

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

JOHN 14:1-14

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Who is this Jesus?

This is the question I introduced last week and is the lens through which we are looking at these two weeks in John's gospel.

Last week, we looked at Jesus' identity through words like "gate" and "shepherd."

Today, we encounter three very well known words, from Jesus' "Farewell Discourse"—his last words to his disciples before going to the cross.

Three words: Way. Truth. Life.

Way

The word "way" can mean a number of different things.

It can bring up images of the journey, the road, or the direction. *What is the way to Calgary? I'm on my way to my friend's house. I lost my way.*

It can also mean something like the technique or the method. *What is the best way to put up this fence? Make this recipe? Solve this math problem?*

When Jesus says, "I am the way," I think he has both are senses of the word in mind.

I am the journey, the road itself and the destination.

And I am the one who shows you the best method of walking the journey.

It's easy to focus on one of these "ways" to the exclusion of the other.

In his book, *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson talks about “consumer churches” and “consumer spirituality” as being the disease of the North American church.

According to Peterson, North American Christians are experts at packaging Jesus as a commodity, a belief system, a church to attend, a program to complete, a political stance to adopt, and pretty much ignore what Jesus himself said about the way to live on the journey *to* and *with* God.

North American Christians are often only too happy to talk about Jesus as our savior, as the one who died for us, the one who rose from the dead to open the door to eternal life, but *less* anxious to actually focus on the things that Jesus *taught* about loving enemies, peacemaking, mourning with the broken and hurting, pursuing righteousness and justice, being good news to the poor, fulfilling our mandates as stewards of creation.

In other words, we aren’t interested in the *ways* that Jesus himself talked about while he was here on earth.

Peterson goes so far as to call a “consumer church” an “antichrist church.”

Strong words. Listen to what he says:

[T]he Jesus truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. Jesus as the way is the most frequently avoided metaphor among the Christians with whom I have worked for fifty years as a North American pastor.¹

He goes on to say this:

We can’t suppress the Jesus way in order to sell the Jesus truth. The Jesus way and the Jesus truth must be congruent. Only when the Jesus way is organically joined with the Jesus truth do we get the Jesus life.²

Perhaps as Mennonites we have historically not been as prone to these errors as those in other streams of Christianity. We have, after all, always emphasized the importance of Jesus’ concrete teachings and been less doctrinally focused than some other Christian traditions. At our best, we have insisted upon a non-negotiable connection between what we say about Jesus and what we do.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 4.

² Peterson, 6-7.

But like everyone else, we are not always at our best 😊.

I think we can be tempted in this direction, too. We, too, need to be reminded that the Jesus way involves all of who we are.

We are not just brains that affirm propositions about who Jesus is and how Jesus saves us.

The Jesus way is not a philosophy or an explanation about reality, at least not exclusively. It incorporates explanation and philosophy, but only within the context of a lived life according to the pattern of Jesus.

God is not interested in a bunch of people claiming to believe things *about* Jesus; God is very interested indeed in a bunch of people becoming *like* Jesus and allowing this Christ-likeness to ripple out into every domain of life, bringing about the kingdom, on earth as in heaven.

Truth.

The opposite error to that of thinking that our beliefs about God are the *only* thing that matters is believing that our *behaviour* is the only thing that matters and that it can be separated from what we believe.

This is perhaps more of a temptation for us as Mennonites given our pragmatic emphasis upon the teachings of Jesus, especially in our cultural context, which is well acquainted with doubt and skepticism, where we ourselves have our doubts.

In this context, it's easy for us to minimize belief entirely, and to simply focus on ethics.

We focus on Jesus' this-worldly teaching and ignore his claims to divinity, his miracles, his focus on life in the spirit, and, possibly, even his resurrection, ascension, and future return.

We kind of lop off all that otherworldly, un-provable stuff, all the miracles and divinity, and focus on Jesus' earthy teachings about love and service and peace and justice.

And there's some merit to this, for this will keep us plenty busy!

But the danger here is that we stop speaking *about* Jesus entirely.

It's easy to do. We live in a pluralistic culture with many different religions and philosophies. Who are we to say that Jesus is THE way or THE truth or THE life?

A way, sure. A truth, yes.

But who are we to say that this story stands over all the other stories? Who are we to try to invite people away from their own ways and into the Jesus way? How can we declare other paths to God invalid?

Especially given Christianity's history with colonialism (in Canada, the role of the church in the Indian Residential Schools is front and center in many of our minds), especially given all the blood that has been spilt throughout history by those who were convinced that they (alone) were right and others were wrong, *especially given the many ways, past and present, in which Christians have ignored the Jesus way in their haste to proclaim the Jesus truth*, how can we continue to affirm that this one story stands over all the others?

Isn't it *immoral* to continue to say this?

I know how this feels. These are my questions, too.

Whatever else we might say about the story of Jesus, we must surely begin by admitting that imposing this story upon anyone by force has always been unequivocally wrong, and whenever and wherever the Jesus way has been ignored in proclaiming the Jesus truth, the church's *only* appropriate response is repentance.

But Scripture does not give us the option of declaring the way of Jesus to merely be one way among many equally valid ways.

(Logic doesn't give us this option either, incidentally. Different religious views and philosophies say very different things about the nature of God and of truth and of the human predicament; it is impossible for them all to be right.)

Most importantly, *Jesus* himself does not give us this option.

