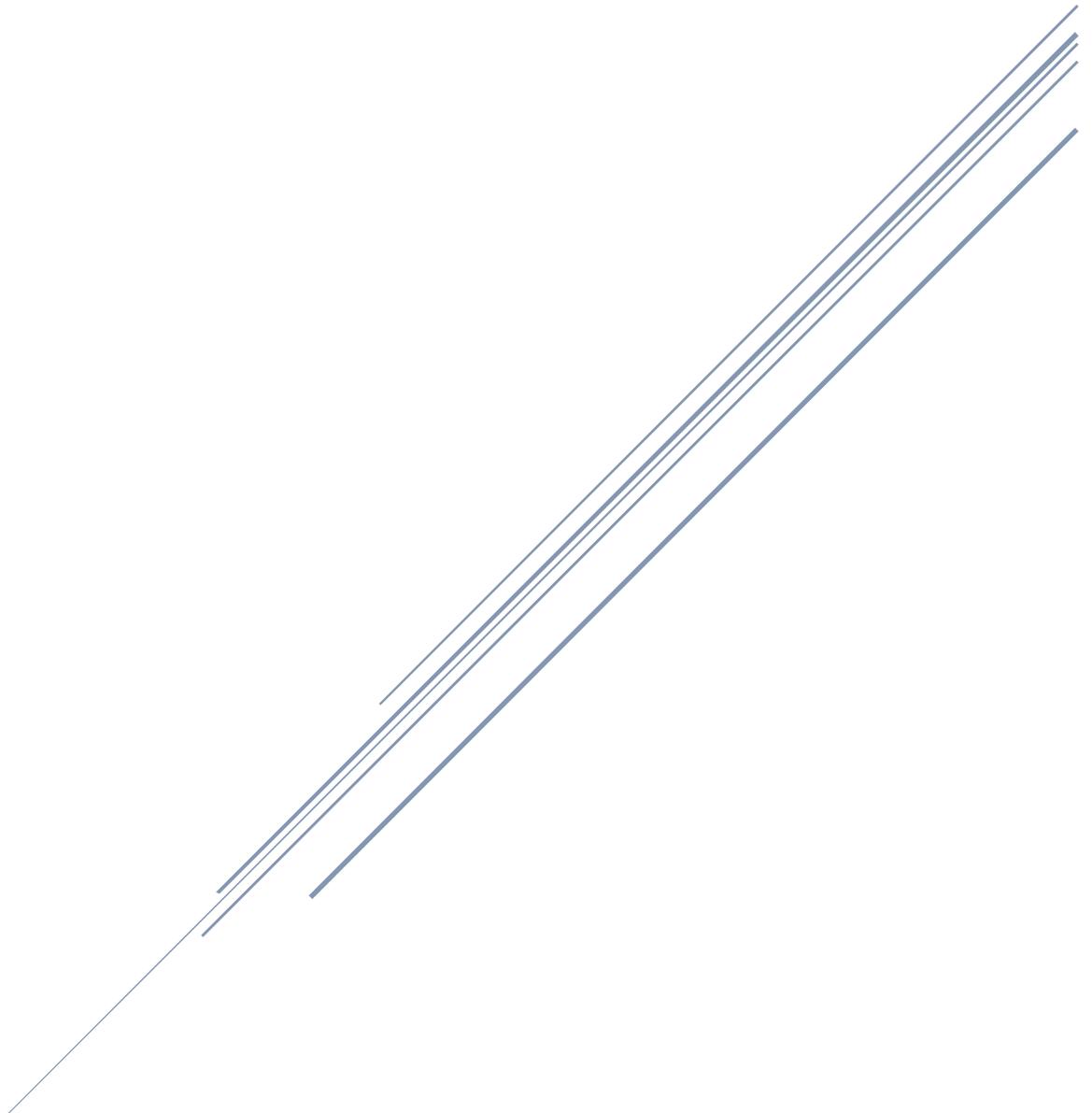


“THE TRUTH, THE WAY, & THE LIFE”

John 14:1-14



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May 18 Sermon – The Truth, the Way, and the Life

Imagine you are hiking a mountain trail that, of course, leads up to the top of the mountain. As you make your way along the path, picking around obstacles and stepping over branches, you stop to rest and to absorb the beauty around you – to commune with God, if you will. Suddenly, a group of people approaches and begins to berate you over the path you have chosen. They insist that, “You are on the wrong path,” and, “You will never reach the top that way,” and you should take the path that they’re on because you’re heading for utter destruction if you don’t change your way(s). Maybe it’s because you’re curious or maybe you’re just polite, but you ask them to take you to their path. “Oh, no,” they say, “You can’t hike our path dressed like that. Oh, no -- and you need a haircut before you join us on our path.”

Or how about this: you’re sitting at a funeral or something with a very good friend who is very active on the interfaith council, and who just happens to be Jewish. The service is being held in an episcopal church and the priest reads the Gospel, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father except through me,” and suddenly, you hear the familiar verse through your friend’s ears! What must she think of these words?

When I first started studying for ministry in undergraduate school - shortly after I sobered up - I thought this verse was rather comforting. Then I got to grad school. Let me tell you, Iliff School of Theology is no Liberty or Bob Jones University. During your first year at Iliff the first thing they tell you is that they want to DE-construct our embedded theology: that’s the theology that we grow up with unquestioningly – usually handed down from our parents – unconsciously sometimes -- and whatever church we may have attended as a child. That way we would be able to really come up with our own original theology that wasn’t based on anything except a thorough study and questioning of the scriptures, the church fathers and a variety of historical and contemporary theologians and philosophers. Suddenly, this verse is no so comforting. I was appalled by the obvious exclusivism of this passage. Surely - this was not what Jesus had in mind.

