

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"
SERMON TEXT: John 13:36 – 14:14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 24, 2024 (Palm Sunday) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had an experience where you got into your car and started driving and then asked yourself where you were going? I hope I'm not the only one! Fortunately, that hasn't happened to me very many times, and when it did, I quickly regained my sense of purpose and direction. I was able to continue on toward the doctor's office or the grocery store. But I have to say that such momentary lapses are disconcerting when they happen!

That reminds me of the story about the pastor who went to visit an elderly church member. He wanted to have a serious conversation with her about her eternal salvation. So, after some pleasantries, the pastor launched into the purpose of his visit. "Madeline," he addressed her, "I want to talk with you about the hereafter."

"Oh, pastor," Madeline replied, "I know all about the hereafter. The older I get, the more and more it's on my mind. I walk into the living room, and I ask myself, 'What am I here after?' I go into the garage, and I ask myself, 'What am I here after?' I open a drawer in the kitchen, and I ask myself, 'What am I here after?'"

One of the constant challenges of our lives is knowing where we're going and why. I suppose that's why Jesus' disciples asked their questions in John 13 and 14. In chapter 12, they had just entered into Jerusalem with Jesus on Palm Sunday. Now, if they were going to continue following Jesus, it would really help to know where he was going next and how to get there.

Throughout this season of Lent, we've been considering the "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. We've heard Jesus say, "I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I

am the bread of life, I am the vine, and I am the gate.” Today, let’s see if we can discern what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

1—I AM THE WAY OF LIFE

Let’s begin with the fact that the way of Jesus is the way of life. When Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and *the life*,” here in John 14, Jesus had in mind all the life-giving events of the previous 13 chapters. Maybe Jesus was remembering the celebration of life at the wedding in Cana, when he turned water into wine. Or maybe Jesus was recalling how he had healed the man by the pool, and gave him the ability to stand up and walk after 38 years of disability. Or maybe Jesus was reflecting on the way he had healed the man who had been blind since birth. Or maybe Jesus was remembering how he had just recently called his friend Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Not only had Jesus restored Lazarus to physical life, but he also inspired sisters Martha and Mary with the hope of eternal life.

That same message of life is present in today’s scripture from John 13 and 14. Here we see Jesus preparing his disciples for the grief and loss of direction they will inevitably feel at his coming death. “Don’t let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus tells them. “Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . [and] I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you will be also.”

Jesus’ way of life gives us blessed assurance for the time after death. Death will eventually lay our bodies low. But we who have eternal life can cope with the suffering and pain, knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us. We who have eternal life can rise above the worry and fear, knowing that we will never be alone. Where we are going is the ample place where God lives, where Jesus has already been preparing for us, where Jesus will take our hand and lead us. No matter how diminished our physical frame becomes, we have the peace of knowing that there will be life beyond the grave.

While it's a common and correct interpretation to think that Jesus was talking about the way to heavenly life after we die, Jesus was also talking about the way of life that starts now while we still have our feet planted firmly on this earth. Bible scholars teach us that, in the Gospel of John especially, "eternal life" signifies a quality of existence, as much as a period of time. This quality of life begins as soon as we believe. So, the very same strength that comes to us as we face death is available to us as we face any number of smaller challenges during the course of daily life. Living the Jesus way means we have the confidence to face our problems head on. We don't have to run and hide. We don't have to detour around in fear. We can go forward believing that God has a plan. If we follow Jesus, there will be a way forward, even in this life.

2—THE WAY OF TRUTH

The way of Jesus is also the way of truth. By saying, "I am the way, *the truth*, and the life," Jesus was referring to the truth of his relationship with God the Father and the relationship Jesus believed his followers could also have with God. Many of Jesus' first-century peers thought he overstated his relationship with God. And I would dare say that Jesus' detractors think the same thing today. All that "I am" God talk is pretty hard to absorb. How could one human being be God in the world? How could one limited flesh-and-blood person represent all that God is? How could someone who lived for only 33 years be the God who was and is and always will be?

Those are big questions, alright. But I think we sometimes make this harder than it has to be. The truth Jesus was trying to tell is that the nature of his relationship with God provided his followers an opening to see God. The power and values of God the Father were revealed in and through the ministries of Jesus the Son. That's what all the "I am" sayings were about. They were glimpses of God. Through Jesus, we can't see *all* of who God is, but we're able to see a lot. We're able to see that God is the light of the world, that God is the good shepherd, that God is the bread of life, that God is the vine, that God is the gate, and that God is the way, the truth, and the life.

Through Jesus, we're able to hear lessons taught, see miracles worked, and observe people loved. That's the truth Jesus was trying to tell Philip. God was not distant and unknowable. God was right there at work in and through Jesus. Because the disciples knew Jesus, they were already living in relationship with God. Because they had faith in Jesus and participated with him in his ministry, they were already living in the way of truth.

Those of us who are Christians find a lot of strength in this message that Jesus is the way of life and truth. I have to admit, though, that many of us worry about the second half of John 14:6. When Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father but by me," we get concerned about what that means for people of other religions. Is it true that Jesus is the *only* way to salvation? Is it true that Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other people of faiths are all doomed to hell because they don't believe in Jesus? Most of us aren't comfortable with that kind of condemnation.

I think we can resolve this problem by remembering that the truth of Jesus is the way of life. Jesus wasn't an arrogant guy, who claimed superiority over others. In John 13, Jesus bowed down as a humble servant and washed his disciples' feet. At that last supper, Jesus taught his disciples that they were to love one another. So, it doesn't seem to me that the way and truth of Jesus can be about eternal damnation for people who have never had real opportunities to accept the beliefs of Christian faith. Instead, it seems to me that the truth of Jesus has to be about life and life-giving relationships with God and each other. A religion that promotes exclusion, prejudice, abuse, and violence is probably not going to pass the Jesus truth test. But any religion that is life giving probably is a Jesus kind of faith. When a person conscientiously practices a life-giving faith, then that person comes into a relationship with God. And that's the Jesus way of truth.

CONCLUSION

During the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I served on a student ministry team in Detroit. Our four-member college student group worked with a pastor to

try to raise up an African American congregation to worship in what had previously been a white neighborhood and church. As we did our ministry there in that summer of 1979, we knocked on doors and followed any and every lead to try to let people know about the Savior who could help them find healing, hope, and new direction.

In addition to my other duties that summer, I also tried singing in the church choir. That was an experience! Coordination doesn't come naturally to me, and that black gospel choir was constantly moving to the beat—swaying this way and that way. A couple months wasn't nearly long enough for me to get the groove of their African American rhythm.

But one of the songs we sang that summer did embed itself in my memory. The song goes like this:

Jesus is the answer for the world today.
Above him there's no other; Jesus is the way.
If you have some questions
in the corners of your mind;
traces of discouragement,
the peace you cannot find;
reflections of your past,
seem to face you every day;
but this one thing I do know,
that Jesus is the way.
Jesus is the answer for the world today.
Above him there's no other; Jesus is the way.*

Jesus is the way because the truth of his way puts us in a life-giving relationship with God and one another. That, I think, is what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

*By Andre & Sandra Crouch, c. 1973 Bud John Songs (ASCAP)