations to our reading of the Bible. I do. I read all of scripture through the lens of Jesus’ radical love of inclusion. At every turn I see Jesus deconstructing human barriers of hierarchy, exclusion; ever widening the circle and expanse of God’s love. I believe this to be God’s movement. Reading through this lens of God’s inclusive love, I need to contend with those verses and portions that do not comport.

I recognize that there is another fully developed strand in the Bible that is shaped by purity – that there are true, right, and narrow ways to follow God - and that all else is errant. If I am with someone who reads scripture through the lens of purity, we’re going to have a hard time finding common ground. It helps if we can each name our own starting places, our own lenses.

In my own journey, I have felt called from time to time to immerse myself in other spiritual practices and traditions. In 2007, when I spent several weeks as the guest of a Buddhist lama in Bhutan, we spent days talking through our different understandings of salvation, enlightenment, and the path, the Way, in this life. I had sought to arrive at an affirmation that Christianity and Buddhism are two religious paths that lead to the same destination. Someone had shared the image of a mountain, with many paths leading to the top. The different paths represent different cultures and religions, each leading to the same place. But what I found during my time with Llama Ngodup is that in order for that to be so, we would need to twist and distort our respective religious teachings beyond recognition. Among those engaged in interfaith dialogue or practice, there is an accepted guidepost: do no harm; if we have to compromise or distort beliefs or practices to achieve common ground, we’ve crossed a line.

At the same time, I discovered what many others recognize, namely, that while the more fundamentalist branches of each religious tradition maintain a great distance from one another in their pursuit of purity, the mystics of each tradition find that many of the differences fall away. The practices of meditation and contemplation, the teachings of silence, of letting go, of awakening are remarkably similar across all traditions. Llama Ngodup and I could pray together in peace. I believe that through the breath, through attention to our breath, we are each spiritually multi-lingual. Rites, rituals, doctrines, creeds – these all differ. But be still in the presence of holiness and pay attention to your breath. And we are one.

As my Himalayan pilgrimage drew to a close, Diana Eck, a Christian professor of Hinduism and director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, gave me language to understand my experience. In her book, *Encountering God,* Eck posits that each person of faith is somewhere on a spectrum as to how we view those of differing faiths – ranging from exclusivist to inclusivist to pluralist.

At one extreme are those of us who say that our path is the only true path to salvation, that if you do not believe in the God of our belief, then, sadly, you will fry in hell – or some equivalent thereof. In the inclusivist middle, where a great many well-meaning people of faith reside, are those who respect the traditions and beliefs of others, and believe that the God of our own faith is gracious enough, loving and powerful, and will in the end, gather us all in one. Which is generous if one is offering, a bit patronizing if one is on the receiving end of that largesse.

At the other extreme, in a posture of religious pluralism, one may be deeply devoted to our God, our tradition and path, and, at the same time, acknowledge that on a really good day, I can only apprehend a glimpse, a whisper, of the sacred or the fullness of God. And if with us, so too with others. That glimpse and whisper fuel a holy yearning – to seek and find the holy – at home, within, in you, in them, in this house of prayer, or that mountain stream, or temple, mosque, gurdwara, or shrine. Tell me of your experience of the holy! The pluralist resides within his or her own tradition, yet actively seeks the holy wherever it may be found.

To my surprise and joy, I have found that the more I immerse myself learning and practicing the ways of others, the more clearly and deeply I experience the love of God in Christ. Jesus calls and I follow. For me, the call to love one another begins and ends in Christian community, with our Holy Scriptures, the sacraments of the church, the community of the faithful gathered and sent – a blessing to the world.

So: ask questions; God is able, and meets us where we are. Discern and claim the lenses you engage – love, purity, or some other. Seek the holy even in unlikely places. Seek the truth expressed by those whose truth differs from your own – but not at the cost of distortion. When in doubt, return to the breath. Then claim with joy, the faith in your heart. It is Thomas – probing, questioning Thomas – who, upon meeting the risen Christ, responds, “My Lord and my God!” Amen.