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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X16
5 Easter (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 14 May 2017 Mother's Day

Acts 7:55-60
Ps 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

The Way, the Truth and the Life

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (Jn. 14).

This morning in three parts I want to consider the gift of Jesus. What does it mean for him to tell his closest friends that he is the way, the truth and the life?

1. The Way. In Marilynne Robinson's early novel *Housekeeping* a mother drops off her two young daughters Ruth and Lucille with graham crackers on their grandmother's front porch. Then she deliberately drives her car off a cliff. At first the grandmother takes care of them then, after she dies, two great aunts do. They in turn are glad to hand off this responsibility to the girl's formerly homeless aunt.

As the girls grow up they feel such a deep longing for their mother. At first, it pulls them together but eventually they become completely estranged. In their last summer together the two find themselves lost overnight, in the moonless wilderness by a lake. This becomes a kind of metaphor for their whole childhood. "It seemed that we were bewilderingly lost in a landscape, that with any light at all would be wholly familiar."

Near the end Ruth writes, "Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell... [Jesus] was so sharply lacked and so powerfully remembered that his friends felt Him beside them as they walked along the road and saw someone cooking fish on the shore and knew it to be him..."

Ruth goes on in a way that might sound like the way you feel about your mother or your childhood. "There is so little to remember of anyone – an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and that the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting so long."

This longing, this loneliness, this sense of loss, sometimes may be how we feel about God. Perhaps the biggest problem of religion is that we all have such different experiences of the same events. For some the abiding presence of God is the most obvious thing about our life. Others search and never even find a trace of the Divine.

The twentieth century Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that we can never experience God, the creator and ground of worlds, as God truly is. We would not expect a housefly landing on a page of my son's calculus textbook to learn the quadratic formula. But comprehending God is more impossible for us than this.

We are thoroughly physical creatures and, according to Barth, God must become a concrete thing for us to understand. But as soon as this happens, what we are experiencing is not quite the same thing as God.

As a result, every experience of God's Word both reveals and conceals something at the same time. When God speaks to us it can never be set apart from the other events in our lives. We experience God only in what Barth calls, "the garment of creaturely reality." He writes, "[God] will not and cannot unveil himself except by veiling Himself... the divine givenness of the Word of God... also fixes our own limits."

This is the mystery of God and the mystery of who we are to ourselves. We are like children lost in the dark and that is the reason we rely on Jesus as the way to God.

2. The Truth. But this brings us to the second part – the truth. John 14:6 may be one of the most misunderstood sentences in human history. At the last meal that Jesus shares with his very closest friends he says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14).

We have been told countless times this means that unless you believe in Jesus, you will not go to heaven. I disagree completely with this interpretation. On Friday morning at Archbishop Neiderauer's funeral in St. Mary's Cathedral I sat between two friends who are rabbis. Before the gospel this line was read and I wondered what they were thinking. I wanted so badly to have the chance to tell them what I believe this means.

Let me explain my reasoning because ultimately we all have to draw our own conclusions about this issue. Let's begin with the context. Jesus and his friends are not talking about people of other religions or even no religion. Jesus is not answering the question, "who can go to heaven."

Instead, he is talking to friends with "troubled hearts." They aren't asking if there are Hindus in heaven, they are saying, "will I be okay?" And so Jesus reassures them about the many dwelling places for them in God, that he is preparing the way for them.

Thomas and Philip clearly feel troubled and ask him pointed questions. Thomas says, "How can we know the way?" Philip implores Jesus saying, "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (Jn. 14). These are questions that come from their fear and doubt. I think they have in mind some kind of secret knowledge, like a password, as if "the way" is a kind of road map or written plan.

Jesus feels frustrated with them because knowing the truth about God is more like the way that we know a person than it is how we might know a map, a plan or a fact. In effect Jesus says, "you are asking for a fact but what matters most is our relationship, that I am standing right here with you."

