

Which Way?

TEXT: John 14:1-12

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on May 7, 2023

Although you would hardly know it from some preachers, that passage from the Gospel of John that Kim just read is not straightforward. To be fair, the very nature of the Gospel of John is not straightforward, and every time I preach from it, I'll remind you of this.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in many ways. Almost every story and saying in Mark appears in either Matthew or Luke; and Matthew and Luke have a lot of overlap with each other. In biblical scholarship, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic Gospels,” from the Greek word that means to see things the same way. John’s Gospel, to put it mildly, sees things differently. John has a few of the same stories, but even some of those happen at different points in Jesus’ ministry or have other significant differences.

Most scholars believe that Mark’s Gospel was the earliest of the four gospels to be written and that the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark in writing their own accounts. Many also believe that, since John was written decades later than the other three, that the author of John felt less of a need to tell the story and more of a need to explain the story.

By the time the author of John put pen to papyrus, all or nearly all of the characters we meet in the gospels are dead and gone. If John’s author is the John who was Jesus’ disciple—which is disputed—he is very old and the only one of the twelve still around. Paul has been dead for decades. With first-person witnesses gone, or nearly so, it has been suggested that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all telling us what happened, while John is trying to explain, many years later, what it all means.

The language of John’s gospel is often mystical and its content relies heavily on symbolism and metaphor, which makes literal interpretations of John problematic. As you know, I don’t think it’s wise to take any of the Bible literally; but it’s truly a fool’s errand to take John literally.

That’s not to say that John’s Gospel isn’t grounded in actual events; but it is to say that a factual recounting of those events for posterity is not John’s main concern, or even his secondary concern. John is not a beginner’s gospel; the author assumes those who hear it already know what Matthew, Mark, and Luke have presented. You don’t have to read further than the first chapter of John’s gospel to realize you’re in a different universe from the other three.

When reading John, you have to dig. There is some information on the surface; but it is always wise to look for additional layers—for symbols and concepts and structure that point you to his key themes and message. I think the failure to do that by so many is one reason we often come away from John with exactly the wrong message, and today’s passage is just one example. It’s also an example that has done a lot of harm in the name of Christ, which is why I want to counter its most common interpretation.

To countless Christians, the section where Jesus says he is the way and that no one comes to God except through him “obviously” means that becoming a Christian is the only way to get to heaven and all others are outside of God’s salvation. But the actual words in the passage don’t say that. It’s one possible interpretation of Jesus’ words, but it’s only that—an interpretation—and that interpretation doesn’t square with the rest of Jesus’ life and ministry. So, I want to suggest something different.

The fourteenth chapter of John is pretty mystical stuff, which is why we turn to it at mysterious times like funerals. It begins with saying that God’s house has many rooms. The King James uses the word mansions, which is how we got hymns like “I’ve got a mansion, just over the hilltop.”

This is the same gospel where Jesus said he had multiple sheepfolds, which we talked about last week. Same idea, different metaphor. He’s talking to the sheep of one particular sheepfold and the inhabitants of one

particular room. But God is prepared to welcome many of both. I see this passage about the “way” as being similar. There was one shepherd, many sheepfolds; one house, many rooms; and now we get one way that then expands to many manifestations of that way, including in each of Jesus’ disciples, present and future.

In this chapter and in the surrounding ones, John stirs the mystical pot by giving Jesus, God, and the disciples overlapping identities. John 14:20, which is a bit beyond what we read today, says, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

“Show us the Father,” says Philip. You can just see Jesus slapping his forehead in response. “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’”

A couple of chapters earlier, in 12:44-45, Jesus gets so frustrated at how people are interpreting what it means to “believe in *him*” that he doesn’t just speak, but he cries out, “Whoever believes in me believes *not in me but in the one who sent me*. And whoever sees me sees the one who sent me.”

Jesus is not some new deity, which is important. Jesus’ words here proclaim him to be an incarnate example of the same God they have always known; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he’s there to proclaim that the same God who walked with Adam in the cool of the day is on earth walking with them still, and has now made a way to walk not simply *with* them but *in* them, so that “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20).

Later, in chapter 17, as Jesus prays for his disciples, Jesus extends that unity to all who will come later: Verse 20 of that chapter says, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Believing in Jesus, according to Jesus himself, didn’t really have to do with him at all. It was always about believing in God. That is one thing that is consistent with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus is always pointing people away from himself and toward God. In the synoptic gospels Jesus actually rebukes a man, just for calling him “good,” telling him that no one is good except God alone.

What John adds is that, for those who believe in God, there is some sort of mystical unity that put us all together—God, Jesus, us, them—everybody, across time and space. If you know God, you know Jesus and vice versa, even if one or the other is traveling incognito, like the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus.

