

## “A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT”

*John 14:1-14*

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Our Gospel lesson for today is the familiar passage from John, chapter 14, where Jesus is seeking to comfort his disciples in the face of his impending death. *“Let not your hearts be troubled,”* he tells them. These comforting words are often heard at funerals and memorial services. In fact, it is traditional to read a portion of John’s Gospel, chapter 14, at the funeral service of a Christian person. The allusion is to heaven, but Jesus uses a metaphor for heaven: that of a home. I believe that Jesus is suggesting that heaven is a homecoming where God’s people are given rest from life’s labors, protection from life’s threats, and love without hesitation, qualification or reservation.

Now there have been a lot of words written, songs sung and sermons preached on the subject of heaven. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that it is unwise for Christians to speculate as to the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. *“In my Father’s house are many dwelling places,”* Jesus taught. Sometimes we Christians spend more time thinking about what our room will look like than enjoying Christ’s presence with us every day. It is clear from the Scriptures that heaven is not so much a place as it is the state of being in the presence of Jesus. It was the British New Testament scholar William Barclay who said that *“heaven is where Jesus is.”*(1) When you are a little kid, safety, protection, and well-being comes from being in your mother’s lap or in your father’s arms. It didn’t really matter where we were or what the weather was like as long as mom and dad were there for me. With Jesus by our side, we can enjoy heaven, not only someday when we die — but here and now — today.

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled,”* are not only words of counsel concerning what was about to happen to Jesus, these words have in succeeding generations been read as words of encouragement to Christians in difficult times. When the going gets rough, Jesus counseled his disciples then and he counsels us now to put our faith and trust in God. In the face of profound upheaval, Jesus makes it clear that trusting in him is the only way to go.

I remember when I was in seminary and we had what we called “sermon talk back groups.” As a student, you would preach a sermon and then the senior pastor and your seminary professor would pick five or six people in the congregation to go into the back room and critique the sermon. The politically correct thing to say is that these sessions were very helpful. They were a learning experience. The truth is, they were torture! The lay people were kind, but they were brutally honest. “I’m not sure why you used that illustration.” “I didn’t follow your second point.” And on they would go. with God, but Thomas doesn’t get it. Instead of just listening and saying, “nice sermon,” on his way out the door, Thomas says, *“Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”*

Jesus responds with the classic words that have given those of us who live in a pluralistic culture fits ever since, *“I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* Well, Thomas may have been sorry he asked! We may be sorry Thomas asked! For Jesus is pretty plain. He puts it right out there. He is the way.

We talk in our new members classes about how we witness to our faith in a pluralistic society. How do we live and share our Christian witness in a community where there are people of many faiths and those of no faith, some who are antagonistic toward persons of faith. Any time we ask for feedback and sermon ideas the issue is shared: what do we teach our kids about other religions? Will Jews go to heaven? What about Muslims? The questions go on and on. Is it appropriate to make exclusive faith statements in the diverse culture in which we live?

Is Jesus the only way to God? What do we say to our neighbors and friends whose faith is not in Jesus, but in the traditions of Judaism or Islam or Buddhism or some other system of religious belief? Do we go on our way and say as little as possible in order to keep from rocking the boat? Do we simply go along to get along? Do we confidently and boldly state our faith claims at the risk of offending those we are trying to convince, or is there another way?

I would like to say three things this morning about Jesus' words, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" First of all, as Christians we believe that **in Jesus we have seen as much of God as ever we hope to see.** We call Jesus "The Christ," "The Messiah," "God's Son," because he is completely one with God. Jesus is God in the flesh. Christians believe that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we have seen God. This is the claim of today's Gospel. Jesus is the very presence of God. When we see Jesus, how he lived in the world; when we hear Jesus, the words he spoke to his first followers, the words he speaks to us today, we have seen, heard and felt God. That is his name: Emmanuel. God with us.

Some of us have had the good fortune of having a father who is loving, intimate and deeply invested in our well-being. My dad wanted to know every detail about last week's Consecration. "We'll only hear a half hour on the radio," he said. "Can you send us a tape of the whole thing?" When my younger son had his annual review at the law firm, I asked, "How did it go?" When my older son was on call last week-end, I wanted to know how many trips he had to make to the hospital and how he got along with the surgeries and the emergencies. Some of us have no problem thinking of God as a loving Father, for we have had that experience ourselves. (How tender the words of all three Holland children spoken about their father. How moved we all were.) We have a God who loved us so much that he refused to remain aloof and apart from us. This God comes among us, revealing himself to us. "*You know me,*" Jesus tells his followers. "*Therefore you know and see God.*" (John 14:7) When Philip says to him, "*Show us the father,*" (John 14:8), Jesus responds, "*I am the Father and the Father is in me.*"

Now some of us are a bit uncomfortable by such claims, particularly when they are made in the form of John 14:6, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" That "*No one comes except through me,*" troubles us. It sounds arrogant. Hasn't that attitude done much damage around the world as Christ's followers have gone about insisting that everyone else ought to give up their religion and accept our way?

I meet a lot of people who believe that Christ is not the only way but one way among many possible ways to God. We live in a tolerance-obsessed culture. The trouble is — if Christ is not the definitive way to God, then what is your definitive way? If you take Jesus off the throne, who or what will you put there in his place? All religious ideas are not the same. There are deep difference between Jesus and other major religious

figures. If Jesus is not your way to God, your image of God, your definitive self-revelation of God, then what will be your way?