Jesus understood himself to be the one way in which the one true God was reconciling all *people*, Jew and Gentile alike, and all *things*, all of *creation* to himself. Jesus spoke and acted in ways that demonstrated his conviction that he was not just a good moral teacher or a powerful prophet, but *the God of heaven and earth in human flesh*.

This is what followers of Jesus down through the ages have affirmed and what we must continue to affirm.

(We might think of current headlines about Meriam Yahia Ibrahim, the pregnant woman in South Sudan who has been sentenced to death for charges of apostasy and adultery. She has never been a Muslim—indeed, she is an Orthodox Christian—but because her father who she barely knew was Muslim, the courts deem her marriage to a non-Muslim “adultery” and her refusal to renounce Christianity and embrace Islam, “apostasy.”)

The truth matters. The truth has always mattered. Jesus does not just nicely take his place on the “religion” shelf with all the other religious products. The story of Jesus, we believe and we profess, is the story that incorporates every other story.

Having said all this, we must always remember to be humble about what we don’t know and to remember that God alone is judge.

We must always keep in mind the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25, where those who were quite convinced that they knew Jesus very well were told, “I never knew you!” by Jesus because they did not clothe the naked, feed the hungry, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison, and those who seemed to have little understanding or connection to Jesus at all, were welcomed in because they did these things.

Those who believed the right things about Jesus but didn’t do what he said were out, while those who didn’t believe the right things about Jesus but did what he said, were in.

We must not miss this.

This ought to make us be *very* reticent about pronouncing upon who is “in” and who is “out.”

I am convinced that there is a wideness to God’s mercy that we cannot even fathom. The parable of the sheep and the goats makes it very clear that there will be surprises on that final day, both to those who were convinced they were in and those who were convinced that they were out.

We must never fall into the trap of thinking that Jesus’ statement; “I am the way, the truth, and the life” is synonymous with “*Christianity* is the way, the truth, and

the life” or “Mennonite theology and practice” is the way, the truth, and the life” or “my *understanding* of Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

These are *not* the same things. Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and Jesus alone decides how this works out in the lives of our neighbours, whatever their professed faith.

C.S. Lewis famously addressed this in *Mere Christianity*:

Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.³

“No one comes to the Father but through me” is not Jesus standing at the gate, checking our credentials, saying, “no one gets the goodies of heaven unless they accept me!”

He is *rather* saying, “I and the Father are one. You can’t separate us. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

We see this even more clearly when we read on after verse 6: “If you really know me, you know the Father as well. From now on, you *do* know him and have seen him.”

John 14:6 has so often been used as a statement against other religions, but in fact it is a declaration about Jesus’ identity, his oneness with the Father, to a group of fiercely monotheistic Jews who struggled right to the end to believe that God could take the form of a human being.

Life

We talked about “life” last week when Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.” So my words here will be brief.

I will simply repeat Eugene Peterson’s formula above.

The Jesus way + the Jesus truth = the Jesus life.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, 1955), 64.

Life properly oriented toward God, neighbour, self, creation here and now.

And *eternal* life. The kind of life that we were made for, the kind of life that will endure beyond the grave and into God's new world.

A final word.

On one level, this has been a rather theoretical sermon with not a lot of practical, "here's what this means for your life" content. I apologize for this. Kind of ☺.

I am convinced that we need to have good ways of thinking about God as we navigate the journey of faith in our own twenty-first century context so that's why I've spent a lot of time on how we *think* about things this morning.

But as I reread this passage this morning, I was struck again by the simple fact that these words were initially spoken as words of comfort and promise to fearful disciples on the verge of a very frightening and disorienting time.

It is so easy to abstract these three words from their original context and make them words about the validity of other religions or about any of the other things that concern *us*.

But we must always remember to read and to listen in context.

These three words that Jesus speaks are in response to a group of frightened, confused disciples who are asking him, "Where are you going? What's going to happen to you? We don't understand what you are saying. We know that you are from God and that somehow God is uniquely present in you, but we don't know *how*."

We don't know the way to the Father. *Show us! Tell us!*

To *these* people at *this* time and for *these* reasons, Jesus says... I am the way, the truth, the life...

*You don't need to be afraid about what you don't understand about how God works and where this is all going to end, because I—the one you see right in front of you, the one you have eaten with, traveled with, laughed and cried with, the one who has been your friend and teacher all these days—**this one—me!**—I am the way, the truth, and the life.*

Don't let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus is not giving his disciples a theological weapon to use against other religions, even if that is how this verse has frequently been used throughout history.

He was reassuring them that because they knew him, because they had, to borrow Martin Luther's term, "hung their hearts upon him," that they knew the way to the Father's house.

They knew the way to the Father because in Jesus the Father had come near to them.

This passage has less to do with defining the boundaries of who gets to God in the end and how than it does with convincing a bunch of confused disciples on the verge of catastrophe that this Jesus who was right in front of them was the way that God got to them.

And we need to hear his words in this light, too. Of course, we want to know how to think about our neighbours who don't follow Jesus, of course it's a bit disorienting trying to think about the exclusivity of the claims of Jesus in our context of religious pluralism.

We, too, get confused and disoriented. We, too, have moments where we can't figure it all out. We, too, have moments when our categories don't seem well-suited to this Jesus. And Jesus says the same thing to us.

I am the way, the truth, the life.

Keep your eyes on me, because if you know me, you know the Father.

I want to close with the words of Eugene Peterson again:

The way we come to God is the same way that God comes to us... Jesus is the way God comes to us. Jesus is the way we come to God. "They way up and the way down is the same way."⁴

Thanks be to God.



⁴ Peterson, 37.