And the proof is in the pudding. “At least believe on the evidence of the works themselves,” Jesus says to Philip, before dropping the news that Philip and the others will soon be doing all those works and more themselves. God’s presence in Jesus is proven by the works, and the same is true for his disciples. “By their fruit you shall know them,” Jesus says in Matthew 7:16. Same idea here. “Faith without works is dead,” says the book of James. Same idea here.

Faith is about an embodied ‘who’ out in the world exhibiting love in action; not an intellectual ‘what,’ recited in a creed or spoken word. That ‘who’ is God, the same God who made a way for Abraham, Moses, and their ancestors. The way to that same God is embodied in Jesus while on earth, but it will soon be embodied in his disciples, too, and in all who live as God commanded and Jesus taught. Jesus’ disciples will know the way because pretty soon they will be the way themselves. “And I will be in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

But wait...how could the disciples possibly be “the way” as Jesus was? Jesus clearly says no one comes to the Father except through him. You’re spouting heresy, Anne. Well, it wouldn’t be the first time; but hear me out.

Jesus says he is the way; the only way, in fact. Okay. So, who is this Jesus person? More particularly, since we’re in John, who does the *Gospel of John* say that Jesus is? It’s laid out at the very start of John’s gospel. Jesus is the Word made flesh—God in human form. John 1:14, you hear it every Christmas, “And the Word

became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus is making the same statement here, “Those who have seen me have seen the Father,” he says. Incarnation. God in the flesh.

Now stay with me here. Suppose that instead of saying “*I am the way*,” you take out the pronoun and substitute John’s definition of who Jesus is. That gives us, “*God in the flesh is the way*.” To me, that changes the meaning from a justification for Christians to slap down other religions to a simple psychological truth.

It has been my experience that we come to know and love God through our experience in human relationships. That’s the lens through which I see John 14. Over and over again I have counseled with people who can’t even comprehend, let alone accept, the unconditional love of God because they have never experienced such unconditional love in the flesh, from another person.

Those who have been abused, scorned, neglected, or for some other reason have gone through their lives without loving human connection, have no bridge to understand the love of God. The works that Jesus did; the works of healing, love, and justice, have never been embodied for them. They may have some intellectual presentation of a loving God; but those words have never become flesh for them, leaving them with no “way” to truly understand.

Suppose Jesus is saying here that the way to meet the love of God, is to meet someone who embodies God’s unconditional love in the flesh. That makes sense to me. That’s what is being said in 1 John 4:20, “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Simply put, the way—the gate, the door—to Love is the human experience of it.

With that understanding, it’s not just Jesus who is the way, but any of us who are willing to follow his example and let God’s love flow into and through us. In that reading, all of us have a responsibility to help others meet God in the flesh, which is the doorway to love, which is our salvation. I remember as a child hearing my pastor say, “You may be the only Bible some people ever read.” I now believe we should take that a step further and say, “You may be the only Jesus some people ever meet.”

If the only way for people to know the unconditional love and grace of God is to experience that unconditional love and grace in the flesh, that means we who profess to be Christ’s body in the here and now have got a job to do. It’s not about getting people to assent to some specific doctrine about Jesus. To believe in Jesus is simply to believe that the way Jesus related to and cared for those around him represents the way God relates to and cares for us—to see in Jesus the love of God turned into concrete action and to take on that same mission for ourselves.

That’s not exclusionary at all. I’ve met a good number of people of all faiths and of no faith, whose lives are more effective waygates to God’s love than many Christians. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” not by our creeds. Love embodied in human action is the way; the word made flesh; Jesus.

People walk around the earth in incredible pain or just in dull, lifeless existence because they have never experienced God in the flesh. They don’t need someone to lay down the Four Spiritual Laws for them. They don’t need a detailed understanding of any Creed. They don’t need to go to church. They don’t need to read the Bible, which is a heck of a thing for someone who led a Bible Society for thirteen years to say.

They may come to be interested in and enriched by those things, but those things are not the Way. God in the flesh is the way. You—us—as the Body of Christ are the Way, just as Jesus was for his disciples. If we do not love others as Jesus did—as Jesus still longs to do through us—we have thrown up one more roadblock to their experience of God’s love, which is the sum and substance of salvation.

The communion table before us, and our practice of allowing any and all to come have a meal with the Jesus who loves them, is one of the ways we embody God’s love in the church. But it’s meant as a model, not a replacement, for the all-inclusive love of God that we each are called to embody in the world. Because plenty of people will never have this symbolic opportunity. Plenty of people will never set foot in a church. You may be the only Jesus some people ever meet. Amen.