

From the Pulpit
Salem First Presbyterian Church

How Can We Know the Way?

John 14: 1-14

© copyright 2008 Audrey L. Schindler, Interim Pastor
First Presbyterian Church, Salem, Oregon
April 20, 2008 (1950's style service)

Our Scripture for today touches on finding our way in life, a timely topic when despite the use of MapQuest and GPS, finding the way in the larger sense can still be a challenge. In our service today looking back to the '50's, there is a sense that **at least in hindsight, things seemed simpler then**. An article in our church newsletter in 1956¹ said the youth group had enjoyed "a perfect hay-ride and wiener roast," supervised by official chaperones. A woman who came of age in that time said that in those days, there was a clear divide between nice girls and fast girls. Nice girls had a circle of friends they did things with; fast girls wore eyeliner, and had their ears pierced.

In our time, finding our way is complicated when stable employment is increasingly uncertain for many, and when, in the virtual minefield of parenting children today, ear piercing is the *least* of a parent's worries. Into all this change and uncertainty, comes a reading from the 14th chapter of John's gospel, a passage of Scripture that offers a depth of **resources for finding our way in such a time**. We'll have a look at each part of this rich text in turn.

Jesus begins with a gracious word to his followers, "Let not your hearts be troubled." This one verse, "**let not your hearts be troubled**" could make such a difference in our lives if we would but take it to heart. Often it is easy to dwell on the negative possibilities, getting bogged down in worries over health or children, aging parents or an uncertain future. Humorist Garrison Keillor once spoke of the internal "**worst case scenario hotline**" that many of us call regularly, envisioning the worst possible outcome for anything we're worried about, even though it isn't possible for *all* the bad outcomes to happen at once (and we never seem to worry about the right thing, anyway).

Christ beckons us, "let not your hearts be troubled," and why? "You believe in God; believe also in me," he says. You may have seen that picture of a lighthouse, standing firm with a huge wave breaking against it. I remember seeing that picture in the office of a woman who had been through a time of conflict in her workplace, where she had been at the heart of the storm. The lighthouse represented for her **faith in Christ, strong against the onslaught of the waves**, the lighthouse shining still.

"Believe in me," Christ says. The Biblical word for *believe* has the connotation of *trust*, trust in the sense that you can **rely on Christ, find him a solid rock for life**. We once had a small antique ice cream chair with a curved back, and rather rickety legs. Beside it was an old oak chair, very sturdy. When we had people over, those of any size would always sit in the solid oak

¹ September 30, 1956, The First Presbyterian newsletter.

chair, sure it would bear them up. Belief in Christ, trust in Christ, is something like that. We can put our whole weight down, resting in him.

Jesus goes on to say, “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places.” He gives a sense that in God’s kingdom, there is ample room for all his many children. He promises **he will go to prepare a place for us**. These are words of deep comfort when we lose a loved one, for they are never truly lost to us, in the sure and certain hope that is ours in Christ.

Jesus ends by saying, “And you know the way to the place I am going.” Thomas asks, “Lord we don’t know where you’re going; How can we know the way?” Jesus answers, **“I am the way, the truth and the life.”**

In our world where there are so many possible paths, when people tout everything from probiotic food to the latest best selling book on the secrets of wealth, Scripture comes with a counter-cultural promise, **it is Christ who is the way**.

This past week with the Pope’s visit, there was a funny moment when one commentator asked a Catholic college student how she could support the Pope, since she disagreed with his teachings on topics like birth control and women’s ordination. “That’s all right,” she said, “he’s entitled to his opinion.”² Her response didn’t take into account the pope’s status within his church as the final word on matters of doctrine Catholics are meant to follow. While we in our denomination don’t have that sense of binding doctrinal views, we look to Christ as the truth. And this is timely, when politicians of all stripes have advisors telling them how to shape their stories and spin their views, sometimes molding the truth for political expediency. In such a time, the Scripture assures us, **it is Christ who is the truth**.

In a day when films are marketed as an escape from reality, and the media tells us that clothing trends this fall are “back to black” reflecting somber economic times,³ in the face of all this, the Scripture reminds us, **it is Christ who is the life**.

Jesus goes on to say, **“no one comes to the Father but by me.”** Much of the missionary zeal of the 19th century was based on an understanding of this passage that said, “If no one comes to the Father but through Jesus,” we’d better get the word out. As we think about this passage today, we affirm that Christ still shows us the Father. Through him we are shown the love, acceptance and grace that is at the heart of the gospel.

