

John 14:1-14

“I am: The Way, the Truth and the Life”

I don't think I have ever begun a sermon with a disclaimer, so to make up for lost time, I will begin with TWO today. First, my plan during Lent was to preach the seven “I am” sayings one sermon at a time. Seemed logical for the six weeks of Lent, Maundy Thursday and Easter, knowing that I am missing one service. If I had done my homework ahead of time, I would have realized that this “I am” saying, is worthy of THREE sermons – one for the way, one for the truth and one for the life. So, rather than trying to fit eight pounds of nails into a six-pound bag, as my husband likes to say, this morning we will only scratch the surface of the richness of this pastoral conversation from Jesus.

Second, I am well aware of the need to use inclusive language in our modern-day world. I completely empathize with people who have had abusive, neglectful or oppressive past relationships with parents. I TRY to do my best to use language that invites men and women who have a negative connotation of the word “Father” to picture God in the way that suits their needs. HOWEVER, in this conversation, it is clear that Jesus is referring to his Heavenly FATHER in a way that illustrates a loving, caring and nurturing father. In the larger passage that his words are a part of, Jesus uses the word Father 53 times!! So, I will follow Jesus' example in my thoughts today and use “the Father” and the pronoun “he” frequently. Please understand that I do not mean to be hurtful in any way, but rather true to the meaning of Jesus' words.

Somewhere along the way, this verse has become the be-all, end-all verse to hang your hat on to describe *true* Christianity. Therefore, it is often overused with a sort of gate-keeping quality – to weed out people who want to have hope that Jesus came to save the WHOLE

WORLD! I often wonder what would have happened if past theologians and religious leaders had decided to emphasize, “Sell all you have and give the money to the poor and follow me” instead, but I digress.

However, when we make this “I am” statement into the measuring stick for Christians, we take Jesus’ words out of their context. This conversation that Jesus shares with his disciples is part of the longest discourse of Jesus’ recorded in all of Scripture. It begins in John 13, when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, and goes through John 17 when Jesus prays for the himself, his disciples, his enemies and then those who have yet to believe. I say this because it is important for us to understand that these words from our savior are completely PASTORAL and not DOCTRINAL. They were given as a comfort and not as a theological truth.

Let’s put ourselves in the disciples’ sandals for just a moment to understand why they needed to hear this hopeful promise. These twelve men, and most likely their families, have given up everything to follow Jesus of Nazareth. Their livelihood, their safety, their belongings, their past relationships, ALL of the comforts and familiarities of their lives. They have also seen the persecution and even hatred that Jesus has faced by not only the political leaders of the day, but the religious leaders whom many would have thought would allies instead.

And now, Jesus has made it clear to them that he is leaving. Dying! That he will die a terrible death. And that even though he will return for a time, THEY are expected to continue his ministry when he is gone. A ministry that they feely unequipped to carry on and that could also lead to THEIR death. In fact, today we know that every one of the disciples, except John, were ultimately martyred for their faith. And on top of all that, Jesus even told them there is a traitor among them and they don’t know who it is!

These beloved friends and followers of Jesus were scared to death. Their leader was leaving them, their futures were uncertain, and they had no idea what to expect when the sun rose each day. So, Jesus is seeking to reassure them, to offer them hope, to uplift their spirits as they set out to share the Gospel in a hostile world.

Now, we can relate to their emotions, even if on a different level. Has anyone here ever felt like God has deserted you? Anyone ever felt overwhelmed by expectations at work, school or within your family? Anyone ever wish there had been some instructions that came with raising children or aging with grace? Anyone ever admired someone who has failed you or lost trust in a friend? Well then, like the disciples, we will be blessed by this “I am” statement because with his words, Jesus is our pastor.

Jesus tells them not to worry because he is going to prepare a place for them and us *and* that they know how to get there. Then Thomas puts into words what everyone else is thinking, “How can we know where you are going? We do NOT know the way.” And Jesus actually offers answers. Those of us who are human pastors can only offer a listening ear, a hug, a path to help you find God in the midst of your suffering, and a promise to pray for you and with you in the joys and struggles that you face. Jesus offers a way when we are lost, truth when we are ignorant and life when we are spiritually dead.

Yes, friends, when we claim Jesus of Nazareth as our savior and Lord, he is our way. The Greek word might be better translated as “path” or “journey”. What Jesus means is that HE knows the way to his Father’s house and that he will not only SHOW us the way but provide a path for us to follow and a means of doing so.

Of course, Jesus has already done this with his life. Someone once asked me to help convince their mother to take a very serious step – to choose a path that was far different from

the one that she was travelling. I was hesitant and told them, “If I am not careful, I will alienate her”. When they asked for clarification, I said, “A wise person once told me that if I shine a flashlight in someone’s face, all I will do is anger and blind them. But if I shine the flashlight on the PATH, then they may decide to follow.” So rather than giving advice to my friend on what she should do, I simply shined the light on the path that I had taken, praying that it would look attractive to her.

When Jesus said, “I am the way” he meant that he had shown his Father’s love so that we could all receive the same blessings by following that way. He shined the light of love on the path that leads to the Father and to Eternal life. God calls those who love him to show His love to others by treating them and ourselves with compassion, fairness, respect and gentleness. By speaking the truth in love and admonishing when needed in ways that build each other up rather than destroys.

Jesus also said, “I am the truth”. Of course, he did not mean in the literal sense but in the spiritual sense or on a moral sphere. And where do we find God’s truth – why in His word, of course! John actually begins his Gospel by telling us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. That is to say, the LIVING word. Again, we can see God’s will for our lives by learning from Jesus. But also, by saturating ourselves in the word of God.

