

Jesus said: I am The Way, the Truth, and the Life
John 14:1 – 6
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
April 3, 2016

When is this passage most often read in church?

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

We humans are creatures of habit. On Christmas Eve we read the prophecies and the nativity story of our Lord; during Holy Week we read the passion narrative and the resurrection stories; at weddings we read from Genesis 2, of the creation of Eve and God’s establishment of marriage; and at funerals we often read this passage from John’s gospel. It is obvious why we do so. At a funeral we feel keenly the loss of our loved one. We find comfort in Jesus’ words promising that he is preparing a place for his own on the other side of the doorway of death. Death is not a departure into the cosmic nothingness of oblivion but a welcomed encounter with our living Lord and entrance to a place prepared and ready for our arrival.

Jesus speaks these words to his disciples on the eve of his arrest, trial and crucifixion. His message is not to lose faith or give up when life is discouraging. He is reminding us that God wills the long term good of his people. We may endure hardship, peril and loss. Jesus calls us to remember that when things are darkest in life; when evil seems to triumph over good; when excellence is on the scaffold and the wicked are on the throne; and when all seems hopeless; that Jesus Christ has gone before us and has prepared a place. Like the single footprint in the sand that told Robinson Crusoe that he was not alone on the island, Jesus words are the sure indication that God is in control. Whatever the world may throw at us, it will not be the last word written on the meaning, value and purpose of our life.

In addition to this comforting hope, Jesus offers some specific advice regarding what we are to believe when we do feel discouraged or when we do face the reality of death.

Jesus’ best advice to us when feeling discouraged or when facing the mystery of death

“ Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.

Finding peace in the midst of turmoil takes faith. Trusting that Jesus Christ has indeed prepared a place for us takes faith. Jesus tells us that two things enable us to find peace in the face of discouragement: believe in God, believe also in Me. They are the twin sides of the coin of belief. Believe in God. Trust in Christ.

Some stumble over this simple instruction. Many in our world want God, but not Jesus. They believe in God but not that God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. They do not like the specificity, the exclusivity, which necessarily accompanies faith in Jesus Christ. These folk prefer a disembodied spirituality. They want God, but not a savior. This is the perspective of Unitarians and Universalists. They want to believe in God, but not that God is revealed in any special or particular way through Jesus Christ. The religion of Islam would also be placed in this category. Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, but do not believe in him as the Son of God. Men and women of the Jewish faith desire the God of the Old Testament, but reject belief in any unique connection between that God and Jesus of Nazareth.

The reverse is sometimes true as well: there are those who want Christ—or at least their particular conception of Christ—but not God. These folk are biblical schizophrenics. They see a Grand Canyon between the pages of the Old and New Testament. They speak of two different Gods in the Bible. The God of the Old Testament is perceived as wrathful, judgmental, and demanding. In contrast, they view Jesus in the New Testament as gentle, kind and affirming. They wish to believe in Jesus while dismissing the Old Testament witness.

Jesus makes clear in this passage that what is needed and required is both: belief in God the Father, the creator, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our savior. Truth is found in believing in God as he is revealed in the Old Testament and as he is incarnated and unveiled in Jesus Christ. Jesus' words in these verses teach us the key reality that pastoral care and theological truth must go hand in hand.

Why pastoral care and theological truth must go hand in hand

“ Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also.

The opening of John's Gospel, (1:17) tell us an important truth: ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John tells us that Jesus embodies “grace and truth.” In Jesus Christ we find the fullness, the quintessence of *both* grace and truth. This balance of grace and truth is illustrated in John 14. In this passage Jesus offers grace, encouraging his disciples to believe and place their trust in God. And, Jesus offers them theological truth as well, saying that he goes to prepare a place for them in heaven. Jesus gives pastoral care and theological truth. Pastoral care is the comfort, encouragement, and guidance offered to someone in need of spiritual support. Theological truth refers to the clear expression and articulation of the tenets, the content, of our faith, of what we believe. Both are needed.

Sometimes people ask me, “*Pastor Mark, why do you put so much theology in your sermons?*” The unspoken part of that question, typically, is this: “*Why don’t you give more practical advice and guidance for day to day Christian living?*” People wonder: when will Pastor Mark preach on “Five ways to have a better marriage.” Or, “The secrets to raising Godly children.” Americans are a practical people.

Why do I preach theology? I do so because knowing right theology *is* good pastoral care. Theological truth and pastoral care go hand in hand. If we believe rightly that will in turn help us to act rightly. In this passage Jesus knows his disciples will face discouragement in the coming hours. Jesus addresses their coming crisis by offering them a very specific lesson in the theology of heaven, the hope of eternal life. Jesus declares to them that *he will prepare a place for them* in heaven. The disciples are encouraged to trust in Christ and believe in God during the difficult times ahead because of the promise of this theological truth. Even death cannot thwart Christ’s purpose in our lives.

