

Our Way to Truth and Life
John 14:1-14
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I love the Gospel of John. I mean it. I *love* the Gospel of John. Even when my evangelical sisters and brothers do horrible things with it and Jesus is a just little too high and mighty, I *love* the Gospel of John. It begins with the most fantastic poetry. I bet you even know the beginning of the poem:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.¹

And then, we get to about this point in the Gospel – where Jesus gets closer to death and starts with this lengthy speech– right here, at about chapter 14, and I want to give up.

But, I don't. And I wouldn't. I can't because these words speak to my understanding of the world. This strange coded language liberates the hope that I have for this world. I don't need a hi-tech presentation that shows my former city sinking into the sea. I won't even lean on scientific data – even though I affirm and belief the work of the experts that tell us that our habits must change now. Instead, I turn to the Gospel of John.

John's community is one like ours. There was the dominant culture that was dictated by the Empire of Rome. And then, off to the side somewhere, there was this beloved community – John's community. Theirs was a community that didn't buy into the ways of the Empire. "They ignored social rank, privileges

¹ John 1:1, NRSV.

[and] entitlement.”² They related to each other differently. They weren’t a fringe group. They did not totally remove themselves from the Empire – but their decisions to relate to each other set them apart. And by these relationships – though they remained within the societal structure of the Empire – their relationships demonstrated their resistance. They were part of the Empire but *always* being opposed to it.³ John’s community – this beloved community – were social deviants.

You may not be as comfortable with that phrase as I am. You might think that that’s going a little too far. But, listen to Jesus’ social deviance:

I am the way and the truth and the life.⁴

This isn’t a guy that comfortably fits into the mainstream. His relationship is radically different. The Empire of Rome describes one way of being: militarily, economically, politically and ideologically.⁵ The Empire has its own way of truth and life. But, simply by the choice of his words, Jesus shows another way of being. Jesus rejects the ways of Empire, and corrects it by saying:

I am the way and the truth and the life.⁶

He is speaking a particular language to a particular people in a particular way. And this is why I love the Gospel of John. John uses language in cryptic and

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴ John 14:6, NRSV.

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 12.

⁶ John 14:6, NRSV.

confusing ways – like poetry. If we can listen carefully, we can hear an earth-shattering message that will blow even Al Gore out of the water.

You don't need a dictionary to figure it out. These are ordinary words. That's what makes them so powerful. This community uses "ordinary terms from the ordinary language of the larger society [the Empire] but gives them special in-group meanings that are understood only by the insiders."⁷ You and I are part of the in-group. We are on the inside of this beloved community. We continue the tradition of John's community simply by having the audacity to recite these words in worship. We are claiming the bold tradition that this is not language for the Empire – but language for our beloved community.

We continue to use particular words – like truth, way and life – to explain the unique way that we relate to each other.⁸ It is in our words that we find the power to oppose the Empire. It is in these ordinary words – like reduce, reuse and recycle – that we begin to describe a different relationship to our each other and our world.

In these first few words of his farewell speech to his dearest friends in chapter 14, Jesus offers three words that begin to explain this unique relationship: the way, the truth and the life. These are not new words to John's version of the Jesus story. John uses these words throughout his gospel account.

Truth came through Jesus. That's how that wonderful poetry in the Prologue of John begins. The revelation of the Word becoming flesh. The Word that was God is full of truth. Truth is what Jesus is. And this is the truth that bonds us together as the beloved community. This truth is the basis of our relationships.

⁷ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 46.

⁸ Ibid., 47.

This doesn't seem to be especially important when we are talking about caring for creation or going green. It's the life we're concerned about today – the life of creatures on this planet, the life of our forests and our skies, the life of our seas and the threat of our changing climate that affects all forms of life.

So, let's get upset about that for a moment. Let's get outraged at the devastation of life in our world. The changing climate has caused "[a]verage temperatures in the Arctic region [to rise] twice as fast as they are elsewhere in the world."⁹ This was news in 2005 – but, not so anymore. We know that this is bad news.

