

Lend a Hand, Do What you can! Reading: John 14:1-14 Easter 5/A 5/7/23
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If you were to describe yourself using three words, what would they be? Would you describe yourself in terms of relationships such as wife, mother, neighbor? Would you describe yourself in terms of qualities such as honest, hard-working, and organized? Would describe yourself in terms of vocation such as nurse, chemist, and priest?

There were many statements that Jesus made when describing his identity and purpose. Some of these statements are metaphorical, such as the "I am" statements found in the gospel of John:

- I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35)
- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
- I am the Door (John 10:9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)
- I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

In today's gospel, Jesus describes himself with the following three words: I am "the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) For me, this is the most powerful and meaningful descriptor of Jesus. It is also the subject of today's sermon. Let's take a closer look at today's reading from the gospel of John.

Jesus says: "I am the way." The early disciples of Jesus described themselves, not as the Christian Church, but as people of "The Way." Over his three years of ministry, Jesus showed his disciples the way to God by manifesting a lifestyle that was simple, non-violent, compassionate, generous, and inclusive. He pointed to God and basically said: 'If you want an authentic relationship with God, if you want to have an abundant life, then come and follow me.' But instead of following him as the way, we engraved his finger in stone and then began to worship his finger. Instead of simply following Jesus as the way, we made Christianity into an established 'religion' and avoided the lifestyle change itself. "One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's 'personal Lord and Savior.' The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great." (Richard Rohr)

Think about all those so-called Christians of the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Ku Klux Klan who committed murder in the name of Christ. Think of the many so-called Christians in the 21st century who believe they are following Jesus yet whose primary focus is on banning books & attacking trans people rather than striving for justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being. "The metamorphosis of Jesus Christ from a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, limited government (that neglects the destitute), and fierce nationalism is truly the strangest transformation in human history." (Rainn Wilson)

Jesus said: "I am the way." He didn't say: "I am a system of belief." What if we were to adjust our way of thinking and require Church membership to be based on compassionate acts instead of assenting to a creed or a statement of faith? What if the litmus test for being a Christian was grounded in loving the unlovable, welcoming the outsider, forgiving those who have trespassed against us, speaking up for justice, working for peace, erring on the side of mercy...rather than signing onto a doctrinal statement? After all, it is love for one another, (not some philosophical belief) that will ultimately show the world that we are truly disciples of Christ.

Jesus said: "I am the truth." In the person of Jesus, we now know God's will for humanity (which is why he is often referred to as the Word of God). Jesus told his disciples: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (John 8:32) To recognize Jesus as the truth is to affirm that he has made the truth of God available to the world.

Therefore, if we are seeking those truths that can offer us abundant life, we don't need to look toward partisan politics, CNN, Fox News, or social media for the kind of truth that will set us free.

Jesus said: "I am the life." We were not created to live in a world of hatred, violence, and greed. And yet somehow, our wounded egos, distorted thoughts, and insatiable cravings have pushed us off the path

that leads to abundant life. The Dalai Lama offered an insight into this tragedy: “People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used.” Jesus said: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

After Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” he goes on to say: “No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.” This has become one of the most controversial statements in the New Testament. Unfortunately, this verse has been used as a weapon to beat people into theological submission or as a litmus test to discredit the value of other religions. It has been used as a rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, trying to convince non-believers that Christians have the corner on God. But to interpret the verse this way is to rip it from its first century context and do violence to the spirit of Jesus’ words.

Jesus is assuring his disciples that he is the embodiment of God and that if they follow him on this path, not only will they embody the spirit of God themselves, but they will do even greater things than he has done. There is nothing in this text to suggest the inferiority of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam as some contemporary readers insist on. In fact, I doubt that Jesus ever knew about the religions of the East and he certainly knew nothing about Islam because it only came into being some 600 years later. The way of Jesus is the way of love. “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” (Presiding Bishop Michael Curry)

Last week, Steph and I attended the musical “Come from Away.” It is the story about the people of Gander, Newfoundland and the 38 planes carrying 6600 passengers who were forced to land when American airspace was shutdown on 9/11. Neither Gander, with a population of 11,000, nor towns in the surrounding area had enough hotel space for all those stranded passengers.

Immediately, local television stations in Newfoundland put out a call to its residents with the mayor chiming in: “*Lend a hand, do what you can!*” Schools and nonessential businesses were closed down allowing local folks ranging from senior citizens to schoolchildren to volunteer. They greeted the “plane people” with warmth, food, clean bedding, and hot showers. Schools, churches, and legion halls were converted into makeshift dormitories. Some residents even invited visitors to stay in their homes.

Area pharmacies filled prescriptions without cost. Free public telephones were installed so visitors could call home while donations of toiletries, clothing, and food flowed in. “Much of the food was stored at the Gander Community Centre’s ice rink, turning it into the largest walk-in freezer in the country. Once basic needs were met, the Newfoundlanders worked to entertain the visitors. They organized tours of the town, bowling matches, and concerts by local bands. Visitors also were introduced to regional cuisine, including stewed moose.” When asked about their generosity, many residents responded that their efforts were not out of the ordinary. “For us, it was just every day,” said a local newspaper reporter. “You don’t turn your backs on people in need.”

“*Lend a hand, do what you can!*” Sounds like the way, the truth, and the life to me. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry once said: “It is impossible to know in the moment, how a small act of goodness will reverberate through time. The notion is empowering and it is frightening—because it means that we’re all capable of changing the world, and responsible for finding those opportunities to protect, feed, grow, and love.” “If it’s not about love, it is not about God.” (Presiding Bishop Michael Curry)

“Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life.” (Collect of the Day: BCP 225)