

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

John 14:1-7

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2008

Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through me.” John 14:6 The New Century Version

I would like to invite some of you to use your imagination and ask the rest of you to simply remember. It will only take a moment. Close your eyes if you think it will help. It's April 29, 1975. The People's Army of Vietnam, a.k.a., the North Vietnamese, has the city of Saigon surrounded. All exits out of the city have been cut off and it is only a matter of time before the capital of South Vietnam falls. American embassy employees and their South Vietnamese supporters are in a panic. Rumors of mass murders in Da Nang and other cities that have fallen are running rampant. There is only one means of escape and it is by helicopter. There is only one place for the helicopters to land and it is on the embassy rooftop. When I close my eyes, I can still see that famous image: a line of desperate people climbing a rooftop staircase to board the helicopter that is their one and only lifeline. Over the next few hours nearly 2,000 people are evacuated to the safety of Clark Air Force Base in Manila. It is a disappointing end to a difficult chapter in our history. And on that particular day in history there was only one way to life.

It is with that image of that one and only way to life that we come to this passage from the gospel of John. Although the disciples didn't know it at the time, they had gathered around the table with Jesus for what would be their last meal together. They already knew that there was going to be something different about their time together that night, for the evening had begun with Jesus taking off his outer garment, getting down on his knees, taking a basin and a cloth, and washing his disciples' feet. Unnerved, they sat around the table, probably wondering what was going to happen next. They didn't have to wait long to find out. Jesus started talking in a way they had not heard him talk before. First, he told them not to be anxious about the events to come. “What events to come?” they wondered. Then he told them he was going away, but that he would come back and take them with him. “Going away?” Their brows furrowed in puzzlement. Finally he looked at them and said, “But you already know the way I'm going.” Thomas, my

namesake, was as confused as everyone else. But never content to simply sit there with his questions unanswered, as apparently the others were content to do, Thomas opened his mouth and spoke up. “Jesus, what in the world are you talking about? We don’t know where you are going. How could we know the way?” And that’s when Jesus uttered those famous words, words that more than likely have become some of the most misunderstood, taken out of context words found in any of the four gospels: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”

Let me pause and remind you again that we have been exploring some of the “I am” sayings of Jesus during the season of Lent. Found only in John’s gospel, Jesus took common, everyday images and used them not only to give us a better understanding of who he was, but a better understanding of who we are as well. These familiar sayings help us to know what it takes to live that fully satisfying, abundant life for which every single one of us longs. And by looking at the “I am” sayings during these 40 days of Lent, by remembering that Jesus said, “I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the good shepherd...I am the true vine,” I believe we can be prepared to celebrate an Easter unlike any we have known before. Now today’s passage comes from what is known as “The Farewell Discourse.” For four full chapters, Jesus addresses different themes concerning his upcoming departure and emphasizes how the disciples, despite his leaving, will not be forgotten. He tells them, for instance, of the Spirit’s coming. He gives them a new commandment: to love one another just as he has loved them. He then warns them that times are going to get tough. Last but not least he prays for them and for all those who will follow them. Jesus’ whole concern is for his disciples. And please note that during their entire time together Jesus never once says anything about the eternal fate of Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, or the practitioners of any other religion.

Now I hope that you heard that. The “I am” statement that is our focus for today, and the one that comes at the very beginning of this long conversation, has long been a source of great discussion and controversy among Christians and others. People have read these words and more often than not divided themselves into two camps. As one has

said of these particular words of Jesus, “They are taken by some as the rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, proof positive that Christians have the corner on God and that people of any and all other faiths are condemned. They are seen by others as embarrassingly exclusionary and narrow-minded, and they are pointed to as evidence of the problems of asserting Christian faith claims in a pluralistic world.”¹ The history of these words is very interesting. But if we are honest with ourselves, if we pay close attention to what is going on in this story, then we will have to admit that neither of those concerns is addressed by Jesus’ words. The “way” that Jesus mentions is neither a proof text to be used on unbelieving friends or evidence to demonstrate that Christians are provincial in their thinking. I believe that something much greater is happening here. And I sure hope that I will be able to show you what it is.

So let’s go back to how this conversation in the 14th chapter of John got started. Just after Judas walked out the door, and immediately following Jesus telling Peter that his faith would falter in the hours to come, Jesus looked at the remaining eleven disciples and said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Now there is a reason that most Christian funeral liturgies incorporate these words at one point or another. These are words used to comfort people at a time of great stress, at a time when the nature of relationships change forever, at a time when death stares you right in the face. And that is exactly the way Jesus used them with those sitting around that table. Although his moment had not yet come, Jesus was fully aware that this would be the last meal he would share with those he called friends. In John’s gospel Jesus knows from the very start that he was going to die. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of his ministry he had tried to tell the disciples that this was what would eventually occur. Whenever he did they would usually brush him off, or they would scold him for thinking such thoughts, or they would tell him that they would never let that happen to him. But he continued to tell them what would be and emphasized over and over again that, as hard as it might be for them to understand, his death would be a good thing. At one point in time he even told them, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears

¹ Gail R. O’Day, The Gospel of John, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 743

much fruit.” Now the commentaries tell us that those words embody the concept of death and resurrection, and that Jesus used that short parable of the seed to remind the disciples that even nature demonstrates that life come out of death. So on the night before he was to die a very painful death, Jesus told them to not let their hearts be troubled. Keep the faith in the light of the terrible death that was soon to occur. What they were about to witness would only be the start of something that they could not even begin to imagine. What would happen over the course of the next three days would be “the way” to a brand new life. Dying and rising is the way to the Father.

