

Jesus, the Way, Truth, and Life

John 14:6

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We find ourselves this morning in the midst of Jesus' last conversation with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It's the Last Supper, Judas has just gone out into the night on his errand of betrayal, and Jesus is telling his friends that he is about to go away to prepare a place for them. But not to worry: they know how to get there. Thomas protests, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus' answer is startling and has caused no end of controversy in our own time: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These words pose a problem for many of us. We want to embrace Jesus as our life, our hope, our savior, the morning star rising in our hearts. But we may recoil at the suggestion that there is no salvation apart from Christ. Is Jesus saying that those who do not expressly follow him are spiritually lost?

What Jesus goes on to say may help. Philip does not seem to be very impressed with Jesus' assertion that he is the way, the truth and the life. "Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied." Forget a journey to the Father by way of Jesus, just introduce us to him, here and now! Jesus' answer is essentially this: you're looking at him already, since if you know me, you know the Father; the Father and I are that closely linked. The implication here is that if a relationship with the Father is our goal, that goal has already begun to be reached if we know Jesus. But more than that, fully reaching that goal will never take us on beyond Jesus, since knowing the Father will always be something that comes in and through our relationship with Jesus.

This helps us to understand what Jesus means when he says he is the way and the truth and the life, but at first this makes things worse. It renders even more acute the question of salvation apart from belief in Jesus. Jesus is reminding us that there is no way for us to know the Father without mediation. God is the reality at the heart of all things. We've all had the experience, perhaps especially as teenagers, of lying on our backs on a summer night looking at the stars. The depth of the universe is unfathomable. But God is deeper. God is the dazzling darkness behind the shining stars, the hidden light that makes all light possible. Yet this God is directly known exclusively in Jesus Christ.

I want to suggest that the unique revelation of God in Jesus in fact opens the doors of salvation wide for everybody, whether they profess Jesus as Lord or not. Let's remember how John's Gospel starts: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." If Jesus is God's word to us, that is, God's message to us, then everything that Jesus said and did tells us about who God is. This is why we hear passages from the Gospels every Sunday. These narratives are the early church's witness to what Jesus said and did. We connect with the story they tell so that we can connect with God.

But behind all this is John's assertion that Jesus is the Word made flesh. It would be easy to overlook what this says about God. God chooses to be made known to us

in an act of communion. To be in communion is to share something in common, to be in community, or, as the original Greek text of the New Testament puts it, to be in *koinonia*. In Jesus, God has chosen to become a human being, to take on our human nature, to make our ordinary lives and our extraordinary struggles something we have in common with God.

I think we Christians forget what a wild idea this is. How could the God who is behind and beneath and beyond all things become one of us and share the human experience in common with us? Yet this is what it means to say that the Word was made flesh. The implications of the Incarnation are immense and multiple, but the main idea is this: God is emphatically and unambiguously about community, communion, *koinonia*.

But why would God need to become incarnate in Jesus Christ to demonstrate God's commitment to *koinonia*? For the earliest Christians, the ones whose witness gave us the New Testament, the answer would have been obvious. Jesus' teaching about *koinonia* and his embodiment of it weighed in on an ancient debate. Is reality ultimately about conflict or *koinonia*? Is the world merely a playing-field for competing forces or is it the seedbed of a society in which the connection of all parties is acknowledged and celebrated?

This question had been most succinctly posed four centuries before Christ in Plato's early dialogue, *The Gorgias*. There, Socrates finds himself pitted against Callicles, an arrogant young man who calls Socrates an old fool and insists that polemics, that is, conflict, is more fundamental than *koinonia*. In the ensuing conversation, it becomes clear that the two views are pretty evenly matched. It is very easy to see the world as a battlefield for power. But the yearning for truth, says Socrates, points us beyond power-politics to a reality that transcends our selfish agendas and binds us into community one with another. If the cosmos is a coherent whole, if it all holds together so that a proper understanding of it, including ourselves, will lead us toward an understanding of all of it, then the universe is grounded in unity, not discord.

When Jesus says he is the way, the truth and the life, he points to himself as the singular Word that binds all things together in one. We can hear that word in two related ways. The first message is that Socrates was right: in Jesus we learn that God is love.

The second is that we are also the objects of God's love. This is a subtle but crucially different point. We might agree that everything is connected. We might even agree that God is love. But we could still think that God's love had nothing to do with us. John's Gospel won't let us get away with that. The Incarnation is not only a word about who God is; it is a word addressed to each of us and to the whole human race. God loves us whether we like it or not. God's love flows toward us freely and abundantly ("grace upon grace"), not because we deserve it, but because that is just who God is.

If that is the case, it is hard to see how Jesus' claim to be the way, the truth and the life could exclude anyone from the Father's love. I can see how those who refuse unlimited *koinonia* might exclude themselves from that love, but then the corollary also holds: all who acknowledge connection beyond their own circle of self-interest belong to the kingdom of God. "Whoever is not against me is for me," says in Luke 9:50. We Christians should not hesitate to honor and work with all people of good will, whether they be Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, seekers, or non-believers.

So why be a Christian? When we witness the confirmation of a new class of young adults, we will, with them, reaffirm our baptismal vows. Why go to the trouble of being baptized in the first place? Why follow Jesus in particular? Here are three reasons.

First, Jesus is our evidence that *koinonia* is, in fact, possible. In a world full of selfishness, hostility, and exclusion, it is all too easy to believe that cutthroat competition and mere partisanship have the last word. The story of Jesus is a witness against all that. If we try to follow him in his way of life, his attitude toward others, his teachings about God, we will be able, at the very least, to resist the pressure of division and order our own lives differently. More than that, we will find ourselves in the company of other people who want to offer themselves in service to others.

Second, since Jesus is the Word made flesh, he is, as he says, our access to the Father: "No one comes to the Father except through me." We can get to know Jesus through Scripture, in the sacraments, in spiritual conversation, in singing and in prayer, and in so doing can come to a personal knowledge of God as a friend and companion. This doesn't make us better than other people. We all know or have heard of amazingly good people who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ. But for those of us who are weak and fearful, the assurance of God's love may give us the confidence we need to speak the truth of *koinonia* in the face of hate.

This brings me to my third point. When we understand that God loves us no matter what, we are faced with a choice. We can resist this freely-given love, preferring to hold out for spiritual rewards we have earned and can be proud of. But if we do this we are headed away from *koinonia*, since in our hearts we have already excluded those who don't measure up to our standards. Or we can embrace God's grace, and in so doing acknowledge the elements of selfishness, hostility, and exclusivity we harbor in our own hearts. But we will acknowledge them in a new way: not as barriers to our own inclusion, but as measures of God's mercy and grace. Thus in our very weakness and failure, we become icons of redemption.

That is our unique calling as Christians: to become icons of redemption through our own acceptance of a love we don't deserve but have received anyway. This is the way the Incarnation ripples out from Christ and sometimes goes viral. Through our witness to God's forgiveness, our readiness to forgive others, and our willingness to be in communion with anyone without exception, the whole world will come to know its infinite worth for the one through whom it was made: Jesus, our way, our truth, our life.