If we look to the wider witness of Scripture, there are places that hint that the door may be open a bit wider than our passage from John first suggests. In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he says, **“God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”** (I Tim. 2:3). Later, Paul calls him the “Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” (I Tim 4:10). And elsewhere in John (10:16), Jesus tells the disciples of his “other sheep not of this fold.” If we believe Christ came to “reconcile the world to God,” (II Cor. 5:19) then he becomes the way to God in a broader sense than first envisioned. **On the**

² Morning Edition, National Public Radio, April 16, 2008.

³ Time magazine, April 14, 2008.

cross, Christ “draws all people unto himself” (John 12:32). For us as Christians, sharing Christ as the way means sharing with others the good news that, as the old hymn puts it, **there is a wideness in God’s mercy**, a place for all God’s children.⁴

No less a Christian than C.S. Lewis struggled at times as we do in our day with the full import of Christ as the way for all people. While his faith was solid, Lewis found himself wondering, what of those who don’t embrace Christ in this life, perhaps through an accident of birth, being raised in another country and faith? In one of his books, C.S. Lewis envisions a heaven where the door is open to people even after they die, and the only ones who remain in hell are those who continue to turn away from God.⁵ This unusual book in his opus is a sign of Lewis’ struggle with the implications of God’s surpassing love for all his children.⁶

In our day, theologians still wrestle with this issue of Christ as the means to the Father,⁷ some suggesting that because Christ died for the sin of the whole world, he is indeed the way to the Father for *all* God’s children, even those who are not as yet of this fold.⁸

In the end, it was not unanimous agreement on points of doctrine that Christ was seeking from his disciples.⁹ “What is that to thee,” he once told Peter, “Come, follow me” (John 21:22). Christ wanted us to **trust in him**, to know he is solid and can bear us up in life’s challenges. He wanted our hearts not to be troubled, to give up the habit of worry, because in faith, **all things are in his hand**.

In this passage, he also says we are to **pray, believing** that he will grant the prayers made in his name. One commentator says: “The test of any prayer is: **Can I make this prayer in the name of Jesus?** No one...could pray a prayer of...revenge, of ambition, or some unworthy and unchristlike object *in the name of Jesus...*”¹⁰ The prayer that is congruent with the cause of Christ will be answered, in God’s own way and his own time.

⁴ For exegesis of this passage, I am indebted to Bill Loader, professor of New Testament at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. London: G. Bles, 1946. While called *The Great Divorce*, the book is not to do with divorce *per se*. It alludes to the great divide between heaven and hell. He even imagines a regular bus trip to bring people from hell to heaven, where they are allowed to stay if they choose.

Lewis’ vision finds echoes in other notes from John’s gospel, where just after the famous verse 3:16, John goes on to add, “God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17).

⁷

⁸ Max Stackhouse, Professor of Christian Ethics at Princeton Seminary, a response to a query on the text of John 14:6, cited in “*Finding The Way*” by Paul Raushenbush, Princeton University Chapel, April 24, 2005. Stackhouse wrote: “*The classical way that Christians of an ecumenical bent have of dealing with this [passage, John 14:6] is to recognize that Christ is the second person of the Triune God, living and acting from the beginning of Creation, and that while the Triune God becomes most visible in the incarnate Jesus Christ, as Christians particularly believe; God has not left others in the world without witnesses to that same God’s reality, will, justice, and love, nor without the possibilities of redemption through this Christ.*”

⁹ As 20th Century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked, we would do well to not waste too much time speculating on “the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.”

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Daily Study Bible Series, Louisville: Westminster, 1975, p. 193, first published Edinburgh: St. Andrew’s, 1955.

And one thing more Christ promised us: “Greater works than these, will you do,” he said. Greater works even than those Christ did in his days on earth, as the Spirit gives us strength. As we look back at all this church has done in earlier years of its life, we are inspired by their example of faith and service. As we look to the future, we are called to share with a new generation Christ’s message of love for all God’s people. For **God has yet greater works than these that by his grace, we will do for his glory.**

Let us pray: For all you have done in and through your people, we give thanks, O God. Help us to take to heart your message of love for all the world. Through your Spirit’s help, may we do yet greater things for your glory. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Copyright © 2008 Audrey L. Schindler, all rights reserved

Sermons are made available in print and on the web for readers only.

Any further publication or use of sermons must be with written permission of the author.

<p>The First Church Sermon Fund receives contributions to offset costs of printing, distributing, and mailing the Sunday sermons. Please mark any gifts for the “Sermon Fund.” Additionally, sermons are available on the web at www.salemfirstpres.org, or can be e-mailed to you by contacting mainoffice@salemfirstpres.org</p>
--