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the SAVIOUR

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“I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life”

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John 14:1-7

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“Do not let your hearts be troubled...In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Chances are, you’ve heard this scripture read at a funeral service – for good reason. Like last week’s “I am saying,” today’s Gospel Lesson comes from the portion of John referred to as the Farewell Discourse, the final words Jesus shared with his disciples before his death. These are words of comfort and hope, given to the disciples to carry them through their sorrow, words that still bring comfort to us in times of grief. In all my years of ministry, I’ve only preached this passage once on a Sunday morning, though I’ve used it in dozens of funerals.

Before I go further, I want to offer a disclaimer. Chapters 14-17 of John contain some of the most treasured teaching we have from Jesus. Someday, I will teach a Bible study on the Farewell Discourse and everything Jesus considered important enough to impart in his final moments with the disciples. The seven verses that comprise our Gospel Lesson for today alone are packed with beautiful content that merits close study and prayer. But for our purposes this morning, I’m focusing solely on verse six, the “I am” saying that is the most difficult of all.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.” If these are words intended for comfort and hope, why have they been used as a weapon by so many Christians against non-Christians, laying claim to exclusive salvation and condemning other faith traditions? If Jesus had stopped at “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” we would be fine. What he said next is where the trouble starts. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Indeed, so strongly have some wished he *hadn’t* said that, that they treat John 14:6 as though the second sentence didn’t exist. That’s somewhat understandable. Triumphalism has never been the most attractive part of the Christian faith. But according to John, Jesus *did* say these words. To omit or avoid them is to be unfaithful to the witness of the Gospel, and in doing so, to miss an essential part of Jesus’s self-revelation. I want to be faithful to the Gospel while at the same time avoiding the pitfall of controversies that distract us from the witness we’re called to share. How do we do that?

Let’s start by considering the context. Jesus is speaking here to the eleven remaining disciples (Judas has already left). He was not speaking to a religiously diverse crowd or extending an invitation to the masses to follow him. These were among the final words spoken to his closest followers, the inner circle of friends who would soon have to pick up the pieces and carry on his saving work without him. Before he left them, he wanted to make sure they remembered the essentials about who they were and the life he came to offer.

I am the way. The disciples weren’t perfect – far from it. If it weren’t for Jesus, these guys would never have been in the same room together, let alone lead a movement that would change the world. Matthew was a tax collector. Simon was a Zealot. Peter was spontaneous and hot-headed. Thomas was brutally honest. James and John were power hungry. Even after so much time with Jesus, they still struggled to follow his example. But if they were going to carry on his work, they would need to follow *his* path – not their old way of life, not the impulse that felt right, not someone else’s advice – the way of Jesus.

I am the truth. John’s Gospel unequivocally states that Jesus is truly God’s Son and that everything he said and did can be trusted. John makes that claim in his introduction to the Gospel: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, ... *full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14) “To recognize Jesus as the truth is to affirm that as the Word made flesh, Jesus makes the truth of God available to the world.”¹ The words *true* or *truth* appear 41 times in John’s Gospel, only nine times in all the other Gospels combined. Truth matters – especially now.

I am the life. The entire purpose of Jesus’s mission was to bring life to the world. Peter earlier professed, “Lord, where (else) would we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68). Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. (John 10:10). He demonstrated power over death by raising Lazarus from the dead. (John 11) Jesus is life because he brings God’s gift of life to the world.

¹ Gail R. O’Day. *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. IX, 742.

No one comes to the Father except through me. This may be the sticking point for contemporary readers, but it is also the highest moment of John's presentation of Jesus. The incarnation fundamentally changed our relationship with God. No longer is God a distant figure, the lawgiver watching over us from on high. In Jesus, God has come near – *the God we can know* as Abba Father, strong but caring and personal. *Jesus is how we know the Father.* Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know my Father also." (John 14:7)

Jesus needed his disciples to remember when he was no longer there to guide them and instruct them that *he is the way, the truth, and the life.* Hard days were ahead. They would be tested. They would be hunted down and driven out. They would have to rise again like him. Under stress, humans revert to our default practices and habits. As the disciples picked up the pieces of the movement after Jesus was no longer physically present, they would need to remember the way to God and follow it. *No one comes to the Father except through me.* The path for them to God was through Jesus. Only Jesus.