The substance and specificity of Jesus’ teaching is in sharp contrast to the trend in the modern world. The modern world wants religion without specific content. Many reject the very idea of “*organized religion.*” Such folk want religion without having to be religious. The modern world encourages people to believe, but without the theology; without specifying the content, the substance of the belief that is encouraged. We moderns like the word “spirituality:” an airy butterfly like word that flits and jumps between religious sentiment and emotion without ever settling down on any one spot decisively. It serves religious emotion without asserting any specific, substantive religious or theological content.

What would you think of a doctor who said, “*Oh, I never tell a patient that he has cancer. I find that the diagnosis is simply to discouraging for a patient to hear. So, instead, I tell my patients that everything will turn out right in the end and that I am on their side, encouraging them all the way?*” Such a doctor gets an A for pastoral care while flunking out on the very purpose of his occupation: to help people get better physically. Yes, theological truth can hurt: in the same way a surgeon’s scalpel hurts. It is the type of hurt necessary for healing. The prescription for a troubled heart and mind is right belief and true faith.

The goal, of course, is the right balance of pastoral care and theological truth. We want to be kind and loving, and right and true. We want to speak the truth, in love.

After this brief commentary on the theology of heaven, Jesus next makes a theological declaration regarding how one gets to heaven. In this declaration he makes four specific claims regarding himself.

Jesus four claims regarding himself

⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus’ assessment of the human problem is pretty clearly stated in this verse. Thomas says, “We do not know the way.” Human beings, on their own, do not know how they ought to live their lives. Jesus knows the answer to that question. Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Let’s look at what Jesus means by each image.

Jesus’ first claim: He is the pathway to God’s presence

Jesus said to him, “ **I am the way**, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

When Jesus says that he is ‘the way’ the image is that of life as a journey. We begin at one point. We end at another. Our lives unfold as a journey, as a passage through time and space. Jesus tell us that in some important way, if our lives are to have meaning and significance, they must in some way overlap with his declaration that he, Jesus, is The Way.

Jesus had something very specific in mind when he spoke of “The Way.” The imagery he is drawing upon is that of the Psalms of Ascent and of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the holy feast days to worship and sacrifice at the Temple. Recall, the Temple in Jerusalem was the special symbol of God’s dwelling in the midst of his people. God’s presence was most palpably felt in the inner most part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. There had been times in the past when God’s glory, in the form of a mysterious cloud, had come and settled upon the Temple itself. God was in the midst of his people.

Three times a year the people of Israel were commanded to travel to the city of Jerusalem for the special feast days: Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement]; Passover; and Pentecost [The Feast of Weeks]. In traveling to Jerusalem, God’s people were called to appear before the Lord. As the pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem, they would ascend through the hill country, reciting Psalms 120 through 134, the Psalms of Ascent, as they grew nearer and nearer to the Temple and to God’s presence. They followed the way to Jerusalem, the way before God’s presence, in order to worship him.

However, at the same time, though God dwelt in the midst of his people, the way into God’s presence directly was effectively barred. The Temple itself was a walled compound, separated from the rest of the city. Within the Temple compound were various inner gates and courtyards. The Temple itself was divided into two: The Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies. In the Temple we see God dwelling in the midst of his people. But, at the same time, we see God’s people separated from him by the various dividing walls of the Temple.

When Jesus says that he is the way, what he means is that by his work, his sacrifice, he will blaze a new pathway into God's presence. This is why, at the moment when Jesus dies on the cross, he declares "It is finished." The pathway has been opened. This is why, at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, the heavy curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem was torn in two, from top to bottom. With Jesus' sacrificial death, the way to God is now open. The barriers are breached. The dividing walls have fallen. Jesus Christ is **the way** through the separation between God and man. He is the path into the Holiest of Holies, into God's presence.

This is how the author of Hebrews (10:19 – 22) describes the way established by Jesus: ¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³

Secondly, Jesus says that he is 'the truth.' By this, he means that he is the revelation of God's nature and character.

Jesus second claim: He is the revelation of God's nature and character

Jesus said to him, " I am the way, **the truth**, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Jesus' reference to himself as 'the truth' is best understood as referring to how he fulfills and completes all of the Old Testament types and symbols. Everything suggested, promised, and prophesied in the Old Testament finds its final meaning and fulfillment in relationship to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the promised Messiah. He fulfills the three fold offices of ancient Israel: prophet, priest and king. He is the light to the Gentiles. He is our daily bread, the manna in the wilderness, and the bread of life. He is the Lion of Judah and the Passover Lamb. He is the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days. He is the good shepherd, the lily of the valley, the rose of Sharon, the shoot of Jesse. He is the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek. He is the Ark of the Covenant. He fulfills it all. I could go on, but you get the point.

