

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
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1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

### A TRUE LIFE-GIVING WAY

The presbytery committee on which I serve works with Presbyterian seminary students as they move toward being ready to receive a call to ordained ministry. There are a lot of hoops for these individuals to go through during and in between their contacts with the committee. There are psychological tests, reference letters, academic performance reviews, field experience evaluations, sermons, ordination tests in five areas including one test interpreting either biblical Hebrew or Greek, written statements about one's understanding of our ordination vows, forms, forms, forms, and multiple face-to-face interviews with the committee. They also have to write a one-page statement of faith.

I am enjoying serving on the committee and getting to know these candidates for ministry. But I have to admit, one area of disappointment has been the one-page statements of faith that the candidates have turned in. For some inexplicable reason, I thought that these seminary students would be ready to test out creative ways to express what they believe. I thought there would be a discernible passion at least between the lines on the page. But what there is in these statements is an abundance of caution, which upon reflection is understandable when our committee could be seen as the potential obstacle that stands in the way of their ordination goal. They know that they will be asked about anything that is a little bit 'out there,' so the tendency is to play things close to the vest. I think they actually hope for a yawn as the committee's response to each statement of faith. They choose the safest words and phrases, which is a bit ironic when we as Christians are talking about faith in someone who risked and gave his very life out of his passionate love for God and humanity.

Nonetheless, I understand that the context in which a faith statement is delivered matters. Jesus makes a number of faith statements in our passage from John's Gospel and the context matters. The setting is the night on which Jesus would be betrayed, just hours before he would be crucified. He has just washed his disciples' feet, and given them a new commandment to love one another. Then when Simon Peter declares he would lay down his life for his Lord, Jesus tells Peter that he will in fact deny him three times before the dawn of a new day. Then comes our passage for today, beginning with the words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus is preparing them for when he will no longer be visibly with them. He tells them that he is taking steps so their eternal life with God, which had begun in his presence, would continue even beyond their earthly lives. That's what he is leaving them to do, but they will ultimately be with him again. Thomas, one of the disciples, shows his confusion and asks for clarification about where Jesus is going so that they would know the way to follow. And Jesus responds with a bold faith statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This statement is treated quite differently by various Christians and is frankly a bit of a mine field for a preacher to navigate. But here's hoping that we can walk through it without playing it as safe as possible.

Again, context matters, and we live in a context where there are people of many different faiths. We also live at a time when there are some Christians who have used these two sentences from the Gospel of John almost as weapons to denigrate other religions. As I mentioned earlier, I want there to be Christians who passionately believe the faith, but if we love dogma more than we love people, particularly people of other faiths, then we are losing the balance of the full

statement about Jesus being the way, truth, and life.

Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian minister who also wrote The Message, wrote about Jesus proclaiming himself to be the way, the truth, and the life saying, “The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life. We can’t proclaim the Jesus truth but then do it any old way we like. Nor can we follow the Jesus way without speaking the Jesus truth.

But Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. Jesus as the way is the most frequently evaded metaphor among the Christians with whom I have worked for fifty years as a North American pastor. In the text that Jesus sets before us so clearly and definitively, way comes first. We cannot skip the way of Jesus in our hurry to get to the truth of Jesus as he is worshiped and proclaimed. The way of Jesus is the way that we practice and come to understand the truth of Jesus, living Jesus in our homes and workplaces, with our friends and family... The local congregation is the place and community for listening to and obeying Christ’s commands, for inviting people to consider and respond to Jesus’ invitation, “Follow me,” a place and community for worshipping God.”<sup>1</sup>

The picture of Jesus that we get particularly in John’s Gospel is that he is the clearest revelation of who God is. For us as Christians, that is an important part of our system of belief, how we try to understand in our heads what is true about God. But there is a big difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner wrote that Jesus “didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could “come to the Father.” He said that it was only by... living, participating in, being caught up by, the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.”<sup>2</sup>

Now for the second part of the statement – “no one comes to the Father except through me.” Again, we look at the context. Thomas’ question which elicited Jesus’ statement was not, “Can non-Christians be saved?” Jesus was addressing his closest followers right before he would have to physically leave them. He passionately pleads with them to continue to follow him, to explore and experience his way, truth, and life when they can no longer see him. If they did so, they would continue to grow in their relationship with God and in finding God’s calling for their lives. “No one comes to the Father except through me,” is an internal statement for his followers, not a statement regarding interfaith relations.

There are people who follow other religions, whom I admire greatly. I believe we can learn from others about God and life and ourselves. The claim that Christianity holds sufficient truth for salvation does not mean that it has to hold that truth exclusively. And yet, the claim that all religions teach the same thing is untrue. I can’t agree with any atheists who claim all religions are false or with some pluralists who claim all religions are true. There are some religious views and practices that are clearly false, abusive, and even despicable. Some of those false, even appalling views and practices have been held by individuals and groups who call themselves Christian. David Koresh and Mother Teresa are not on the same plane. Yet, none of us who identify as Christians fully embody the way, truth, and life offered us in Jesus. Exactly how the universal love of God and the particularity of Jesus fit together isn’t totally clear to me, but it is a demonstration of God’s wisdom that determining who is ‘saved’ and who might not be isn’t left up to you and me.

I hope that the contextual conundrum of living with and learning from people of various faiths

does not diminish the passion of our Christian faith or our deep love for Jesus. What he says and demonstrates about God, what he enables for humanity thrills and challenges me no end. I hope and pray that his passionate love for God and for all of humanity is the way, truth, and life found not just in my faith statements, but in my heart statements and in my life statements as well. By God's grace, may it be so. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way*, Eerdmans, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper Collins, 1973, p. 14.