

Following in the Way
John 14:1-6
August 19, 2018 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Friends, I generally like to follow the Ecumenical Lectionary – that listing of suggested Sunday scriptures for Christian churches of all denominations. I find a certain spiritual strength in knowing that, as we read and reflect on a Bible passage, churches around the world – other Methodist churches, Presbyterian churches, Lutheran churches, Episcopal churches, Catholic churches, and many others are reading and reflecting on that same scripture. That having been said, I am not a slave to the lectionary. I do not hesitate to deviate when there is reason to do so or when I find the Spirit leading me in a different direction; and today is one of those times. For the past three weeks we have considered Christ as “the Bread of Life.” As important and as meaningful as that is; I thought it time to take a break from that particular “I AM” saying. So today, I’d like to consider another of Christ’s I AM identity statements: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

I stated several years ago that beyond a doubt, I am asked about this scripture more than any other verse in the Bible. Specifically, I am asked about the troubling verse that follows the I AM saying: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Does this really mean that belief in Christ is the only way to heaven? Does this really mean that good Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or atheists cannot enter heaven. Certainly many of our conservative friends and fundamentalists staunchly hold that belief. But those of us who believe in an all-loving God and an inclusive Christ have a problem with this view. I confess, that as one who believes that, at least on some level, every bit of the Bible holds a certain truth, I struggled with this verse for many years.

When I was in graduate school, I attended a lecture by a New Testament Professor from Garrett Theological Seminary in Chicago, one of our thirteen United Methodist seminaries. During the question and answer period she was asked about this verse, even though it had nothing to do with her lecture. The professor responded, “You must remember that, when Jesus said this, he was speaking directly to Thomas. Thomas didn’t ask, ‘What must the Jews do to receive eternal life or what must the Romans do.’ Thomas asked, ‘What must I do?’” So I “chewed” on that for a while. But it still didn’t quite work for me.

Then, one day, while I was in seminary, I was discussing this very verse with a fellow student. Jesus said, “I am the way. When Jesus answered Thomas, was he speaking about a certain religious dogma, or was he speaking about a way of life?” I don’t think Jesus was so concerned about a specific belief as he was about a way of living; and, indeed, Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists, and even atheists can follow the way of life prescribed by Jesus.

Now, please don't hear that I'm selling Christian beliefs short. I think belief in Christ is hugely important. I fully believe that the best way to enter into a constant loving relationship with God is through belief in the Triune God – Father, Son, and Spirit. And I believe that our relationship with God is a major support on *our way*. Yes, I believe that we are blessed, as Christians, to have a special, wonderful, living relationship with the deity. However, I also believe that loving caring people who approach the love of God through different means are not excluded for God's grace. And, I might add that the Methodist belief in Prevenient Grace supports that view. Indeed, God loves all people whether they know it or not; and all people are brothers and sisters in the family of God.

So let's get back to our I AM saying. Jesus said, "I am the way." I stated earlier that, when Jesus said, "The only way to the Father is through me," he was speaking about *a way* of life. In fact, first century Christians referred to themselves as followers in "the way." I like that. I like the metaphor of life as a journey. How often we speak of Christ as a light unto our path. I said a couple weeks ago that one of my singing prayers is "Lead me, Lord"; and my favorite benediction prays that Christ will go before us to show us the way.

I've spoken during Lent and again to our Youth Work Mission Team about the Spirit of the Living Christ constantly walking with us. I've stated that one of the most important verses in the Bible is the last verse of Matthew: "I am with you always, even until the end of the age." Christ walks with us to support us in our journey. Christ leads us to show us the way through our journey. Through prayer, through study, and through a loving relationship with Christ we are led to make the right decisions, loving decisions, decisions for the care of creation, for the care of others, and for the care of selves. We here at North Olmsted UMC have entitled our long range plan *Our Faithful Journey*. I really don't remember who came up with that name. I don't think it was me; but I really like it, for together we, as a church family are on a journey to live and grow in the love of God and to spread that love to our greater community. Yes, I am truly grateful for a loving God who walks with me, who leads me, and who loves me.

There is another aspect to the leading. . . The central element of this scripture is that Christ will lead us home. Indeed, this scripture is traditionally read at funerals; and home is interpreted as heaven and life in the eternal glory of God; and yes, I do believe that's appropriate. But those of you that know me well may not be surprised that I don't want to limit this scripture to the afterlife. It's been said that home is where the heart is. Home is where there is comfort and security. Home is where there is warmth; and home is where there is love. I often refer to this place as "our church home," and I really hope that all the attributes I just listed apply to this place: comfort; security; warmth; friendship; and love. And just as I believe that Christ leads us through life to our eternal home with God, I also

believe that Christ has led each of us here to this home; and through this home we may come into a closer relationship with Christ as we come into a closer relationship with each other. (Remember last week's sermon? We come to this place as Christ's flesh and blood, brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.)

Then there is also our daily home, the place where we live. I hope that you sense Christ's presence leading you in that place as well. I hope you sense Christ's presence in the relationships you maintain in that place. Whenever I perform a wedding, I give the wedding couple a brass cross with symbolic wedding rings intertwined at its center. It's called a Cana cross; and it's symbolic of a marriage in Christ. I don't know what the couples do with those crosses. I'm sure some simply put them in a drawer; but I hope some hang them on a wall in their home. Ginny and I have one hanging on our bedroom wall. It reminds us of Christ's presence in our lives and in our marriage. It reminds us that the love we share is a gift from God. It reminds us that Christ is leading us, guiding us, and most of all loving us.

Indeed, Jesus is the way, the way to peace, the way to love, the way to truth, and the way to life. Thanks be to God for the gift of love expressed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

You are the way, and so we pray that you will lead us in your way,
the way of faith and truth,
the way of love and live,
the way of peace.

As you walk with us, help us to walk closer to you,
every day of our lives.

Amen.

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