It is in relationship to Jesus that we begin to comprehend our place and standing in the world as God has established it. Jesus is not a truth. He is *The Truth*. Let me illustrate what this means, practically, for us. Recently I read the book *Blood, Bones and Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef* by Gabrielle Hamilton. It is a well written type of autobiography. I found the details and the snapshots of her life engaging. At the same time, as I read, I found what was missing from her story arresting, and I found myself quoting Prospero's

daughter Miranda from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "O brave new world, That has such people in't!"

One of the realities of life in the modern world – forgive me for the use of the jargon of literature studies – is the *loss of the metanarrative*. A metanarrative, refers to how we understand our place in the world. The narrative is our story. A metanarrative refers to how our individual story is tied into the higher meanings of life. Every Sunday we gather for worship and you bring with you your individual spiritual needs, joys, hopes and commitments. During worship, and in our small groups, we are directed to look to and consider the metanarrative: how is God at work in our world, in our lives? What is our place in that meta narrative of the gospel, of the message of Christ? Other metanarratives might include our sense of identity as Americans; or our particular ethnic background; or being a graduate of Penn State. These are the larger realities that help give meaning to our individual lives.

What struck me about Gabrielle Hamilton's book is the near complete absence of metanarrative. She is not a religious person. She does not even claim to be spiritual. She is a professional chef, but as she says in the subtitle, she has come to that role *inadvertently* and *reluctantly*. What is missing from her story is any sense of being part of something larger than her own story, her own life. And I found that sad. She has no metanarrative, no sense of being connected to meaning and purpose in life that is larger than her own individual story.

When Jesus declares that he is The Truth, he is saying that he is the highest metanarrative. Jesus Christ is the source of knowledge and understanding. He is the key to unlocking the mysteries and meaning of life. He is truth. What he offers is not hidden, shadowy, or unclear. He is the source of heavenly wisdom, understanding, and insight. Through Jesus a person's life can take on meaning and purpose and be tied to a story that is larger than our individual lives.

Jesus third claim is that he is the source of new spiritual life.

Jesus third claim: He is the source of new, spiritual life

Jesus said to him, " I am the way, the truth, **and the life**. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Is there life after death? Is there something more on the other side of the grave? Atheist secularists say that there is nothing on the other side of death. When you are gone, that is all there is. There is no metanarrative, no higher meaning or purpose to life. Muslims would say that there is life after death, but your status depends on how faithfully you submitted yourself to God's will in life on earth. Jesus also teaches that there is life on the other side of death and that he, Jesus, is the sources of that life.

When Jesus says that he is 'the life,' the reference is to the fact that he is the source of new life, of spiritual rebirth. The hope and promise of life on the other side of death is found in relationship to Jesus Christ.

Note clearly the full sweep of Jesus' claims in this verse. He says that he is the pathway to God, he fulfills the truth about God, and he provides new life enabling us to love God. Note also the presence of the definitive article in Jesus' claim. Jesus is not "a way, a truth and a source of life" but he is "the way, the truth, the life." What is implicit in Jesus' use of the definitive article is made explicit in his next sentence. He makes clear that he, Jesus, is the only complete source of these three things.

Jesus' fourth claim: He is the only complete source of these three things

Jesus said to him, " I am the way, the truth, and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through Me**." If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

I do not know if there is anything more controversial about the Christian faith today than these nine words of Jesus. We live in a world that highly values multiculturalism, pluralism, diversity, multiplicity, and variety. Our world does not care for exclusivity. It is extremely reluctant to say that one culture, one religion, one people, one tradition, is better than another. Even Christians grow embarrassed by the exclusive nature of Jesus' claim in this passage. It seems presumptuous. Jesus' words must be rewritten. Jesus is not **the** way, for there is more than one way to God. Jesus is not **the** truth, for the diversity of religious experience teaches us that they too are precious to God. Jesus is not **the** life, for there is more than one source of salvation and new life.

In saying that Jesus is the only way, truth, and life, we are not saying that there is no truth at all to found in other religions or other faiths. Every religion contains some truth, but the truth it possesses is not sufficient *saving* truth. They are like the dead ends in a maze: they take you part of the distance, but they cannot take you all the way. Whatever truth they possess is borrowed and reflected, partial and incomplete. They get you somewhere, but they will not bring you with confidence into the presence of God the Father, washed of your sins by the blood of Jesus Christ, reborn with a new, living heart that loves God and desires to serve him. For that to happen, you must hear the words of Jesus and take them to your heart: begin with Christ, continue with Christ, and end with Christ, for no man or woman comes to God the Father, except through Jesus Christ.

So I end with an invitation. Jesus said it. He is the way to God the Father. He is the truth you and I so desperately need. He is the source of life: both new life here and now and eternal life on the other side of the grave. I invite you to turn to him, to Jesus Christ, in believing faith and be saved.

Say 'Amen,' Somebody

John 14

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”