The twentieth century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) distinguishes between an "I-It" relationship between us and objects in the world and I-Thou relationships that we have with other people and with God. Jesus calls us to be his friends, to have a continuing relationship with him through prayer.

For me, the irony is that so many people today have read this in exactly the opposite way. In place of seeing Jesus himself as the way for his disciples to reunite with the Father, they have substituted a statement about believing in Jesus. They make everything contingent upon a dogma rather than the freedom of God. Jesus and the disciples are not just talking about heaven. It is about wholeness and health right now. This comes from directing our life towards God and feels like the difference between life and death.

3. The Life. This brings me to my last section. Jesus says, "I am the life." The Greek word is *zoē* like our word for zoology. In 1995 the MIT professor Nicholas Negroponte predicted how the Internet would soon transform humanity by matching news articles and videos with our tastes and personality. He called this "The Daily Me." Today every time we click or share something online we communicate what we like, and restrict what we will see in the future.

It is human nature to want to surround ourselves with people who share our perspective, just as it is to avoid those who disagree with or upset us. Today technology vastly amplifies that impulse. We know what a bubble is. We see its effects playing out in our political life.

The life Jesus promises is not The Daily Me, not isolation from the world. Jesus calls us to know and to love our neighbors, to open ourselves to the unexpected and new for the sake of others. Jesus shows us how we can be the way that God blesses the world, just as he did, in forgiving the very people who were putting him to death.

This week at the San Francisco Interfaith Council monthly breakfast John Trasviña the Dean of USF Law School spoke about his fear that beloved traditions and practices of our democracy are under attack. He cited the firing of the Director of the FBI, executive orders on immigration, attacks on the judiciary, scientists and the press. This might be the time when Jesus' life becomes even more evident.

The theologian David Bentley Hart (1965-) writes, "Christ's... is a truth that is only made manifest in being suppressed; its gesture is that of the gift, which is given even in being rejected; and so, on the cross, Christ makes the sheer violence that underlies the economies of a worldly truth transparent to itself, and opens up a different order of truth..."

Last week at the Forum a gentle ethicist from Santa Clara named Tom Plante described life as a potluck. Each of us has a completely unique gift to contribute to it (mine is marshmallow yams). For this week's homework ask yourself two questions: what is my unique contribution and how can I deliver it in a way that it can be received?

In this world in which there is so little to remember of those who we have lost and God can seem hidden from our sight, Jesus is the way. When we take false comfort in tribalism and manipulate facts to realize our longing for control, Jesus introduces us to the truth. As modern life with its Daily Me presents a greater proliferation of ways to drown in narcissism Jesus shows us the way of life.

Brothers and sisters the gift of Christ is intimacy with God. Let me close with a final quote from David Bentley Hart.

“We are music moved to music... Creation is... a partaking in the inexhaustible goodness of God... its ceaseless flow of light and shadow, constancy and change, mirrors both the “music” of God’s ordering words and the incomprehensibility of his changeless nature, while the restless soul, immersed in the spectacle of God’s glory, is drawn without break beyond the world to the source of its beauty, to embrace the infinite.”⁸

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (NY: Picador, 1980), 130

² *Ibid.*, 194-5.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. I.1* tr. G. W. Bromiley (NY: Continuum, 1936), 165.

⁴ D. Mark Davis, “Incarnational Truth vs. Propositional Truth,” *Left Behind and Loving It*, 8 May 2017. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>

⁵ Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (1923).

⁶ “Salvation is not to be construed as going to heaven after physical death; it is recovering human health and wholeness by exiting from the cave of non-being at Jesus call and being unbound by one’s bystanders.” Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 339n.

⁷ Dan Heischmann, “The Daily Me,” *The National Association of Episcopal Schools Weekly Meditation*, 8 May 2017.

⁸ John Trasviña, San Francisco Interfaith Breakfast, 11 May 2017.

⁹ “... a different story, one told anew and with ever greater power every time violence is employed to silence it.” David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 333.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.