Texts like this one are often referred to as clobber texts: the scripture passages that are most often wielded as weapons in theological debates. Maybe you've been in one of those discussions where someone asked if Christianity was the only way to salvation. It usually doesn't take very long until somebody pulls out old faithful here, "The Bible clearly says," -- Now I always pull up short when I hear somebody say that the Bible 'clearly says' anything, because I know that what's coming is out of context and probably misquoted. The Bible clearly says, "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through him." BAM! Discussion over; case closed. That is a clobber text.

How often are people bullied by this passage? From this perspective, doubters and seekers, faithful followers of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhists and Jews, any faithful adherents to any other faith are doomed unless they explicitly accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, usually by reciting some simple formula -- a prayer or a creed. Otherwise they're damned for all eternity! That just doesn't sound like the Jesus I know and love...

Now, I have misquoted a few Bible verses from time to time but until recently, I never noticed that this passage is almost always quoted this way: "Jesus said, I am the way the truth and the life."

"Jesus said..., I am the way the truth and the life," but that's not what it says. What it says is, "Jesus said to him..." not just "Jesus said" and on to the clobbering. Now, doesn't it make sense that the words 'to him' might be important? Who is this "him" to whom Jesus is talking, and why? What is the larger context of the passage?

So we first take look at the historical context. Scholars for the most part agree that John the disciple probably did not write the Gospel of John, and trace it instead to a "Johannine community" which traced its traditions to John. The Gospel according to John was written about 60 years after Jesus died, dating it to around 90 A.D. We have to then read it with the eyes of John's 1st century community and not our 21st century world. With that in mind, we cannot interpret this passage as a blanket claim made by a major world religion -- the way people do now -- because Christianity wasn't a major religion yet. This is a claim made by one

author writing for a small sect – a cult even, at the time – a rather enthusiastic community trying very hard to form and articulate an understanding of just who and what Jesus had been for them and what He would continue to be.

Then we should look at the literary context of John's Gospel. This passage is part of what scholars call the "Farewell Discourse" – Jesus is offering the disciples some sort of reassurance for the separation and the grief that's coming down the pike. He says "Don't let your hearts be troubled...You know the way..." And Thomas – who apparently has an intense need to know the details, the how's and the why's of everything – Poor Thomas' heart IS troubled; and he asks the big question, "How can we know the way?"

Four chapters earlier, in John 10:16 Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Other sheep? What other sheep? Notice -- Thomas doesn't ask about those other sheep in the other folds. "What about those non-Christians?" Thomas' question concerns Thomas - and maybe his disciple friends. Thomas' question would even be appropriate for us to ask, too: As Christ followers, how can WE know the way?

And so I think that Jesus' answer to Thomas was meant for Thomas. "Dude – Thomas – You're looking at the way! Haven't you been paying attention? I told you," – and these are the famous "I am" statements -- "I am the bread of life, I am the vine, I am the resurrection, I am the gate, I am the shepherd, I am the way. Follow someone who knows the way!" Better yet, "Do what I do."

This is a statement by Christ followers for Christ followers, and not an effective statement for inter-religious dialogue. But more than that; many of us grew up in a kind of heaven & hell Christianity: Heaven is the reason for Christianity. Sin is the big issue, forgiveness is the answer, and the most important thing about Jesus is his death because it covers that whole sin thing.

For many of us who've been grappling with these questions, this kind of black and white Christianity has become unacceptable and unsupportable in the light of the diversity of the global community in which we live. It used to be all about being 'saved'... But when we look a little deeper and we broaden our understanding of the teachings of Jesus, we can get rid of this go-to-heaven or go-to-hell religion. We don't have to worry about who's saved and who's a heathen. Jesus tells us to love them all the same anyway so it doesn't matter, right? Love your neighbor? My neighbor's Muslim. Or Gay. Or Catholic!

My friend and mentor Geoff never set foot in a church his whole life. He was a kind and generous man who was always willing to go out of his way to help another person. I had just started back to church when he died, and I asked my pastor whether he thought Geoff would go to heaven, and he said one of the smartest things I've ever heard come out of a pastor's mouth. He said, "I don't know. It's not for us to say."

Part of what Jesus was offering to Thomas was some sense of reassurance and comfort. "Don't worry, guys, you know me. When I'm gone, just keep doing the works I do." Follow this path laid out by Jesus and you're following the way. Then we are free to find the message of transformation and abundant life that Jesus was talking about – on earth as it is in heaven - and we are free to include everyone in each one's understanding of the way.

Religious pluralism is here to stay. Here are a couple sayings that I have found helpful: "God is defined by Jesus, not confined to Jesus." If we want to know God, we can look at Jesus. The other saying is from Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who said, "I walk the Christ-path into the mystery of God, but I do not believe God is a Christian."

My religion isn't my God; my Bible isn't God; but they both point to God. And other sacred writings and other religions can also point to God. I'm OK with that. I can comfortably affirm the validity of other religions. I don't need to be concerned about whether or not faithful Hindus, Muslims, and Jews are saved, or get to heaven, or how they get there. There's way too much wonderful challenging work to be done as a Christian to worry about everyone else's religion. What we should be asking ourselves is this: Am I living the Jesus Way? Am I living the

Jesus truth? Am I living the Jesus life? Do that, and you won't have time to worry about other people's religious beliefs.

I still have some thinking to do around this subject, in fact, I could be totally wrong about this passage, but that's part of the journey, too. One writer sums it up beautifully saying, "Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life." Amen.