

## Finding the Way

Sermon preached by Maureen Smith

Text: John 14:1-11

The disciples were sad, confused, afraid. Jesus had just told them he would be leaving them, and they didn't want him to go. They didn't understand why it had to happen.

In our beautiful passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus offers words of comfort. Whenever any of these words are used in any other way—whenever they are used as words of condemnation—it is important to remember that.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says. “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

These words, so familiar to many of us, are often used at funerals, because they offer a promise that someone who has been a follower of Jesus will have a home with God in eternal life. The language is metaphorical, but sometimes it helps grieving family members and friends to imagine the dwelling place prepared for a loved one, imagine what will be in it, what interests and hobbies might find fulfillment in the eternal home.

Those of us who are old enough may still prefer the language of the King James Bible: In my Father's house are many mansions. Mansions are big. The idea of many mansions inside a house is striking—it captures our imaginations—and for me it sounds inclusive, suggesting that there will be room for everyone. In another passage in the gospel of John, in the 10th chapter, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.” I always like to think there are mansions for all kinds of others.

But in fact, dwelling place is a better translation of the Greek. One of the gifts of preparing a sermon is that it pushes me to do research I wouldn't do just for myself, and I discovered something lovely about the word in Greek. It is the noun form of the Greek verb “abide,” a favorite word in John's gospel. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus says in the 15th chapter of John. “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

In English, too, we have a verb and a noun. Abide, and abode.

What's beautiful about this is that we don't have to wait until after death for this abiding, this being at home in the presence of God. We abide in Christ now, and the promise is that we will be in God's presence on the other side of death, always and forever.

After Jesus speaks these words of comfort and promise to the disciples, Thomas asks a question. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus answers, in the best known words of this whole passage: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Sometimes, when I use this passage at a funeral, I stop there, without including the follow up line, “Nobody comes to the Father but by me.” Some people believe in using funerals as opportunities for evangelism, but I never want to hit people over the head in a time of grieving. I wouldn’t mind using the passage if I had time to explain it, but I don’t see a funeral as the time or place for that.

Three years ago, when David Colby came to Central, he talked to some people about me, trying to get a sense of whether he should ask me to stay on in my part-time pastoral role. People must have said good things about me, because he did ask me to stay on, and I continue to thank God for that, for this wonderful privilege I’ve been given at this church I love.

Dave told me later that one thing he heard about me was, “Maureen is great. We love her. But she always preaches sermons about women.” I love preaching and teaching about women—women of the Bible, the feminine side of God—and I guess I did do that quite a bit in my first years at Central.

I mention that only to say that these days people might say something different. They might say—you might say—“We like Maureen, but she’s always talking about other religions.”

Everyone who knows me knows I have a great interest in other religions, great respect for them, and I don’t hold to the idea that everyone who isn’t a Christian is headed for hell. I’m not going to make that the main point of this message, but I do want to address it just a little bit again.

Any Christian who makes the claim that God’s love embraces people of all faiths has to be ready to give an explanation for this verse: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me.”

I love the way Diana Eck explains it in her book *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. She was a Methodist from Bozeman, Montana, who continues to be a committed Christian but takes a wider view after spending time in Banaras, the holiest city in India, on the Ganges. The city is probably better known by another name, Varanasi, the name of one of our greatly loved families here at Central, the name of our friend Sri Varanasi, from India.

I love what Diana Eck says about Jesus: “Faith in Christ rests on two remarkable affirmations. Jesus Christ reveals to us the face of God, which is love. And Jesus Christ reveals to us the meaning of the human, which is love. That double revelation is enough. I do not need to know that it is the only story on earth to affirm that it is worth giving my heart to.”

Didn’t Jesus say I am the way, the truth, and the life? Yes, Eck says, but if “I am the Way” is the answer, what exactly was the question? Most Christians wouldn’t be able to say what the

question was, but if you've been listening this morning, you could do it. Jesus said these words during the last night he spent with his disciples, when he spoke words of farewell and Thomas asked where he was going and how the disciples could know the way. Jesus answered, I am the Way. It was a pastoral answer, spoken in love to people in a time of confusion and fear.

