

April 9 – Palm Sunday

I Am the Way

John 14:1-7

According to the book of Acts, the early communities of Christians were known as “Followers of the Way.” That is a telling statement. It seems to mean that other people noticed that this community lived as Jesus did, following his way of life. They embraced what Jesus was trying to share with them when he says this “I Am” statement. We need to understand that we are still called to following the way of Jesus. It means living like Jesus and it is this that draws others to the Christian Faith.

Before we talk about its meaning for us we need to acknowledge that this “I Am” statement brings with it some problems. Jesus says, “I am the Way, and the Truth and the life.” If the gospel stopped at those words, that would be one thing, but it continues: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” That is where the trouble begins. That single verse has been a major source of controversy for centuries. Sometimes it is used to invalidate other religions and has been employed as a justification for the mistreatment and abuse of people of other faiths. This text has also driven many away. The narrowness and intolerance implied by these words cause open-minded individuals to reject the claims of the Christian faith. To make sense of John 14:6 let’s consider what these words might have meant to Jesus’ hearers.

Jesus was not speaking to a large, diverse audience. He was talking to his disciples after the last supper. He had just delivered very hard news. He was about to depart from this world. He had said, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” Comfort was the intent when Jesus spoke to the disciples. The word “room” is also translated, dwelling places or mansions. It is the noun form of the verb abide. Jesus pictures heaven as a place of perfect abiding with him—no more separation from God. Jesus then says, you know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas says, “Lord, we are not sure where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus says, “I am the way. In other words, Jesus isn’t arguing which religion is the right one. He is

reassuring his followers that in him they have connection to heaven. He is their access to God.

Also, we need to know what was happening when John wrote this Gospel. It was the last of the Gospels to be written, probably at the end of the first century. By this time tensions between Jews and Christians were very high. Those Christians who still wanted to worship with their Jewish friends were often turned away from the synagogue. Also, persecution by the Roman authorities of Christians caused the Jewish communities to make sure all knew they were different faiths. In a world where their belief was in the minority, early Christians needed confirmation that their faith was valid. John 14:6 affirms their faith. This context helps us understand that instead of being used as weapons to convince others they are wrong these words were meant to assure Christ-followers that their faith was genuine, their connection to Christ real, and their path the one that leads to God.

This still does not minimize the exclusive nature of these words. The author believes that Jesus meant, in sharing these words, that our salvation, our getting into heaven does not depend on what we do. It is not merit-based. Salvation comes through grace and that grace comes through Christ. We want to go to the next step and say, "What about those who are not Christians?" Jesus does not address this.

The way many Christians use this verse negates the need for grace. The statement is interpreted as a required belief: Jesus is the way. So, the reasoning goes that our knowing, accepting, and believing in Jesus is the only way to get us into heaven. Jesus doesn't use the word "only" but he does use the word "way." What seems to be more important to Jesus than believing is being, living and acting like Jesus taught.

The author talks about four ways the first disciples made Jesus their way.

First of all, they stayed connected with Jesus in a small community. This is how he initially taught them. Later, after his death and resurrection they remained together. Even the great evangelist Paul, never traveled alone. They understood something that we sometimes forget. This is that faith will always be somewhat abstract until it

becomes real to us in relationship with other people. The disciples came to understand who Jesus was by their intense interaction with him while he was alive. They were able to withstand the struggles and challenges they faced after Pentecost through fellowship with others. From the beginning, the early church was about mutual support. Read the New Testament and you see how many times they talk about the faithful coming together. This is how they were following in Jesus' way. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, organized his movement around small groups for this same reason. He knew we need support and accountability if we are to be faithful.

A second way the disciples patterned their lives after Jesus was to develop practices that deepened their connection to God. The one request the disciples made of Jesus was to teach them how to pray. Living in Jesus' way means developing habits that bring us closer to God; habits such as prayer, Bible study, meditation, and other spiritual practices. How are you doing in developing or maintaining spiritual practices? It is something we should be doing if we are following Jesus' way. I will say this. It is almost impossible to keep such practices going in isolation. It is again a reason we need to be connected to others.

Third, adopting the Jesus' way also meant practicing sacrifice. The disciples experienced the challenges of being persecuted for their faith. They had seen the cost to Jesus in his dying on a cross. Many of them ultimately would die a martyr's death. They understood that new life and hope came through sacrifice. That idea profoundly changed them. One of the interesting footnotes to history is that the church has almost always grown in numbers when it is being persecuted. There is something life-giving about having to say yes to your faith when it is costly. You don't make those decisions casually. Then you are literally putting your life in the hands of others. You are needing support. Now we do not live in such an environment. Because it is easy to be a Christian and there is little or no cost to us, we sometimes grow stale in our faith. When we challenge ourselves to live our faith in a sacrificial way we grow. We are living the Jesus' way.

Fourth, the disciples showed compassion to people...all people. Making Jesus their way meant they had to release their prejudices. They reached out to people they

would otherwise have avoided. Besides being known as followers of “The Way” often what was said about those early Christians was, “See how they love one another.” When you make Jesus your way, this is what happens. You become open to opportunities to extend grace to others. Unfortunately, we live in a time where people have forgotten this. Too often the church is now seen as an exclusive club instead of welcoming all. We are not always known for how we love all people but instead of how we discriminate.

The season of Lent is often called a journey. Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus entry into Jerusalem. Holy week is often talked about as a journey to the cross. Faith in Jesus is about right actions more than right beliefs. When we make Jesus our way we let it define our living and what we do, and that’s how we experience God’s power. This isn’t something to believe in. It is something to live out. We worship a living God who is active and moving and present and doing something right now.

All of this reminds me of a woman who ran the food bank in Bonners Ferry, Idaho while I was there. Her theology was, to put it kindly, unique. She attended the Catholic church on Saturday nights and a Pentecostal independent church on Sunday. Her faith was a mixture of deep liturgical grounding, she would pray the Rosary, with charismatic tongue speaking. Yet, no one doubted her faithfulness to Jesus. Why, she was one of the most welcoming, compassionate people you would ever meet. Everyone who came to that small food bank was welcomed with a smile. She would sit and listen to problems and try to help when she could. All of the community came to trust her and her care and she did it all on a very small stipend. She would often say, “It’s not about the money it’s about the people.” She was one who lived the Jesus way even though every church she visited or was a part of had questions about her orthodoxy.

Think about what it means to believe that—right this minute God is seeking to do something and seeking someone through whom to do it! Perhaps you are that person. Jesus says “I am the way.” Following me will get you closer to God than you have ever been. It means being with other followers, having deep spiritual disciplines, a willingness to sacrifice, and to be open and loving to all. It is hard word but through grace we will succeed.