

I Am the Way the Truth and the Life
John 14:1-6
Easter Sunday, 2011
Rev. John Burns
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740
Website: www.weareubc.org

After church last Sunday, Jacob and I were surprised with the gift of tickets to see the Washington Nationals play the Milwaukee Brewers in an old fashion double-header at Nationals Park. We had several matters to tend to before we could go to the ballpark and didn't arrive until the eighth inning of the first game. We went to our seats and found a man in his late thirties sitting in our spot. An usher was nearby, so I recruited him to help Jake and I occupy our rightful places in the ballpark. He told the man he was in our seats.

The man evidently thought that when he purchased his tickets for the game, he had bought the entire stadium for he replied, "I'm sitting with my group." "That may be," said the usher, "but you're in the wrong seat. This man has a ticket for both of those places."

"For which game?" the unmovable man inquired. "I've got these seats for the first game." He lied. "No you don't" the usher calmly countered. "Every ticket is for both games. You're going to need to move."

"Come on man" his testosterone was getting pumped. "There's only five minutes left in this game and you're going to make me move." I guess he thought Jake and I should just hover until he was ready to evacuate where we were suppose to sit.

"Yes" said the usher, "you need to move now." At this point I noticed the man's wife was sitting four empty seats away from him. She tried to look like she didn't know who he was. Thankfully, a friend of his sitting in the row ahead of him said, "Come on buddy, just move up here."

Huffing and muttering, the man got up out of our seats, crawled over the back of the seat in front of us and sat down on the back of the seat intentionally blocking our view. He said, "I'll just sit here for the rest of the game." His wife let out a sigh of exasperation and his friend said, "dude, give it a rest." At which point the man slid down into another seat that did not belong to him. I, thankfully, kept my thoughts to myself.

When the game was over, the obstinate one's wife came over to me and very kindly asked if I would take a picture of their group. I agreed to do so but then, after she conferred with her still obnoxious husband who shook his head vociferously, she came back and said, "I guess that won't be necessary."

That man had adopted a certain way of life. Let's call that way, the path of the Intimidator. He learned that way from somebody and has probably found it to be successful in certain circles. The Intimidator can persist in his way because he has a friend who will manage his outbursts and a wife who will try to repair the damage he leaves in his wake. So far, his way is still working for him. But here's what I know. If he doesn't find a new way, that woman won't be with him for much longer and neither will that friend. He may get a new wife and a new friend, til he wears them out too, but if he follows his way to the day he dies, he will miss the best part of this life as well as the life to come. The Intimidator needs to learn a new way.

Ranier Maria Rilke asks God to help people whose way is no longer working for them when he prays, "Lord the great cities are lost and rotting. Their time is running out . . . The people there live harsh and heavy, crowded together, weary of their own routines. . . Their dying is long and hard to finish: hard to surrender what you never received. Their exit has no grace or mystery. It's a little death, hanging dry and measly like a fruit inside them that never ripened."

If your way is still working for you, congratulations. Do you think your way will get you through the next five to ten years? How about twenty? Will your way take you through this life and prepare you for the day you die? If you persist in your way, will you experience the life God intended or will you face your death fearfully and regretfully as you realize you've missed the best part of this life as well as the life to come? As you realize your life was like a fruit inside you that never ripened.

These were the questions on the minds of the disciples when Jesus said, he was going to leave them. They each had their own way about them. Peter the bombastic one. Thomas the realist. Nathaniel the skeptic. Simon the revolutionary. Judas the opportunist. James and John, known as the sons of thunder because of their short fuses. Their ways had worked for them fairly well. They had made it into Jesus's inner circle. They had traveled throughout Galilee like celebrities, followed by huge throngs of people virtually everywhere they went. They thought their ways would help them obtain places of authority in the new government they assumed Jesus was about to create. Then, out of the blue, Jesus said, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now" and something like panic set in. All of a sudden, their ways weren't working for them anymore.

Jesus sensed their anxiety and said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I am the way, the truth and the life."

It's a frightening experience to realize that our ways are not working for us anymore. When the awareness settles it, we experience confusion, disorientation, depression, aimlessness, like we've lost our home and can't find our way back.

My way stopped working for me in 1993 when I went through a divorce. One night, in the midst of the pain of those days, I had a dream. In the dream, it was my first day of high school and I had all my school supplies in my hands walking down the halls looking for my locker. I traveled corridor after corridor looking for a place to put my stuff, but every locker was taken. Finally, a friend directed me to a table, where a teacher sat, handing out locker assignments. When I approached and told her my name, she said, "there is no place for you here, anymore." And that is exactly how I felt.

That's the way the disciples felt when they heard Jesus say he was going away. They had no place anymore. Maybe, if your way is not working anymore, you feel that way. If so, hear the words of our Lord. For he comforted the disciples with words that are essential for your and my life as well. He said, "yes you do have a place. A place that I will secure for you. A place with my Father. I will go away, but I will return and usher you to the place God has prepared for you."