The Climate Change Institute at the University of Maine is in the midst of a project to assess how this climate change affects Maine. It won't be released until November.¹⁰ But, we don't need to wait for their results. We already know that the report is grim. We are already seeing the effects: more droughts, more disease, species extinction and flooding. These effects will only continue to "increase the lack of food, shelter and [clean] water" in our global community.¹¹ There is good reason to be upset about this – *especially* if we dare to claim these words:

I am the way and the truth and the life.¹²

⁹ National Resources Defense Council, "Global Warming Puts the Arctic on Thin Ice," <http://www.nrdc.org/globalwarming/gthinice.asp> (accessed 16 April 2008).

¹⁰ John Richardson, "How Will Global Warming Affect Maine?," *Portland Press Herald*, 20 November 2007.

¹¹ National Council of Churches USA, "How Global Climate Change Will Impact Core Church Ministries," http://www.nccecojustice.org/network/downloads/EarthDayResource_5P.pdf (accessed 16 April 2008).

¹² John 14:6, NRSV.

In these words, we're rejecting that drought, disease and flooding must be the way of our world. For us, who seek relationships that oppose the Empire, these are not *just words*.

We know that it's not enough to say: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" or even "I drive a hybrid" (which by the way, I do). What matters for us in the beloved community is how those words affirm our relationship to God, to Jesus and to each other. Do we say them to fit into the ways of the Empire? Do we use these words because it's suddenly popular to care about the risks of climate change? *Or* do we use this particular language in a particular way because we are a particular people?

We are claiming life because we are people of the truth. The very thing that bonds us together is the same thing that brings us into the hope of new life. Our relationships are supposed to offer this new life - as Jesus offered to Nicodemus, Lazarus and the even the Woman at the Well.¹³ The bread we eat gives life. Not just a burst of energy but the kind of bread where no one will be hungry or thirsty again.¹⁴ This is the kind of surreal and awesome life that Jesus gives - and it is the life that we are supposed to share.

It's not the way of the Empire. Politically, ideologically, and perhaps even economically, this is *our* way. Our way is to seek life in all things. Not violence or destruction. We seek life for all creatures and people. We seek life for our world. We *do not* abide by the ways of the Empire. Instead, we speak a particular language to a particular people in a particular way.

¹³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 41.

¹⁴ John 6:35, NRSV.

Again, this is why I love the Gospel of John. It's poetry. You are not supposed to take it literally. Jesus knows we are angry and outraged. Jesus knows that there is destruction to our world, our planet and its people. Jesus isn't deaf to Thomas' question: "How can we know the way?"¹⁵ He hears it and he attempts to answer it – in fact, he already had.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled,"¹⁶ he said. Jesus knows that there is plenty to outrage us – then and now. As the climate rises degree by degree, there is enough in this world that rejects both life and truth. Jesus knows that it is hard to find a way around this. But, it's poetry. You're not supposed to suddenly feel at ease about the melting polar ice caps. And still, he says: "Believe in God, and believe also in me."¹⁷

It's a non-answer – which is probably why both Thomas and Philip appear baffled. Jesus doesn't answer our anger and our outrage anymore than he answered theirs. It's not the solution that the disciples wanted – anymore than it might be for us.

But, this is why I love the Gospel of John. Jesus uses words in a particular language in a particular way for a particular people. So he gives the disciples a bunch of words to remind them of their commitment. *Commitment* to God, to Jesus and to each other.¹⁸ This is the way of the beloved community. This is *our* way.

¹⁵ John 14:5, NRSV.

¹⁶ John 14:1, NRSV.

¹⁷ John 14:1, NRSV.

¹⁸ Mark A. Matson, *John: Interpretation Bible Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 178.

No matter how we choose to engage in the efforts of greening our church, our way is to find the right words to reflect our commitment to God, our world and each other. These are not empty words. They should be poetic words that affirm our faith that our world can change. We don't need to accept things as they are - but we must find the right words that proclaim our unique sense of relationship to God, our world and each other. This is our way. This is our way to truth and life.