



Sermon

John 14:1-14
Meditation The Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 20, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

It's a Relationship Thing

Jesus said: I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. – John 14:6

I'm just gonna say it. I can't think of many more jarring words in the Bible. "I am the way, the truth and the life," may be among the most cherished and fortifying words but the "No one comes to the Father except through me" are among the most disturbing.

I'll be at a funeral reading John 14 as the gospel lesson. My heart and soul go from comfort to shock and alarm in the same moment. How consoling and reassuring for the grief stricken to hear: "Do not let your hearts be troubled...in my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I go to prepare a place for you....and will take you to myself that where I am, you may be also."

But that quickly melts away – in me and others in the room – when I read the rest of the text, Thomas, questioning Jesus about finding the way to this place prepared. Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father *except* through me."

What if the dearly departed didn't know Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life?" Do they not get to go where Jesus is going? What's so heartening to grieving family and friends, telling them that unless they conform to Jesus there isn't a snow balls chance in you-know-where they'll get to heaven either?

One of the most sincere, soul-searching Christian women I know shook my hand after church one Epiphany Sunday when we sang what I'd professionally selected as a most appropriate hymn for the day: "Christ is the Worlds' Light."

Christ is world's light, Christ and none other...

Christ is the world's peace, Christ and none other...

Christ is the world's life, Christ and none other...

It was the "Christ and none other..." part that was like finger nails down the chalk board sending shivers down her spine. "Do we really believe that?" she asked. "I have Jewish friends. What about Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus? Or people who just aren't sure about the whole God thing. I don't like how exclusive that hymn sounded. That's not the Jesus I know."

I'd picked the hymn from the United Methodist Worship and Music Planner because it was a suggested hymn for the day. It was Epiphany, the festival of God's shining light to the world in Jesus, for heavens sake. And it was a sing-able tune too, darn it. Note to self. There's more to picking a hymn than its title or tune. Read all the verses before making a selection.

The same principle of reading all the verses carefully applies to reading the Bible to.

I'm thinking of another song. Not from the hymnal. It comes at the end of West Side Story when ill-fated lovers, Tony and Maria say their last words to each other. Tony is dying in Maria's arms. In ways only possible by the suspended belief of a Broadway musical, people singing with their dying breaths, come the words:

There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us.

Peace and quiet and open air.

Wait for us somewhere.

There's a time for us. Someday a time for us.

Time together with time to spare. Time to learn, time to care.

Someday. Somewhere.

There's a place for us, a time and place for us.

Hold my hand and we're half way there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there.
Somehow. Someday. Somewhere.

Like that song, the story this week from the Gospel of John is an intimate story of love and faithfulness, of commitment and trust. The way John tells it, at their last meal together, Jesus tells his disciples he is going away. So, in the midst of their sense of loss, abandonment, grief and fear he comforts them. "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

But how could they NOT be troubled. He's told them he's about to die, that Judas will betray him, that Peter will deny him, and that where he's going they cannot go. "Where, where, where?" they clamor.

In comforting them, Jesus tells his disciples to trust. He tells them to believe in him. But scholars say that our English word for belief is more flat and leaves something to be desired compared to the original expression (Greek "pistueo"). Our word and ideas of belief have to do with rational understanding and intellectual assent. John's word, these scholars say, frame believing more in terms of trusting one's life to something or someone. Belief as John puts it is a relationship thing – not a matter of some special knowledge gained or grasped.

So, Jesus is telling his disciples that they are not going to lose him. But to his disciples this is crazy talk. Look, they say, you're going to be gone. You're going to separate from us. How will we find you? Where?

We've felt that same worry, fear, even panic in the face of change or loss or being left behind. But Jesus keeps at his offer of comfort and teaching.

Jesus tells them to trust in God and trust in him. He also tells them to trust themselves and their relationship to each other. "You *know* the way. You *do* know the way," he tells them. "I am the way," and you know me. So, you know the way. Trust yourself to know what I know. Trust what we have done together, what we've been through together. Keep doing it. Keep it going. Keep loving each other as I have loved you. You know God because you know me. You know the way because you know me. Trust yourselves, trust me, trust God."

This is love language. This is relationship language. This is a relationship thing. Here is something way beyond comprehending doctrine or belief systems. Here is the stuff of devotion and commitment. This is love like "there is no one else in the world for me" stuff. This is a relationship thing like "you are the most wonderful person in the world" stuff. This is "you're my everything" stuff. This is "there's a time and place for us, hold my hand and we're half way there" stuff. Whatever the words, they are the words of deep connection and inclusion not of despairing disconnection and exclusion.

Even towards the end of the story when "doubting" Thomas contradicts Jesus saying, "We don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?" and Jesus answers, "I am the way, and the truth and the life..." – beyond our rote memorization of those words, can't you just hear Jesus saying: "Thomas, don't be distracted, don't be afraid. Trust me. TRUST ME. Look at me, Thomas. Focus. FOCUS."

In words that can be as comforting as pastoral consolation in the face of death or as jarring and disturbing as wondering if Jesus really means "I am the only way..." what I'm hearing him talk about in this cherished gospel is relationship thing. "You belong to me and I belong to you," he says. Nothing will ever be able to keep us apart. My love will live on in you and be between you. It is what keeps us together. If you love me, do as I do, keep God's commandments. Love one another as I have loved you."

Love, divine love, not "my way or the highway" is what permeates this text.

I've read where Michelangelo said that the beautiful sculptures he created were already there – inside the chunks of granite and stone. What he did, he said, was remove the excess to get to the precious essence. Sounds like he went to the same art school as Jesus.

When Jesus makes his exceptional claim: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father *except* through me," he is using love language, intimacy language, relationship language, with the people who love him most, and who are about to go through some tough times on the way to new life. It is not meant to be off-putting or exclusive as much as embracing those

closest to him with comfort and connection to their deepest source in God: "Come to me and come to God through me. We've already been doing it. Keep doing it."

In his book the heart of Christianity, Marcus Borg tells the story of a Buddhist Monk at an interfaith service. By some unfortunate oversight he was given the "I am the way, and the truth and the life..." passage to read. It must have been an awkward moment when the Buddhist Monk read the "No one comes to the Father except through me" part. Says Borg: The Monk then spoke to the congregation in words that surprised everyone: "These words are absolutely true. The way of Jesus is the only way to the Divine. And that way of dying to the old way and being born into a new way is the way of all the great religions of the world and their

path to the sacred. Jesus embodies the way to oneness with God."

"I am the way, the truth and the life," said Jesus. No one comes to the Father except through me." In our relationship with Jesus, may we get what it means to believe out of our heads and into our lives. "You belong to me and I belong to you," Jesus says. Nothing will ever be able to keep us apart. My love will live on in you one and be between you. If you love me, do as I do, keep God's commandments. Love one another as I have loved you. You can do it. You can do it." This is the way to the Father.

Amen.

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