There is a reason, you see, that the cross is the central symbol of Christianity. So many other, much more palatable symbols could have been chosen. The fish, as you know, was one of the first and earliest symbols of the Church, one that—in the midst of a hostile world—those first Christians used to identify one another. The anchor was another, reminding us that the letter to the Hebrews tells us that in Jesus “we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”² And don’t forget the lamb, the image that John the Baptist used that day in the Jordan to proclaim that Jesus was the “Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”³ There are so many symbols from which the Church could have chosen for its primary symbol. Yet as one has written, “The followers of Jesus came very early to the conclusion that he had lived in order to die, that his death was not the interruption of his life at all but its ultimate purpose.”⁴ From the very first the cross, that horrible instrument of Jesus’ brutal execution, has become the single most recognizable symbol of the Christian faith. Why? Because as Marcus Borg point out:

*The early Christian movement saw the cross as a symbol of “the way”: the path of transformation, the way to be born again. The cross, the central symbol of Christianity, points to the process at the heart of the Christian life: dying and rising with Christ, being raised to newness of life, being born again in Christ, in the Spirit...the gospels saw the way of Jesus as the way of the cross.*⁵

² Hebrews 6:19

³ John 1:29

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries, Yale, New Haven, 1985, p.95

⁵ Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 2003, p. 112

Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.’ Except, that is, by the way that that he has shown us. “The way” has nothing to do with knowing about Jesus and believing certain things about him in order to go to heaven, you see. “The way” is not about accepting certain doctrines and dogmas about Jesus or even about being baptized in a certain manner so that you can be saved. Rather, as we are reminded in our communion liturgy, “On the night in which he gave himself up for us he took bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.’” The one and only “way” to the Father is the way of the cross, the way of death and resurrection, the way of dying to self in order that we might live to Christ. That is why the apostle Paul went to the Corinthians vowing to proclaim “nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”⁶ That is why he also told the Galatians that “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁷ To “die to an old way of being and an old identity and to be born into a new way of being and a new identity.”⁸ That, as Jesus would say, is the only way to the Father.

There is an interesting commercial currently running on TV that I believe embodies that old way of being and that old identity better than anything else. You have probably seen it. It begins when a wife, after their old television seems to have breathed its last, says to her husband, “You’re right, we need a new TV.” The cameras then cut to the husband, whose face immediately lights up at the thought of having the latest big screen, high def, plasma TV, or whatever hanging on his wall. Suddenly, to the strains of Freddie Mercury and Queen, music starts to fill the air. “I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now!” A voice then is overheard proclaiming that with the Chase Credit Card, you can have it all and you can have it now. Catchy, isn’t it? It kind of gets me all stirred up. Yet while it obviously is a great ad campaign, and great music to boot, it seems to me to be a terrible indictment of both our society and ourselves. That commercial tells us that the only way to happiness, that the only way to fulfillment, that the only way to life is by

⁶ I Corinthians 2:2

⁷ Galatians 2:20

⁸ Borg, *op. cit.*, p. 113

living for ourselves, by immersing ourselves in things, by living a life that is totally centered upon ourselves.

But the cross of Christ, that central symbol of our faith, presents a very different view of life. The gospel writers proclaim over and over again that the only way to the Father is through our dying to self and rising to Christ; by turning away from a life centered upon ourselves and turning towards a life centered upon God. And that turning away is the same way taken by the prodigal, who came to himself and was then welcomed home from exile; it is the same way taken by the woman of Samaria, who turned away from the well and found that she was never thirsty again; it is the same way taken by Lazarus, who was called out of the tomb and raised from the dead. There is only one way to life and, as Jesus showed us, it began on that terrible Friday afternoon. It ended on that glorious Sunday morning. Do you want to find that way? Then go ahead and die, and then let Christ raise you to life. For that is the only way to the Father.

Is anyone here this morning that has been looking for the road to the Father? Is anyone in this room who has searched, but not yet found, the one and only way to life? Jesus said that there is only one way to the Father, only one way to life, and that way leads straight through that hill called Calvary. It is the same way he took. If you choose to go that way it will cost you everything you have, but in return it will give you everything you need. If you choose to go that way you will lose your soul, but in return you will find you life. If you choose to go that way you will force to pick up your cross, but in return you will find that the stone of your tomb has been rolled away. For crucifixion always occurs before resurrection. And it is in dying and rising that we find true life. Perhaps the words of the old gospel hymn writer Jessie Brown Pounder say it best. While some may find another way to put it, its words contain a great truth. Listen:

*I must needs go home by the way of the cross,
There's no other way but this;
I shall ne'er get sight of the Gates of Light,
If the way of the cross I miss.*

*The way of the cross leads home,
The way of the cross leads home;
It is sweet to know, as I onward go,
The way of the cross leads home.⁹*

⁹ Jesse Brown Pounder, "The Way of the Cross Leads Home," The Cokesbury Worship Hymnal, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1938, p.141