

May 10, 2020
“Finding Our Way”
John 14:1-14
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Some of you know that I was a campus minister and chaplain at Drexel for a little over seven years. It’s actually kind of hard for me to believe that it’s now been almost that long since I moved on from the role.

I remember during my first year there—I started in the fall and this was the spring quarter—sitting in on a “Religion and Science” class co-taught by a friend and colleague, along with a crazy physics professor. I was invited to sit in with this particular class because the guest lecturer, a sociology professor at Drexel, was also a member of my Board. He was reflecting on the relationship between faith and reason, on the nature of truth from religious and scientific perspectives.

I don’t remember anything specific about his lecture at this point, but I remember three things about the class. The first is that the crazy physics professor fell asleep in the back of the room about five minutes into the lecture, which struck me as . . . you know, a little strange, though in his defense, he had nothing to do that day.

The second was that about halfway through the class, some guy showed up with food delivery for – you guessed it! – the same crazy physics professor. Who managed to wake up at the sound of knocking, and stay awake to enjoy his lunch.

The third thing I remember, and the point of my telling you all of this, was that my Board member, the sociology professor, put me on the spot in the middle of his lecture. He introduced me briefly, and then asked if I believed in absolute truth.

Now I need to say here that I did not, of course, know the students in the class, but I did recognize one young woman who had come to one of my early program offerings and spent the whole time grilling me on what she considered core Christian beliefs to make sure that I was, you know, legit. It did not take her long to determine that I was not, at least in her book, and I never saw her again—except for this class.

So you can imagine that she was probably eager to hear my response. Maybe you are, too? I don’t know, it’s hard to tell through Zoom.

To be honest, I don’t actually remember what I said, just that my basic answer then was – and still is – NO. I maintain a healthy skepticism when it comes to absolute truth, based if nothing else on the limits of our ability as human beings to grasp truth in the absolute sense.

And so I think I tried to make clear that we enter into dangerous, and arrogant, territory when we—especially in the context of faith—try to make claims of absolute truth for someone else. There are plenty of truths, of course, which are and have been universally accepted as such. That is practical as we navigate the realities of living in this world, and trying to do so with a whole bunch of other people in the context of our common life together.

At the same time, I didn't then, and don't now, believe that all truth is relative, or that all truth claims are valid. Personal claims to truth operate in the social context of the larger community, and so have to be examined and interrogated accordingly.

Anyway, I didn't say all that but that was the gist of my answer. Or at least what I intended to say! Or what I wished I'd said! I'm not real good on the spot.

If I had a chance to prepare, especially thinking about the notion of absolute truth in a religious or faith context, I might've quoted H.L. Mencken. Now I also feel the need to say here that I don't know much about H.L. Mencken. I know that he was an American journalist, essayist, satirist and cultural critic active in the first half of the 20th century. I also know that he was a vocal atheist, and that he was apparently a virulent racist and anti-Semite.

These are not the kinds of people I would typically (or at least knowingly) quote, but what he said about faith has stuck with me for a long time. Here's the quote: "The most satisfying and ecstatic faith is almost purely agnostic. It trusts absolutely without professing to know at all." It trusts absolutely without professing to know at all.

With that, we dive into this text from John's gospel. And here I find myself returning to the theme of my Epiphany sermon—back in January. You know, when we were still gathering in person. Remember that?

You may or may not have been with us that Sunday, but I shared a story about Amy and I getting lost—and eventually found—in the Poconos woods when we were first dating. And I considered the epic journey of the magi as a journey marked by wonder and "gracious uncertainty" rather than fear and anxiety—trusting, even without a map and only a star to guide them, that they would eventually find their way to the newborn Jesus. That they would find their way.

In this text from John's gospel, I hear Thomas asking Jesus for a map. For certainty. There is something so profound, so innocent, so sincere, so honest, about his question.

We're back on the Lenten side of Holy Week now, Jesus pointing his disciples toward his eventual suffering and death. He lets them know that he's going to a place to which they will eventually follow him.

"In (God'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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." You know the way. You know the way.

With that mysterious description, we get Thomas' understandably pleading question. And remember, this is the same Thomas whose initial doubt is showcased when the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples.

"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" How can we know the way?

Amy reflected on this in her sermon last week, on listening for the shepherd's voice. On the spiritual invitation to discern the voices we hear and which we follow in finding our way.

You know Jesus' response to Thomas' question: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to (God) except through me." Which brings us back to that class at Drexel and the question of absolute truth.

This text from John's gospel is one perhaps most often cited by many Christians to justify the claim that they are right and everyone else is wrong. Period. It is a "clobber text" in an interfaith context, eliminating any need for or value in dialogue among people from different traditions.

As Amy also shared about herself last week, I have struggled with exclusive, boundary-drawing verses like this. Even growing up in a more conservative Christian context where verses like this were emphasized and celebrated, I found myself wishing Jesus hadn't said it (more on that in a bit). In my understanding of the God who is Love itself, the notion that there would be only one, exclusive, conditional way to God has never made sense to me.

Beyond my instinctive discomfort, I have come to understand other problems with such an interpretation.

