

I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life

Fourth in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by

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John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. 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, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place 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 know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

There is an old New Yorker cartoon that comes up in conversation among preachers from time to time. It depicts a pastor in a dark suit and clerical collar standing at an intersection where he is clearly struggling with which road to choose. At the intersection there is a signpost with two signs pointing in opposite directions. One has an arrow that points to “Heaven,” and the other sign points down the road that says, “Discussion About Heaven.” Presbyterians are known to be people who would most often choose the discussion.

One of my friends pushes the thought further, writing: “Sometimes I think we in the church stand at the same crossroads, stuck between ‘Jesus’ and ‘Discussions about Jesus.’ This is particularly true of thoughtful, intelligent people who are not afraid to ask questions about the Bible and the history and culture of Jesus’ day. We are so comfortable with theological discussion that we are better at articulating what we do not believe about Jesus intellectually than saying what we do believe about him personally.”¹

This is precisely the challenge of the I Am saying before us this morning as presented in John’s gospel. Given the number of Memorial Services and Funerals I have done in over thirty years of ministry, I have probably read selected verses from John 14 out loud – more than any other gospel text. When we gather in grief for a loved one who has died, these are comforting words:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me.
In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places ...
I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am,
there you may be also.*

As my friend Jon Walton describes them, these are “some of the highest and loftiest thoughts of our faith. Many of us have drawn solace

¹ Matthew Rich, *Trying to Say What is True*, here quoting Lillian Daniel’s *Spiritual but not Religious*, “157-8.

from them as we have let go of people we love, in the hope of seeing them again in a better place and time, envisioning them in the dwelling places of heaven. However, at the end of this beautiful passage, which has given us a glimpse of the glory of everlasting life, there is a shift in mood that does not seem to fit.”²

When Thomas boldly asks: How can we know the way? Jesus answers, *I am the way, the truth and the life*. So far, so good, until Jesus then says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is the crossroads where most of us would rather follow the arrow to the Discussion about Heaven. This is where many Christian people have to stop and admit: Yes, I am comfortable with Jesus up to a point. But I do not believe that his claim upon my life is meant to exclude all other faiths, or even non-believers. I trust him to be the way, the truth and the life but I’m not so sure he meant to say he is the only access to God, or that any path to heaven must lead through him, and only him.

In our raised consciousness about the importance of interfaith dialogue and our interfaith work for the healing of the world, this is the I Am saying that really does merit discussion. We who believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life are called to be very careful in how we hold in tension this exclusive-sounding phrase: *No one comes to the Father except through me*. For Christians, we trust that Jesus is the unique revelation of who God is and what God expects of us. But to have faith in Jesus, to seek and know him, to follow him, is to encounter One who challenges our tendency to exclude others. His entire ministry was all about breaking open social and religious barriers that divided people into classes and categories. He touched the untouchable; he welcomed the outcasts; he empowered the lowly and he confronted those in power to level the playing field where the seeds of the kingdom of God are sewn in equal measure for all. Indeed, to have faith in Jesus drives us in the direction of openness to others, particularly those who

² Jon Walton, *Imperfect Peace: Teaching Sermons on Troubling Texts*, p.72.

are very different from ourselves, even those whose religion is different from our own.

As one Presbyterian theologian put it: “To confess the unique self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, is to confess not just what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for and among us Christians. It is to recognize what the life-giving, life-preserving Creator of the world has been doing, is doing, and intends to do also outside the Christian circle, among all people everywhere, including those who do not know, confess, and voluntarily serve Jesus Christ as their Lord.”³

Friends, you simply cannot read the story of Jesus in the gospels without coming face to face with the fact that it was Jesus’ nature to reach out to those who were *other* than himself and his followers. He welcomed everyone into his company and mingled with the most despised people of his day. He forgave and blessed even his enemies. He laid down his life for people he could have justifiably ignored.⁴

So how are we to understand *No one comes to the Father except through me*? First: When we hear Jesus’ invitation: *I am the way, the truth, and the life* we acknowledge his distinctive claim upon our lives to follow in his way, to claim the truth of his suffering love for the world, and to cherish his life – which is the very source of our life – in this world, and in the world to come. Second: Then we trust that he knew better than we how he is the to the God for everyone else. We remember Jesus also said: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.*⁵

³ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 69.

⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?* P. 144.

⁵ John 10:16

Nowhere – in recent memory – has this expansive Christian outlook been so eloquently demonstrated than by Pope Francis’ trip to Iraq last week. In this bold step toward religious unity, Pope Francis made the first papal visit ever to that country. The photographs of his sitting next to the Grand Ayatollah of Iraq’s Shia community of Islam, spoke volumes in and of themselves, but the text of Pope Francis’ speech at Ur embodied, I believe, the way, the truth and the life of Jesus from an expansive Christian perspective. Standing in the very place where the Bible tells us Abraham lived, among a throng of interfaith leaders Pope Francis said, “We seem to have returned home.” He acknowledged Abraham the father of faith for the Jews, Muslims and Christians and then invited them to do what Abraham did, at God’s behest. “Here is where Abraham our father lived,” he said, “We are the fruits of his call and journey. God asked Abraham to raise his eyes to heaven and to count its stars. In those stars, he saw the promise of his descendants; he saw us. Today we Jews, Christians and Muslims, together with our brothers and sisters of other religions honor our father Abraham by doing as he did: We look up to heaven and we journey on earth. We look up to heaven. Thousands of years later, as we look up to the same sky, those same stars appear. They illumine the darkest nights because they shine together. Heaven thus imparts a message of unity: the Almighty above invites us never to separate ourselves from our neighbors.” And then Pope Francis said this: “The *otherness* of God points us towards others, towards our brothers and sisters. We raise our eyes to heaven in order to raise ourselves from the depths of our vanity; we serve God in order to be set free from enslavement to our egos, because God urges us to love. This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbor.”⁶

Those words of Pope Francis point to the way, the truth and the life we have come to know in Jesus Christ. In him God’s infinite love has overflowed to include us. And if God’s love can include us, then we are compelled to remember that ancient promise includes all human beings.

⁶ Pope Francis’ full speech at Ur available online.

Jesus Christ embodies the love of God, and love of neighbor for the sake of the world. That's how all of us have access to God the Father, through him.

AMEN.