

CHRIST THE WAY

JOHN 14:1-14

MARCH 1, 2006 – ASH WEDNESDAY

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“I am the way, the truth and the life no one comes to the Father except by me.” Those words of Jesus have been misinterpreted for generations.

On this Ash Wednesday when we begin our Lenten journey here at Westminster by dedicating ourselves to studying and meditating upon the famous “I am” sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, I would like for us to reflect a moment on what we mean when we call Jesus the way.

I say those words have been misinterpreted. Some understand the meaning of Jesus the way, the truth and the life as the final statement of the superiority of Christianity over all religions.

Proponents of this view say that to be a Christian is to believe certain things. That Jesus was the son of God. That Mary was a virgin. That the Pope is infallible. Or, for example, that the Genesis account of creation is literally true.

Others, claim that to be a Christian is to do certain things. Such as going to church, getting baptized, giving up alcohol and tobacco, reading the Bible or doing good deeds.

But easy definitions of the faith as a set of ideas or acts misreads what Jesus meant when he referred to himself as the way. In fact, much of the religious strife in our world today comes from reducing human spirituality to simple formulas.

When Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” he 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 him. By living and participating in and being caught up by the way of life he embodied.

That’s why we are proposing these Wednesdays of Lent to become better acquainted with the way of Jesus. When Jesus says in the Gospel of John I am the light, I am the gate, I am the good shepherd, I am the true vine he was giving his followers road signs and markers that pointed to his way of living.

Webster’s dictionary offers one of its longest entries for the word “way.” Not because it is complicated but because it is nuanced. The word “way” means: a thoroughfare used or designed for traveling from place to place; a course of action; the mode, manner, style or method in which something is done to get from point a to point b.

Whatever the way of Jesus means it has to do with getting us from one point to another. To boil it down to an idea or action makes it sound like something stationary that we can capture and tame.

Rather the way of Jesus captures and tames us as we move in our homes and workplaces and churches from brokenness to wholeness, from despair to hope.

Jesus is the way from falsehood and illusion to truth. He is the way from death to life.

On my way back from Florida last Saturday I sat next to a man in his eighties and his daughter. He had a heavy accent, was well dressed and snoozed with his tennis racket under his seat most of the way from Tampa to JFK.

As we were descending he asked me what I was reading. It happened to be a little book by a well known social critic. I told him the book was about how civilization changed from 1915 to 1945 not because of technology or politics or economics but because seventy million people were killed or murdered in war.

The little book said this event shattered the faith and optimism of the 19th century—an era of relative peace at the end of which we thought by educating the masses in the classics of western civilization we could design and become the perfect society. 70 million dead destroyed that hope. There is no link between education and behavior the book says.

My seatmate told me he was Jewish and that grew up in Czechoslovakia. He said that he spent much of the war in a concentration camp. “I agree with your book,” he said. “But what is the solution?”

“I’m not sure what the author says but my conviction is it has to do with what we call values and character.” I said. “The kind of principles we use to make daily decisions. We don’t learn character from books as much as from each other: seeing other human beings choosing things like honesty and integrity, risking to trust or cooperate when it is the last thing you’d think they’d do.

“Yes,” he said, “but it is an uphill battle.”

What does it mean to call Jesus the way, the truth and the life? It means getting to know him well enough so that he inspires you, so that the man he was is more real for you than the stained glass version of him most of us carry around in our heads.

How else could one person impact so profoundly the lives of twelve followers who in turn inspired dozens, hundreds, thousands and generations of followers?

Like my friend on the airplane said, it’s an uphill battle. There is so much in our world that demands our time and attention other than getting to know this first century carpenter/rabbi. But we have an opportunity for forty days in Lent to meet him again or maybe for the first time.

In a moment, we will place ashes on the foreheads of those who come forward. This ancient ritual on this holy day reminds us that “we are dust and to dust we return.”

That’s a sobering concept. Our consumer-driven world would have us believe we are invincible and eternally young. But our days are limited and numbered. We are, the psalmist says, as grass that grows up, withers and fades.

If our aim is to make our time here count and grow into whole people, I can’t think of a better thing to do this Lent than spend time with Jesus on his way.

Amen.