Without going into a lot of detail here, the Gospel of John is what I like to call the "Sesame Street" gospel—unlike the other gospels, the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, which share a great deal of common material. In contrast, roughly 90 percent of the content of John's Gospel is unique, not found in the others.

We need to understand that each gospel writer was writing to a particular audience and for a particular purpose, but it is generally agreed among Biblical scholars that John's account takes far more literary freedom with material related to Jesus—including what he said and taught and what he claimed about himself—than the

others. Amy reflected on Jesus as the “gate” and “good shepherd”—among the seven “I am” statements Jesus is said to have made about himself: I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the vine, and this, I am the way, the truth and the life.

The most striking distinction between John and the other Gospel writers surrounds Jesus’ claim to divinity. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is decidedly God-centered. Unlike in John’s gospel, Jesus does not refer to himself as the “Son of God”; he does not appear to claim divinity or oneness with God as he does in John’s account.

Many scholars are skeptical that Jesus actually said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life.” We have no way of knowing for sure. But even assuming these are his words, the point here, as one of my favorite seminary professors, Dr. Wesley Ariarajah, suggests, is not to discount this text from John, only to show “that there is another witness to Jesus, different from the one that emerges when all the exclusive sayings are put together, and this witness in some ways stands in contradiction to the Jesus presented in those sayings.”

This witness, of course, is to the Jesus who taught and modeled and lived radically inclusive, revolutionary love.

It is beholden on all of us who claim the Bible as sacred text to read any passages in the context of the larger Biblical witness. Proof-texting is a seriously slippery slope.

What the Gospels have in common is that they are all accounts of faith, informed and shaped by the experience of the early church. We are, therefore, further beholden to understand the Biblical texts in the historical context in which they were written.

We need to understand that the Gospels—and the rest of the Greek Testament scriptures—represent not only what Jesus was believed to have said and done, but what the early community of Jesus’ followers believed about him. In a decidedly Jewish context, the early followers of Jesus found themselves under pressure to justify their movement to form a separate community, to justify their faith in Jesus.

“As much,” Ariarajah writes, “by the logic of the circumstances as by the strength of their convictions they were led to make claims for Jesus which he would not perhaps have made for himself.”

And so statements like we find with John 14:6 are best understood as statements of faith made among the early Christian community.

Dr. Ariarajah provides another perspective that I have always found helpful. He writes, “. . . the exclusive statements about Christ can never be understood unless we recognize the different levels in which language is used, and the different standpoints from which claims are made. Let me illustrate. When my daughter tells me that I am the best daddy

in the world, and there can be no other father like me, she is speaking the truth. For this comes out of her experience. She is honest about it; she knows no other person in the role of her father. The affirmation is part and parcel of her being. There are no doubts about it in her mind. She may be totally disillusioned if she is told that in fact her father is not the best daddy in the world.

“But of course it is not true in another sense. For one thing, I myself know friends who, I think, are better fathers than I am. Even more importantly, one should be aware that in the next house there is another little girl who also thinks that her daddy is the best father in the whole world. And she too is right. In fact at the level of the way the two children relate to their fathers, no one from outside can compare the two fathers and say which one of them is a better father. It is impossible to compare the truth content of the statements of the two girls. For here we are dealing not with absolute truths, but with the language of faith and love.”

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

What I hear in Jesus' response to this particular question is the reassurance that his disciples, and so his early followers (who we remember were initially known as followers of “The Way”), already know the way because they know Jesus. And so we who continue to follow in Jesus' footsteps, or at least try to, already know the way because we know Jesus.

Thomas is pleading for a map, for certainty, but Jesus reminds them that they don't need a map. The journey of faith, the journey of life, is always uncertain, but you know me! You know who I am and what I am about. And so, as he goes on to say, you know who God is and what God is about.

Jesus, as William Sloane Coffin and others have suggested, is a window to divinity, to divine love. But he's not the only one.

Go and do likewise, go and be likewise, go and love likewise, Jesus says again and again, and you will find your way into the place God intends for all of us, into the very kin-dom of God. That kin-dom defined by radically inclusive, revolutionary love. Earth as it is in heaven.

The Way Jesus presents is not conditional, it is invitational. It's not about believing certain things in order to join an exclusive club, it's about the journey from faith to hope to love—divine love, truth and life. The journey ever closer to the inclusive, beloved community God intends.

The nonviolent activist A.J. Muste once wrote about peace, that “(t)here is no way to peace, peace is the way.” Likewise, there is no way to the kin-dom of love, love is the

way. In pointing to himself, Jesus is pointing to such love. The way is easier said than done, of course, and the way is not always certain, of course, but we know the way.

With that, I leave you with the same blessing from Jan Richardson that I left you with in my Epiphany sermon. From Epiphany to Easter and on, our journey of faith need not lead us to unhelpful and unnecessary and, frankly, impossible claims of absolute truth, but instead to gracious uncertainty. To hope and to love.

And so with a mix of faith and humility, trusting absolutely without professing to know at all, our journey continues with the divine leading, as we continue to trust the divine assurance that we will find our way.

A Blessing for Those Who Have Far to Travel

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions

beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place

where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.

May it be so.