Many Biblical scholars interpret Jesus' words here to mean that after his resurrection, he would go to heaven and return at some future date to gather up all his followers and take them to heaven. Jesus speaks several times about a return to earth, but I don't think he is referring to the second coming in this passage. I think Jesus is talking about his resurrection. He knew that in a matter of hours from when he said these words, he would be crucified and buried. Knowing his disciples as he did, he also understood that his death would throw them into fear, confusion and despair. So, before all the dramatic events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday unfolded, Jesus tried to prepare the disciples for what was about to unfold by telling them "I will leave you for awhile, but then I will return to provide you with a new way to live."

Somehow, although Jesus emphasized he was going to show us a way, Christians, from almost day one, focused on a place. Jesus words were mistranslated in the earlier versions of Scriptures to read "in my Father's house there are many mansions." The phrase spawned a bunch of hymns and gospel tunes about our mansions in the sky, just over the hilltop, in the sweet by and by.

Please don't misunderstand what I'm about to say. Heaven is a glorious place, if by God's grace we make it there, we will in no way be disappointed, but Jesus is not talking about heaven here. The better translation of these words is, "In my father's household, there is a place for you. I will go to secure that place and then I will return and walk with you in the household of my Father."

This household that Jesus speaks of us spans the division between heaven and earth. Think of it like a immense family traveling together. You and I are sort of in the back of line. Way up ahead, beyond our sight, are those believers in Jesus who have already died. They aren't walking any more, they have arrived. They're singing and shouting and loving God. . .and waiting on us.

You say, "How do we know they're up ahead. How do we know there's a place for us with them?" Because Jesus told us, right here in this passage. He told the disciples, "I've got to leave you for awhile and you can't follow where I'm going right now, but later you will. Because I will return and walk with you and you will be with me always." Then Christ suffered the crucifixion and went away from the disciples sight for three days. Where was he? He was on up ahead. He saw every thing and every one waiting for us. He heard the singing, joined in the shouting, helped wipe away every tear and then returned, as he promised, to his grieving disciples and said, "come along with me, I've seen the destination. There is room in the household of God for you. I'm the way. Follow me."

When we say yes to Christ's invitation, our blessing is twofold. We have a glorious destination awaiting us and we have Christ to walk with us in the new way of life he offers us. These blessings are not automatic, however. In order to find them we must give up our way and accept the way of Christ. That's not easy because the world is hard on people who choose the way of Christ. The influential, conservative scholar Leon Morris writes, "'I am the Way,' said the One who would shortly hang impotent on a cross. 'I am the Truth,' when the lies of evil men were about to enjoy a spectacular triumph. 'I am the Life' when within a few hours His corpse would be placed in a tomb."

I must admit that last Sunday, for just a few moments, my mind fantasized about a different response to the Intimidator who would not yield our seats. As he sat there sneering, I saw myself pick him up, twirl him like a helicopter blade and toss him up in the second tier of the ball park to thunderous applause from his family, friends and surrounding spectators. But even if I could have mustered that much muscle and adrenalin, that would not have been the way of Christ. Nor would have been my other thought. To agree to take the man's picture and then, like that guy does in the commercial about the cell phone company, take his camera and throw it under the feet of the racing presidential mascots.

The way of Jesus often makes us feel foolish, weak, uncool, taken advantage of, even deprived of all the flashy things others spend their lives trying to accumulate. Presbyterian pastor M. Craig Barnes reminds us, however, that the outcome of a life lived in the way of Christ is one of surprising joy. He writes, "The disciples thought their Lord was going to bring about a kingdom of earthly power, but they were amazed to discover his vision was for the Kingdom of God. Mary and Martha thought their beloved friend would prevent the death of Lazarus, but they were stunned to discover that he was the resurrection and the life. Everyone thought the cross was the end of the story, and that is why preachers always present Easter as a startling surprise."

No, it is not easy exchanging our ways for the way of Christ, but it is the only way to find the meaningful life God has for us to experience. It makes it somewhat easier to let go of our ways however, if we recognize that our ways just are working for us anymore. If you're wearing out with your way as well as exhausting everyone around you, why not accept Christ's invitation and join Him in the household of God.

In his poem, *A Brief for the Defense*, Jack Gilbert describes an insight that came to him while standing on the prow of a ship looking out at a sleepy fishing village on Santorini, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea. As Gilbert took in the spectacular sight, he heard the sound of oars splashing the water and knew a villager was coming to take him to the island. The sound of the oars sent a chill down the back of his neck because, although he desperately wanted to get to the tranquil village, he was afraid to leave the safety of the ship that had carried him so far to put his life in the small rowboat coming to take him ashore.

As the sound of the oars grew louder, he grew more fearful and then a reassuring truth calmed him. He thought, I don't have to navigate the rolling seas by myself. There is a skilled oarsman on board and the craft is seaworthy. I will be in the hands of one who has made this trip countless times and knows the way like I know the way to my own home. The ship I'm on cannot take me to my beautiful destination. The only way is in that boat with that able oarsman. As that thought settled into his mind, the sound of the oars splashing the water filled him with wondrous excitement.

Does the sound of the oars splashing the water trouble you? Jesus told us not to let our hearts be troubled. Then, on Easter morning, he showed us why we can greet the sound of the oars with great anticipation. For it is Christ, the one crucified, buried and raised from the dead who has been to the beautiful shore and has returned to accompany us into the household of our loving God. To travel with Him, we simply have to let go of the ship that has carried us this far, turn loose of the ways that aren't really working for us anymore anyway and put our lives in the hands of the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.