

Worship Sermon
“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”
John 14:1-7, 25-27
TUMC
March 8, 2015

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

I was sitting in church waiting for the funeral to begin. The person who had passed away was a good man who died before his time. So there was an acute sense of loss and sorrow in the air. Suddenly out of the silence came the words

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In 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?

These words embraced me and others at the funeral, holding us fast, almost as if Jesus himself were present, drawing us to himself. They spoke to our condition: we, who were bereft of earthly comfort, were promised that there is a place prepared for us in the love of God that no one can take from us.

This text came to life for me in a moment of vulnerability. Let us pray for ourselves and for one another right now for a similar openness, not to my words, but to Jesus’ words as the Holy Spirit speaks them to us. *Pause*

The setting for Jesus’ words is the Passover Supper he was sharing with his disciples before his death. The meal is finished and Jesus is moved to tell his friends one final time, from deep inside himself, why he has come into the world and why he is about to leave it.

Finally, he thinks, he is among people 'who get it', who know him well enough to understand what is about to happen.

In the previous part of this conversation, in chapter 13, Jesus has told his table companions that he is about to go somewhere where they cannot follow now. Most commentators agree that Jesus is referring to the cross that awaits him. On that cross there will be a naked confrontation between good and evil. Jesus will take the tentacles of evil, those forces that seek to keep people, and the creation itself, from the love of God, and pry the world loose from their grip. He has to do this alone because only the Son is so bonded with the Father that evil will be unable to come between them. You might remember the song that talks about this.

Jesus walked this lonesome valley.
He had to walk it by himself.
Nobody else could walk it for him;
he had to walk it by himself.

Jesus' message to his friends is this: you can't walk this path yourselves until I have done so. But Peter, as usual, is impatient. "I'll do it", he insists, "I'll lay down my life for you". "No" Jesus replies, "before you do that you will first deny me." Jesus could have said that to any of us. What a troubling thought!

The Master doesn't dwell on Peter's – or our – misunderstanding. He wants to give Peter courage and hope. "Don't be troubled!" he counsels. "Believe in God, believe also in me." This simple sentence, "believe in God; believe also in me", is the heart of the matter, the single truth that John's compilation of Jesus' teaching is trying to make clear from chapter 1 verse 1 onward. Listen to those first words again as the

key to interpreting Jesus' message. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The point of the Word becoming flesh was to make the invisible God visible, to be the downpayment on God's faithfulness. In hearing Jesus, we hear God; in being embraced by Jesus we are being embraced by God. Yet so often this mystical moment is pierced by the hard reality of our lives. "How can this be so?" we argue. "Hasn't God absconded, taking off without telling us that he's leaving the world to its own devices?" How else can we make sense of the brutal suffering in our world? The list is too long to repeat. Think only of Iraq and Syria.

John's record of Jesus' sayings does not trivialize the reality of evil and suffering; it doesn't try to explain them away. The claim on which John stakes the whole gospel is God's solidarity with the creation in its suffering. Jesus is not simply a messenger of a far away God; Jesus is God in our flesh. God's solidarity with us creatures is so boundless that it takes him to a cross. That unbreakable solidarity between Father and Son, which becomes an unbreakable solidarity between the Son and those who come to him, makes Jesus' promise believable. "If it were not so", he cries out, "that there are innumerable dwellings in God's realm, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" The image of dwellings is a homely one. Think of a time at the end of an exhausting day of travel when a host welcomed you into a room with clean towels and sheets and a piping hot bath. This is the kind of welcome we are given into God's presence, in time and eternity. The 'no vacancy' sign never goes up.

Because eternal life in God is so far beyond what we can grasp, Jesus resorts to such simple illustrations. But they aren't convincing for another of his impetuous friends, Thomas. "Lord", he cries out, "we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way"? To a breathtaking question Jesus offers a breathtaking response. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Each of these astonishing claims leads to the next one. When we find in Jesus the way to God, we are drawn into the truth that he and the Father are one. When this revelation is given to us we realize that the Son and the Father in the Spirit are life, in this world and the world to come.

Nothing bolder could be said or imagined. The way, the truth, and the life are not concepts, not ideas we sink our teeth into, but a person who offers himself to us. When we let him embrace us we are on the way to creation's destination. When we recognize that love is the heart of meaning we are unlocking the truth. When we are bereft of earthly comfort and receive the promise that a place has been prepared for us we enter into life that no one can take from us.

And yet these remain barely believable words: *pause* "I am the way, the truth, and the life". Part of the problem is that when we risk speaking them we quote them in a polemical way to prove that we are right. The spirit of the original setting of Jesus' words is quite different. He speaks them as comfort and promise into a setting of looming disaster; they become a lifeline to people who have lost hold of everything that had anchored their life. Nothing less than this extravagant claim could have held onto Jesus' friends at the moment

when their world was being turned upside down before their very eyes: the one they called Master was about to be tortured to death. *pause*

So what are Christians today, living in Toronto, to make of the claim that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? Whether we are teenagers or parents, whether we are at work or among friends, we are with people who can't fathom why we stake our lives on Jesus. For many of these people living just lives is as important to them as it is to us. We are not their judges. In the mystery of God's purposes we have come to know Christ through his earthly ministry. But he also has a hidden ministry, freeing people who do not know him by name from a troubled and fearful heart.

Our calling is that of witnesses to the One who holds onto us even when our world is being turned upside down. I was stopped in my tracks once by the words of D.T. Niles, a Sri Lankan theologian. He put our witness as Christians into a single sentence: "We are beggars telling one another where bread can be found." x2 That's it: humility about ourselves but irrepressibility about God. We're alive because we've tasted the bread of life. It's not that we are better than anyone else but that someone has come into our lives who is the way, the truth, and the life. Wouldn't we be the most selfish of all people if we kept that to ourselves?

AMEN.