Jesus spoke directly to his disciples that Maundy Thursday. He offered comfort and strength to prepare them for the monumental task that was ahead of them without him. Was he also signaling for future generations that the Christian faith is the only path to God? I don't know. But if that's our takeaway from this passage, I'm afraid we have missed the point.

Perhaps the real issue isn't whether people *outside* the church are saved, but whether those *inside* the church are faithful to the Christ whose name we claim. Observing Christian communities today, it is apparent that we don't agree on what it means to follow Jesus. Given the way his name has been used to hurt people and advance personal and political agendas, I'm not sure we're even reading the same Bible. A statement I heard recently rings true: When you filter your *biblical theology* through your *political ideology*, what you end up with is *idolatry*. The culture war so aggressively pursued by some Christian leaders today is a red herring, distracting us from the sacred work Jesus calls us to do. Crafty politicians often sound alarms to mobilize Christian voters – but rarely are they genuinely concerned about faith. We too often allow ourselves to be manipulated by plays on our emotions that turn us into political pawns. Our actions can cause people to lose faith in the church...and in Jesus. I cannot stress this enough – if you feel yourself being drawn into a culture war, run away. Jesus didn't spend his time condemning groups of people, and we shouldn't, either. Every time Christians go on a crusade against culture, it only reinforces the stereotype that we're hateful and judgmental. And that causes far more harm to our witness for Christ than anything we allegedly condone.

What would it mean for us to commit ourselves completely to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life? What if everything we did in ministry was based on what he did or what he taught? Not the inherited traditions of the church, not the things other people say about him, not the cultural battles that are designed to separate us into camps and clans – only Jesus. *No one comes to the Father except through me.*

The people of the early church were not called Christians. Their movement was known simply as The Way (Acts 9:2). They followed as closely as they could the things that Jesus taught, as it had been handed down to them by the disciples. Because they did, the faith was handed down over generations, eventually to us today. Unfortunately since then, we've picked up a bunch of other beliefs, practices, and habits that didn't come from him. We're no longer a counter-cultural movement on the margins. Christians today make up the largest religious group in the world. The UMC is a global denomination with 12.5 million members across the world. We worship in a magnificent building and enjoy a privileged status in our community. But our calling remains the same – to abide in God by following the way of Jesus.

Now, I'm not an originalist – far from it. I don't believe in mimicking the practices of the early church, but I do believe we need to remember the *ethos* of the movement. Do we still believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? We face many challenges in our world today, things Jesus never warned us about. Fear can lead us away from faith – fear of war, climate change, pandemic; fear of diminishing influence and declining membership; fear of being seen as irrelevant and simply ignored. But Jesus's word for us at the beginning of chapter 14 is this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

Instead of engaging in cultural and political warfare, we would be wise to focus instead on living the way of Jesus. He was humble, not "loud and proud." He was self-giving, not self-aggrandizing. He was compassionate, not judgmental. How much more effective would our witness be if, instead of fighting about who is allowed in and who should be kept out, we focused on making people's lives better by living more like him?

Today is the beginning of Holy Week, the week that followers of Jesus mark the last week of his earthly life. We began worship today with songs of praise and joy, just as the people around Jesus did when he entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. By the end of the week, many of those same people turned away from him, their shouts of

“Hosanna!” became shouts of “Crucify!” Will we, too, turn away from Jesus? Will we deny the way he taught or betray him by turning his Church into a tool of hate instead of a way to life? Be warned – the way of Christ isn’t easy. It isn’t the way of popularity or glory or success, at least not the way that’s usually defined in our world. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...He humbled himself and became obedient...even to death on a cross.” We may not be called to die for the redemption of the world, but we are called to *live* the humble obedience of Christ.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. May we hear that as our call, Church of the Saviour, and have the courage and the conviction to live it. Amen.