The Apostle Paul lived this better than anyone. He wrote to the Romans: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4) As we believe the word and obey it, God’s power works in us and accomplishes God’s purposes.

You see, Christianity is not just a doctrine, a creed or a religious system. Christianity is a way of life. That is why Augustine one said, “Preach the Gospel every day; use words when

necessary.” But we cannot demonstrate the truth to others if we do not know what those truths are, nor can we teach it to them.

Fred Craddock tells about then time when he lived in a small town in Georgia where the 30-bed county hospital asked all of the local ministers to take turns being Chaplain for a week. On one of his assigned weeks, a new baby was born. He writes, "I went there about nine in the morning and saw a clan of people gathered, looking through the glass at a little bitty new baby." "Is it a boy or girl?" "It's a girl." "What's the name?" "Elizabeth." "Is the father here?"

Someone pointed and Fred saw a young man leaning against the wall. "I'm the father," the young man told him. "Baby's name is Elizabeth?" Fred patted his back, "She's a beautiful baby." Elizabeth was squirming--you couldn't hear through the glass--but she was squirming, and red faced. Thinking the father may be concerned, Fred told him, "Now, she's not sick. It's good for babies to scream and do all that. It clears out their lungs and gets their voices going. It's all right." The young man nodded, "Oh I know she's not sick. But she's mad as fire."

Fred said, "Why's she so mad?" "Well wouldn't you be mad? One minute you're with God in heaven and the next minute you're in Georgia." Fred asked, "You believe your daughter was with God before she came here?" "Oh yeah." "You think she'll remember?" "We'll that's up to her mother and me. We've got to see that she remembers, 'cause if she forgets, she's a goner." This father knew that the Word is the way to Heaven and it was up to him to share it with this beautiful gift – his new baby daughter.

But we all know it is easy to forget with the pace of life and the noise of the world. Which begs the question: how does one remember? And why is it so easy to forget? Well, one remembers by knowing the truth. And if it we don't, then not only can we NOT share it with others, but we forget it also.

Finally, Jesus said, “I am the life.” Of course, we know today that Jesus was talking about Eternal life. Jesus had told the disciples about his death and resurrection, but they could not understand it. And while we may not understand it either we know that it is an historical fact. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a cross, suffered on our behalf and died. We know he was buried in a borrowed tomb but when the women went to tend to his body, he was not there. He had risen! As we journey through Lent, seeking to follow Jesus more closely by examining his words and our lives, we can do so with the joy of Easter people, knowing that this promise “I am the life” calls us to live as repentant sinners saved by grace.

Yet, Jesus was not only promising Eternal life but reminding his disciples for all time that we are called to live FRUITFUL lives, as he did. After Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension the disciples planted churches in Jerusalem, Samaria and all throughout the known world. Perhaps in an effort to follow this “I am” statement from Jesus, these churches were called “The Way”. And because God’s church still lives all over the world today, we know that they were fruitful in their efforts.

Understanding this, the Holy Spirit might be asking us today if NAZARETH is a fruitful church. Luke tells us those first believers in Acts were unified. Are we unified in our beliefs, our mission and our teaching? The first church shared not only their possessions for the good of all, but also their joys and burdens and every day lives. Do we share what we have so that others can be blessed? They ate and prayed and sang and worshiped and had glad and generous hearts. As a church, we might pause and examine the body of Christ in this place to be sure we are still bearing fruit as Christ’s people in the world today.

One thing is certain. We must seek the will of God and ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit if we are to bear fruit for God. In other words, we can only seek the Father’s way, share

the Father's truth and hope for life with the Father if we listen to the Spirit. All our discipleship must be human effort that is blessed by the Spirit of God.

Often times, when people give me compliments at the door after worship, you will hear me say something like, "It is all God." Well friends I really believe this. It's not just something they teach us to say because it sounds "preachery". Rev. Bob Cook once said, "If you can explain what's going on, God didn't do it." This describes me and my ministry perfectly. If God can use an ordinary sinner like me to bring His word to one individual, it can only be a combination of human effort and the Holy Spirit. There is no way I can explain it otherwise.

So, by God's grace and out of His great love for each one here, we have received another promise. This promise will journey with us on the Lenten road to Jerusalem and even beyond as we live as resurrection people. Jesus Christ is the way to his Father's house and the truth about his Father's heart. He brought the Father's life to earth so we could share in it now and forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Holy God, in Jesus Christ you have built for us an eternal house, a place of gracious plenty for the hungry and abundant life for the poor in spirit. By grace through faith you have promised us that we can live in that house with you forever. Believing in your living Word, we pray for all who have not had the opportunity to hear the truth and the promises of life you offer. Give us zealous hearts and courageous souls that we will preach the gospel with our words and our lives.

We pray also for the promised peace that Jesus offers to come soon. We bring to you those whose lives are threatened by violence, whose hearts and homes are filled with division and disagreement. We pray for the peace and welfare of all people, especially those who are grieving because they have lost loved ones because of hatred, greed and a lack of respect for life.

We continue to pray for those in power whose decisions and actions affect so many lives, not just today but for years to come. Give them wisdom and hearts to seek your way.

Lord, we are thankful for this church and the blessings that it brings to each life here. Cause our lives to bear fruit so that others may taste and see your goodness and grace. We pray for those and for those we have yet to love. Examine our hearts as only you can and bless those that are suffering, lonely, confused, addicted or depressed by the comfort of your presence and the encouragement of your Spirit.

God of patience and compassion, cause our lives to bear good fruit. In this Lenten season, we pray especially that you will help us bear fruit of repentance, so that we may be one with your will; through Christ our Lord. Amen.