

**ARE YOU SURE THIS IS THE WAY?
A Sermon by the Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – May 7, 2023**

**Please read:
Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
I Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14**

Some of you may remember Billy Graham, the famous evangelist of the last century, who traveled the world proclaiming the gospel of Christ. There is a story told that once, when he was in London, he spent an afternoon writing letters and postcards to folks back home and when the missives were complete, he headed out the door of his hotel in search of a post office. Just outside, he spotted a shoeshine boy, so he stopped to ask for directions to the nearest post office, which the boy gave him. Upon his return to the hotel, Mr. Graham stopped to thank the boy and then offered him tickets to that evening's crusade. "Come, bring your folks, and learn how to get to heaven." "No thanks," said the young man. "You don't know the way to the post office; how can you possibly know the way to heaven?"

I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Graham might have referenced today's gospel reading as the basis of his appeal to his audience that night. This text from John is one that is both familiar yet also troubling, comforting but uncomfortable. It is a beautiful text that is often chosen to be read at funerals. I suspect that is so for two reasons—first the people who are planning the funerals are people whose hearts are troubled. They are grieving and sorrowful; their lives have been turned upside down by the loss of a loved one; they are longing for comfort and hope and peace and Jesus' words offer them those gifts. The second reason it may be chosen is that it lays out a promised future for the loved one who has died—a heavenly mansion with a room prepared for that one by Jesus himself. That promise, too, is a source of comfort.

And yet...those same words of promise can be difficult when read before a funeral congregation that may include people who are not Christian, who may be Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu or follow no religious tradition at all. We live in a pluralistic world; we participate in a pluralistic church in which fellow Christians disagree about the meaning of some of Jesus' words. I have sometimes found myself reading the opening verses of this text in such a context, and omitting the last part of verse 6, "No one comes to the Father except through me," so as not to offend or confuse or turn listeners off.

These words are troubling because they sound exclusive—that there is no other name, no other way, not other truth, but Jesus. That is to say, Christianity is the one true religion and all others are false. We have the truth and no one else does. We worship the one true God and all non-Christians worship false gods. We are saved and they are damned. We are in and they are out.

The problem is in wanting to make sure that we are in, we are tempted to use Jesus as our guarantor for heaven. Remember Billy Graham? He offered the shoeshine boy the answer to the question of how to get to heaven. That's the answer we may be

tempted to look for, too. So when we hear Jesus say that he is the only way to the Father and we claim belief in Jesus, we can breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that we are all set. We don't have to worry about what comes after this life; we can just look forward to a place in God's heavenly mansion. Pastor Sam Wells says, we humans have a project and it is to get out of this life alive and Jesus solves that problem by offering us eternal life.¹

However, this means that we are using Jesus. Faith becomes a transaction—I believe in Jesus and he gets me past the pearly gates. Jesus becomes a means to an end, and relationship with him is reduced to a contract. We assume the whole point of Jesus is to get us into heaven and that solves the death problem.

Sitting there with his followers for the last time before his death, knowing that they were frightened and grieving, do we really think that Jesus is trying to give instructions on how to get to heaven? I doubt that he would choose that moment to declare that other faiths, such as Judaism, which was his own faith tradition, are inadequate. He has something else in mind all together. At that tender moment, he is more concerned about relationship, about love, about the joy that comes from living life with him.

Look at the two words that he uses to begin the sentence about being the way, the truth and the life—"I am." Over and over in John's gospel, Jesus give us "I am" statements—I am the good shepherd, I am the true vine, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life. Seven times he says "I am," which is the translation for the Hebrew word for the name of God. Over and over, Jesus claims his oneness with God. All that God is, is embodied in Jesus. And what the Hebrew Scriptures tell us about God is that God is all about relationship. God established a covenant with the Hebrew people as the sign of God's love for them. God sought them out, gave them freedom from slavery, led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land, and forgave them time and time again, all because of God's love for them and the desire to be loved in return. God is a God of covenant, not contract, a God who longs to be enjoyed, not used.

This is what Jesus is about—loving relationship, here and now, not golden streets in heaven some day. The way is to seek after, to desire, to be open to relationship with God in Christ now, each day. The truth is that God made us to be in relationship with the Creator and with all of creation. The life is living in the truth of God's gracious and generous love. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life of God, who is present and at work among and for the sake of all people everywhere, even people of other religious faiths or no religious faith and maybe even fellow Christians who don't believe exactly as we do.

But here Jesus is speaking to the people who have lived with him, listened to his teachings, watched him heal and forgive, witnessed him giving new life to those who had lost all hope, sat at table with him when he prayed and broke the bread. These followers have experienced something special in his presence. Jesus has made them think better thoughts, live better lives, be part of a unique community, and discover something new about being in relationship with God. They have heard the boldness in his words, seen his kindness to all kinds of people, witnessed his open-heartedness, and been a part of the

community that he formed out of a hodge-podge of women and men. In this person, they had already seen and heard and lived the way, the truth and the life. Now, that it was time for him to leave them, he is reminding them of the amazing relationship they have known and that they would continue to experience.

Remember, Jesus is speaking to his followers in these verses. He is offering them words of consolation and the assurance that he will not abandon them but will make a way for an even deeper intimacy than they have already known. He is not addressing the question of other religions or no religion at all. I don't believe he was worried about that because he was amazingly inclusive during his lifetime. Remember how he spoke of other sheep he had outside of this flock?ⁱⁱ Or when he said he would draw all people to himself?ⁱⁱⁱ Or how he reached out across ethnic and religious barriers to speak the Samaritan woman^{iv} or to heal the son of the Roman official^v?

Here, Jesus is addressing people who have made a commitment to him and who have accepted his call to follow him, both those first followers and us. He encourages them and us to trust that we know enough and are equipped enough to do greater works than Jesus himself. We do that by living, as best we can, the life he lived—loving our neighbors, even the ones we don't like or agree with; trusting ourselves to God's mercy, even when it seems all hell is breaking loose; humbly listening to people on the margins of our society and doing what we can to work for justice on their behalf; being part of a community that supports our relationship with God and one another; forgiving and receiving forgiveness; loving God and pursuing that relationship with all our being through prayer and scripture. Of course, we will fail to live that life perfectly because we are not Jesus, but he has given us numerous ways to start again and to remember the love he offers us—we have each other, we have baptism into his family, we have his Table, we have his Word to us.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, who wrote vast tomes about the faith, said once that all those volumes could be summed up in the song we sang with the kids, "Jesus loves me, this I know because the Bible tells me so." Jesus is not about making deals with us, not about offering us a ticket to get into heaven. Jesus is about loving us with a love so deep and true, that the everlasting life with him, which we hope for after death, is ours even now.

ⁱ Sam Wells, "The Way, the Truth, and the Life," preached for the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., May 10, 2020.

ⁱⁱ John 10:16.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 12:42.

^{iv} John 4:7-42.

^v John 4:46-53.