

John 14.1-14 2020

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one will come to the father but through me.”

I can remember when these words from John’s gospel first bothered me.

I was in college, early 70’s, and was really for the first time around different cultures and religions and ideas.

I also worked as a church organist. I heard these words and a sermon about exclusion.

For what was probably the first time, I really paid attention.

And, I realized that if this was Christianity, I was not a Christian.

I loved playing the organ, and finished my degree. But that was it for me and the church.

I’ve since found my way to God. Or, God has managed to break into me.

As we consider this passage, I invite us to try very hard to put ourselves into the scene.

I think it’s very important that Jesus is telling his friends goodbye.

Jesus is at a last supper with them. He knows his alternative way will get him in big trouble with the powers of the Empire and the temple.

He offers his friends a metaphor—for a place where they will be able to find him.

He calls it a dwelling, a place to abide.

Abide not in the future, but rather as a present reality:

God already dwells here, with them, on this earth.

That’s the reality Jesus has told them about time and time again.

The kingdom has come near, God is here.

Thomas, ever the literalist, wants to get it right. He wants a map.

He wants to get to this place that Jesus is talking about.

But Jesus isn’t talking about geography.

He’s talking about being connected, about being with each other, and with God, in life, in the eternal life that is beginning now.

He is talking about something that is the very essence of Christianity: being in relationship with God, and with each other.

Jesus says to Thomas, “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life.”

He does not say: 'here is a list of things you must do to get to God, here is a list of beliefs you must sign onto, here is a confession, a creed'. He is comforting his friends: he says, "I am the way. I am Truth. I am Life. You know me, you've been living it with me, this way, this truth, so you already know God."

But Philip wants more, something dramatic. He wants to see God. Jesus answers him: "Okay Philip. If it is too much for you to realize that in knowing me, you have seen God present and active and real-in-the-flesh right in front of your very eyes, then don't just look at me, look at what I do."

"Look at how we live: See who has traveled with us, eaten with us: the ones from the roadside, from the edges--the ones without names, without titles, without power, the women unwelcome in the synagogue, the prostitute valued here for her heart, not her body.

"Trust what you have seen. *This way, this truth, this life, this love does not end.*"

These words, recorded long after any kind of conversations between Jesus and the first disciples, gave comfort to the ones who came after Philip and Thomas and Mary Magdalene and the rest. John's community, living at the end of the first century, needed assurance. Their hearts were troubled by the chaos of their day. The temple walls had tumbled down; they were afraid of the Roman persecutions. They were confused by all the new religions that were springing up. And they were confused by friends and family who rejected their new way to be Jews.

So in the midst of all this, this little Christian sect at the end of the first century needed to know that theirs was the way, the path of light through the darkness. Out of this fear comes the gospel of John.

They heard that the Jesus who healed and fed and freed the captive and welcomed the outsider -- had shown them God, the very Goodness at the ground of all life.

They knew they could see Jesus again, alive and active, in all his divinity and all his common humanity --

in these places of need and longing,
all the places of feeding and releasing and reconciling and welcoming.

The Way wasn't a special set of beliefs or some sort of correct doctrine.
The Way was about recognizing need, and doing something about it, in the name of love.
The Way of Jesus was about love incarnate, love in-the-flesh.

Our day is different than that of the early disciples,
but we still sometimes want the same assurance that Thomas wanted;
we want the path of light through the darkness and a place to abide, safe with God.
I'm no longer haunted by the idea that John 14:6 means
that Christianity is the only way to salvation.

In my experience, the claim that Christianity holds sufficient truth for salvation
does not mean that it has to hold that truth exclusively.

I realize that Mohatma Gandhi (a Hindu) and Thich Nhat Hanh (a Buddhist)
come closer to the Jesus truth, the Jesus way, and the Jesus life
than most of the Christians I know, including myself.

Theologian Huston Smith says that God is "defined by Jesus, not confined to Jesus."

That heart of God is big enough for all of us -- now.

This roominess can be seen as time.

In God's eternity, created time is room in God's own life, and God's own heart.

We can trust in the God of compassion in which there's a place for us.

In God's eternity, just as there is room in the heart of God for all,
there's room in our world for our differences.

The meaning of life is found as we share God's compassion in the world –
that's where we find the way, the truth, and the life.

God has room for all of us. Now and forever. And our hearts need never be troubled.