Jesus wasn't answering a question about what happens to Jews or Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims. All he was saying was that he is the Way, for those who follow him.

Sometimes I look at it this way: If Jesus is the way, then Jesus is the one who opens the door or closes it, and I would trust people to Jesus. I actually heard a Jewish woman say the same thing once. "Let Jesus be the gatekeeper," she said. "I bet he'd say, She gets in." I bet he would, too.

For me all of this ties in with the next section of our passage from John. Philip says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus says to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. That is a bold claim, isn't it? And it's exactly what Diana Eck is talking about when she says Jesus Christ reveals to us the face of God, which is love.

I've always believed that was one of the main reasons Jesus came, to show us what God is like. Without the distinctive personality of Jesus as we come to know him in the gospels—without the example he gives us, the ethic he teaches and the challenging way of life he calls us to—we would be too tempted to invent our own God, a God who endorses our own prejudices, a God who is sort of a magnified and perfected version of ourselves.

We do some of this anyway—it's almost impossible not to—and people of all beliefs find ways of convincing themselves God is on their side. But the example of Jesus makes it harder for us to go too far astray.

Some Christians, many Christians, maybe most Christians although I'm not sure that's true any more, but certainly many Christians are able to look at Jesus and say he would send a majority of the people in the world to hell for not believing in him.

For me, this just doesn't compute. I think of the Jesus who told us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek—the one who said "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"—the one who outraged the most righteous people of his day by eating with sinners—the one who said he had other sheep who are not of this fold—the one who came into this world to show God's love.

When I think about all the good people I know who aren't Christians—I'm not saying they are perfect people without sin, but then neither are any of the Christians I know—I'm with that Jewish woman who said, Let Jesus be the gatekeeper. I bet he'd say, they get in.

In some churches, all of this might be a brave thing to say. When I've told some of my friends I was going to say it at church, they've gasped as if they figured I'd get in a lot of trouble for it and maybe lose my job. I was a little apprehensive myself the first time I spoke out about

this. But if anyone has been unhappy with me, they haven't told me about it.

In fact, I don't think most people here at Central want to believe everyone who isn't a Christian is headed for hell. If they can find ways not to believe it and still be faithful Christians, they will be happy. I believe that's true for most people in our mainline churches, and maybe even for more evangelicals than we would guess.

So maybe this isn't the issue we need to be thinking about. Maybe we should look at Jesus's words—I am the way, the truth, and the life—and see in what ways they challenge us.

Maybe the question for us isn't whether Muslims and Hindus can be saved. That's between those people and God. Maybe the better question is how Jesus is the way for us, where our identity is as Christians.

I found this in a book called *Texts for Preaching*, and it spoke to me: "The Christian community has so bought into the world's economics, its psychology, its standards of morality, that visitors from outer space would have a difficult time discerning the difference between the social and political culture of the day and the church. Maybe the real issue is not whether people outside the church are saved, but whether people inside the church have any sense of their distinctiveness.

Think about the values of our culture, and think about whether ours are different. Where is our center of value? Is it in our salaries or our investment accounts, our beautiful homes or our latest technological devices? Is it in our liberal Democratic politics, or our conservative Republican politics, or our staunchly independent stance? Is it in our favorite sports team? For me, is it in my beloved Minnesota Twins? How are we different from the rest of our culture because of our Christian faith?

This brings to mind a question that was going around when I was younger, not long after I was converted to Christianity: If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Or let me ask it this way. If Jesus shows us the way—if Jesus is the way—have we found that way, and are we following it?

What is the way of Jesus? Loving God and neighbor. Loving the enemy, turning the other cheek. Bringing good news to the poor. Eating with outcasts and sinners. Feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, welcoming the stranger.

Don't worry right now about your neighbor, or about the people of other faiths you know. Trust them to God's love. Ask yourself only this. Is it true for you that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?