John's Gospel begins with "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" It sounds beautiful and poetic. But when that word-made-flesh got to talking, got to reaching out to the untouchables, healing the sick, rebuking the rich and the powerful, raising the dead, upsetting the authorities, many people thought they could see God just a little too well! God got so close to us in Jesus that we got a good look at God, and we didn't like what we saw! So we put him to death on a cross. We were determined to keep our religion vague, soft and spiritual, even if we had to crucify Jesus to do it. But we learned on Easter that he was not only Word-made-flesh, but also eternal life, that he was the God who would not be defeated by sin and death.

You see, when Christians claim that Jesus is the revelation of God, that in Jesus we have seen as much of God as human beings can ever hope to see, we are not being arrogant, if we are truly looking at Jesus. His way of humble, loving service and inclusive, embracing love is God's way. His way is the way of the cross — suffering, self-sacrificing love, not arrogant, assertive, vain and pompous pronouncements.

Christians are those who believe that in Jesus, we got a good look at God. We are not those who begin with a clear, fixed idea of who God ought to look like if God is to be God. Rather we look at Jesus — what he says, what he does, who he is — and believe that in him we see the true and loving God. His way is God's way. His way is the way to God.

The question arises, "What about those who do not believe in Jesus?" My honest answer is to say, "I don't know." **God is the judge.** I'm glad that's not my job! While Christians have to make judgments every day, it is not our job to decide who is part of God's kingdom and who is not.

Although it happened over thirty years ago, I remember so well the time I was preparing for a funeral when the phone rang. It was a woman who wanted to "fill me in" on the life of the deceased. She told me some terrible things about this man, and then she asked, "Will God forgive him for that? Will he go to heaven?" I paused, then said that I didn't know whether or not he would go to heaven, but that the Bible tells us that if a person asks for forgiveness, God promises to forgive. Yes, I said, God could forgive this man, and then I suggested that she forgive him, too. She quickly concluded the conversation. That was not what she wanted to hear.

Jesus shows us what God is like. God is the judge, not us. My third point is that **while it is one thing to believe in Jesus, it is quite another thing to follow him.** Jesus' words of encouragement to his disciples start out with "*Let not your hearts be troubled,*" but by the time the conversation was over the disciples were probably mighty uncomfortable. You see, Jesus didn't leave them sitting there drinking coffee and discussing theology, he challenged them to do even greater things than he had done.

The early Christians were persecuted for their faith. Yet their lives were such an amazing witness to the power and love of God that people were drawn to the church like a magnet. What about us? Do our lives mirror the Jesus we say we follow? Did you read Terry Pluto's article in last Saturday's *Plain Dealer*? He said a pastor in Akron has mentioned several times in his sermons how some people claim to be so spiritual and then turn a 15 minute break into a 45 minute one. They show up to work late or forget

when they are supposed to work. They complain about assignments. They are obsessed with a fellow worker who seems to be receiving all the breaks. “If you act like that, why would I care about your faith?” reflects Pluto.(2) Ouch!

Is it any wonder that so many people are unimpressed with our faith? We invoke God’s name as we bomb, occupy and dominate other countries. We say on our money, “In God we trust,” but it often appears that power and wealth are our true heart’s desire. I wonder if people look at us and think, “You’re going to have to look a lot more redeemed before I’ll believe in your redeemer!”

Before he was elected a bishop of the United Methodist Church, Will Willimon was Chaplain of Duke University. He tells the following story, and with it I close. “Years ago there was this Duke University student whom I met on the first day of the school year. He was tall, white, blond, a Baptist from South Carolina, whose family I knew. I saw him walking on campus sometime later, hand in hand with a young woman who was short, dark-skinned, and (I was soon to discover) a Muslim from the Middle East. I got a call from his mother. ‘Have you met Thomas’ girlfriend?’ she asked. ‘Talk to him! They’re serious!’

“I called him in for a chat and eventually said, ‘Thomas, tell me about Miranda.’ He told me they were very much in love, that she was a wonderful person, and that they were planing to be married after graduation.

“‘Really? Tell me what brought you together.’

“He replied, ‘We have so much in common.’

“I said, ‘Thomas, you’re a South Carolina Baptist. She’s a Muslim and from the Middle East. What in the world could you possibly have in common?’

“He replied, ‘Well you know me, Reverend. I don’t drink on week-ends. I don’t believe in casual sex, and I’m not really into the success at any cost thing. Miranda has all the same values I do.’”(3)

Jesus has showed us what God is like. God is the judge. And we are called, not only to believe in Jesus, but to follow his way. May God help each of us to follow, for heaven is where Jesus is.

*Prayer:* Dear God, we hear the words of Jesus: “*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.*” Help us to follow where you lead. Amen.

Notes:

1. Barclay, William *The Gospel of John. Volume 2.* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955. p. 181.
2. Pluto, Terry. “The Way We Work Says Something About How We Live.” *The Plain Dealer.* April 12, 2008, p. E3.
3. Willimon William H. *Pulpit Resource.* Vol. 35. No. 3, pp. 47-48.

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“A Word of Encouragement.” Sermon by Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Sunday April 20, 2008. Podcast Summary: In this sermon, based on John 14, Dr. Yoost discusses the question,

“Is Jesus the only way to God?” As Christians, we believe that in Jesus, we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see. We believe that God is the judge, and that we are called not only to believe in Jesus, but to follow in his steps.