



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Last Words”

John 14:1-14

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I'm intrigued by last words. The final things people say before they die. Here are a few last words that I have collected:

“How were the receipts today at Madison Square garden?” P.T. Barnum

Oscar Wilde, on his deathbed in a Paris hotel, opened one eye, looked around, and said, “Either this wallpaper goes or I do.”

Mother Theresa's last words were “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you.”

19th century economist Adam Smith said, “I believe we should adjourn this meeting to another place.”

Our passage this morning is part of Jesus' last words to the disciples as recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus knows that he is going to be arrested and that he is going to die and he does his best to impart wisdom and reassurance to those who will be left behind.

I have a complicated relationship with this section of Jesus's last words. I have quoted the first part of this passage many times – at funerals, memorial services, gravesides. I know the power of these words to comfort. When I pray with people close to death I often use images from this passage. I speak of Jesus preparing a place – paving the way – getting things ready. There is great comfort in this idea that we have a home with God and that, even though we die, there will be reunion with God and with those we love. I find this passage deeply comforting.

I also find it deeply troubling. I'm thinking of the part when Jesus says:

I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

This morning, I thought of skipping that part. Can we skip that part? I struggle to put the comforting part and the troubling part together.

There was a man who died and went to heaven, which, he thought, was like an enormous house. An angel began to escort him down a long hallway past “many rooms” that appeared like mansions themselves. “What's in that room?” the man asked, pointing to a very somber looking group of people chanting a Gregorian mass. “That's the Roman Catholic room,” said the angel. “Very high church.” “What's in that room?” the man asked, pointing to a group of dancers gyrating their hips and occasionally shrieking out loud. “That's the Balinese group,” said the angel. “Very lively.” “What's in that room?” asked the man, pointing to a group of bald-headed people meditating to the sound of an enormous gong. “That's the Zen group,” said the angel. “Very quiet. You would hardly know they were here.” Then as they were about to round the corner, the angel stopped the man, “Now, when we get to the next room, I would appreciate it if you would be very quiet and tiptoe past.

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We mustn't make any sound." "Why's that?" asked the man. "Because in that room there are fundamentalist Christians; and they think they're the only ones here."¹

We like that joke, don't we? We like that joke because it makes us feel good about ourselves. About how tolerant and open-minded and respectful we are. How comfortable we are with people of other faith traditions. Which makes the troubling part of this passage all the more challenging.

Let's take it apart. First Jesus says:

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

Recently I was asked, "With all the world religions out there, why did you choose Christianity?" Short answer, I didn't choose Christianity, it chose me. As a child, I learned from my parents and my Sunday school teachers that God loves me and has claimed me as God's own. As a teenager I learned more about Jesus, went on my first mission trip and was attracted to God's call to make a difference in the world. As a young adult, I looked around and saw that so many people were suffering for no good reason and I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that the hope offered by Christianity acknowledges the reality of suffering.

I have had a long love affair with the Biblical text, the church and, above all, with the God who gave us both. I've always known about other religions but I have never explored them with any passion. I'm really not interested. It has always been easy for me to dance with the one who brought me.

For me, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the route, the road, the path. He is the door, the gate, the key. Above all, he is my home.

So when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life," I'm good with that. You would think I would be OK with the next sentence.

No one comes to the father except through me.

That's the problem verse. I wish Jesus hadn't said it. I wish it wasn't in the Bible. I wish...

I was on an organized bike trip with 15 strangers, none of whom worked for a church. The first night when we all shared what we did for a living I could see that a few of them were taken aback when I told them my profession. But then they saw that I was just a regular person on vacation and I wasn't there to convert them. The surprising thing was over the course of an eight-day trip almost all of them initiated a conversation with me about faith and religion. It reinforced my feeling that there is a lot of spiritual hunger out there. But such deep longing for God is often paired with deep suspicion of the church. One person in the group wanted to know how someone who seemed so tolerant of others could be a Christian.

Ouch. But we have earned that reputation. Due in no part to this sentence of scripture.

No one comes to the father except through me.

We are not the first one to wrestle with these words of Jesus. I'm going to share with you what one pastor has done with it: Episcopal priest and preaching professor Barbara Brown Taylor.

¹ Multiple internet sources.

She reminds us that Jesus here is not addressing some interfaith conference with Hindus and Buddhists present. He is talking to his close friends at a tender farewell moment. This language then is confessional language or love language. He is trying to speak loving words to his closest friends. He is “giving them everything he [can] think of to help them survive without him, and he [uses] the singular, exclusive language that people who love so often do. And when John [writes] it down, he [uses] that same language too.” It is language like we use in our tender and teary moments: “You are the best mother in the whole world. You are the only man in the world for me. No one has ever loved a child the way I love you.”

This is not objective language to judge other religions or people from other faith traditions. This is language from the depths of relationship, spoken only for love to grasp.²

A child in need of reassurance asks his mother, “Do you love me, mommy?” She responds, “Of course, son, I love all children.” That is not a helpful answer.

If Jesus had used similar language with the disciples, they would have been filled with anxiety and fear. Instead, he says, “I am the only one for you. You have made the right choice. No one can lead you to God better than I.³ I’ve got you covered.”

It’s good work on Taylor’s part. It helps me come to terms with “No one comes to the father except through me.”

And another thing. This is Jesus speaking. Jesus, who makes a habit of crashing through barriers. Jesus who reaches out to those considered outside the scope of God’s love and care.

This is Jesus speaking. Jesus who always tailors his language to his audience. He uses different words with the people he interacts with: disciple, adversary, honest inquirer, skeptic. Sometimes he’s blunt with honesty, sometime he trades in subtlety and nuance. His language is never one size fits all.

In my struggles with this one sentence of scripture, I wonder if I’m guilty of making the whole thing more complicated than it needs to be. When Jesus says, “No one gets to the father except through me” maybe all he is saying is, “Sometimes it’s hard to connect with God – I will be with you to help you do that – I’m going to help you – I will be with you.” Jesus knows how much we need company. He knows that if someone is holding our hand, we can bear just about anything.

Still, I wish that these words weren’t in our Bible. They are hard words for us to carry around in this multi-cultural, interfaith world.

I am going to ask Jesus about these words someday. When I find myself face to face with Jesus. Jesus – the one who brought me to the dance. Jesus – the route, the road, the path. Jesus – the door, the gate, the key.

I’m going to ask Jesus about these words someday. When I am welcomed home. When I go to the place that Jesus has prepared for me. Jesus, the one who shows me the way, the one who reveals truth, the one who has given me life. Yeah, I’m going to ask Jesus.

Amen.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Only Way to God," a sermon at Duke Chapel, May 2, 1999.

³ IBID.