

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

July 31, 2022

John 14:1–7, 15–17, 25–27

Let us pray for the presence of God’s Spirit.

Almighty God, grant now that by the Spirit your word may come alive in our hearing and understanding so that we may be empowered for faithful witness and service in this time and place; through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.² In my Father’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? ³ 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. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

We continue this week looking at the various “I Am” statements in the Gospel of John. Today, we look at “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” As was the case last week, and as it is when looking at most scripture, it is always good to spend time exploring the context of the situation in which Jesus says, “I am.” Looking at what surrounds the statement helps bring about clarity and understanding for what the statement means – both for a possible understanding of what Jesus’s audience might have understood it to mean, and also how we in our own contemporary time and context can find meaning. Context matters. When these statements are taken away from their original context, it is more likely to have a mis-understanding or skewed reading of the possible meaning of what Jesus meant – and what the passage could mean for us today. Context matters.

One preacher puts it this way, “What’s the difference between a promise and a threat? It’s a simple question, of course, but one with far-reaching implications. Consider: ‘I will always love you,’ as a promise. Clear enough. But what if one says instead, ‘I will always love you, if you love me.’ Hmm. There’s still the vestige of a promise there, but now it is a conditional one. And lurking behind the condition is an implied threat: ‘And if you don’t love me -- or perhaps even, love me as I think you should -- then I won’t love you.’”ⁱ Context matters.

For many this particular “I am” statement stands as particular proof that Jesus is the only means to salvation. When Jesus says, “I am the way,” it’s as if people have heard Jesus saying, “I am in the way.” This statement is often read in such a way because it is also in this passage where we hear Jesus say, “No one comes to the Father but through me.” But if we read this particular “I am” statement in this exclusionary way, – then it goes against, I believe, what Jesus is saying, like I suggested last week with “I am the gate,” and, I believe for the other “I am” statements made by Jesus.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life,” becomes a beacon for God’s judgment and condemnation, and “No one comes to the Father, except through me,” becomes not promise – but threat. “If you don’t believe in Jesus, then you are done!” people might say. Or maybe even worse – “if you don’t believe in Jesus the right way, (which is usually the exact way they believe in Jesus), forget about it!” Your salvation is in doubt. As I have asked before, “where is the good news in that?” Where is the promise in the threat that you must believe in a certain way?

Again, context matters. Yes, Jesus says he is “the way the truth and the life,” and “that no one comes to the Father except through him,” but he doesn’t stop talking at that point – instead he continues. Jesus says, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” The grammar in this sentence is important – because it is not a conditional sentence – but rather it is a statement of fact. Jesus is in essence saying, “If you know me, *and you do know me*, you will know God.” This is a reiteration of what is already known by the disciples – in the person of Jesus they have seen God.

This is not threat – it is promise. Jesus words, as usual, are not meant to keep people out, as they are to assure his followers that God’s love is

wide, that God's mercy is unrelenting, that God's grace is an already existing reality. This is a promise that God is already with them. We must see the nature of God in the life and work of Jesus – no one comes to a deep understanding of the Father, except in the person and ministry of Jesus. Look to Jesus, know Jesus, and you see and know God. God is already here and with us – this is promise, not threat.

This “I am statement”, like some of the others we will look at, is part of a larger section of the gospel of John called the Farewell Discourse. A farewell conversation between Jesus and his disciples. This farewell conversation happens after the disciples have had their final meal together in the upper room, and Jesus tells them that his time on earth is almost done, but their time will continue so that they, that we, may continue the work that Jesus has started. Jesus has commanded them.

Jesus has said he is leaving, and the disciples are concerned. Thomas asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which Jesus replies “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Like us, the disciples in the gospel never quite understand Jesus – and Thomas is very literal when he asks this question. But Jesus simply answers that if we want to find him, and if we want to know God, we should follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Follow the ways of Jesus, seek the truth in Jesus' life and ministry, find a better way to live when you follow Jesus. Know that God will be with you.

If that isn't enough of a promise for the disciples, (and it isn't) Jesus then says that God will send the Holy Spirit, the advocate, to be with the disciples. The Holy Spirit will be with the disciples, in fact will abide with them, and continue to guide and to teach them so that they can continue in the way of Jesus. Again – promise.

We know this uncertainty and fear. Many times, I have longed for a Jesus in the room with me and never to leave me. I want that same reassurance the disciples must have wanted when Jesus told them he was leaving them. Interestingly, when Jesus starts this conversation with the disciples, he mentions dwelling places. As one scholar notes, these dwelling places are linked to the idea in the Gospel of John of “abiding.” The dwelling places are the noun form of the verb used in the next chapter when Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him. ⁱⁱ

This is an invitation to trust in the presence of Jesus. Abide is not a word that I use very often – it’s a pretty “churchy” word. But I think, maybe, I should use it more often because I love the word abide or abiding and all that it means. To abide is to remain with, to endure or hold with. It is to reside or dwell, or even to withstand without yielding. Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him, and he also says that he will abide in them, and that the disciples should abide in love. This invitation of abiding with Jesus and one another, in the ways of Jesus, means we don’t have to have it all together. We don’t have to be fully in control of the situation. We are given some permission to be vulnerable. We can make mistakes; God’s Spirit will be with us.

This vulnerability, this willingness to make mistakes, is essential to living a life in the way of Christ, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. When we live in the way of Jesus, it means being open to the other – and more specifically to the other that may not be like us. That requires some honest reflection and some vulnerability. Jesus was constantly widening the circle. He was always getting in trouble (usually the most religious people were upset at him) because of who we would talk to, or eat with, or touch.

This vulnerability is not easy – it may mean facing truths that are difficult. And, just like the circumstances surrounding any portion of scripture – context matters. Where and how things are, and how they came to be are important when we seek to follow in Jesus’ way. As we delve into the discernment process to answer who we are, who our neighbors are, and where God is calling Oak Grove into its future we can be open about our past, honest about our present, and invite whatever is to come in the future.

As we have engaged in the first steps of anti-racism work, it has compelled us to look with fresh eyes about the founding of Oak Grove and our physical location. While we can value the Pond brothers for founding this church, we can also recognize the wider context in which they did so was influenced and driven by Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery that did real and substantial harm to the indigenous Dakota people of Minnesota. We are working on a land acknowledgement – which is a formal statement to recognize and respect that the church building sits on Dakota land and that the indigenous people of the area were the original stewards of this land. But we also know a statement is just the starting point, and so members of Oak Grove are starting the first steps to be in relationships with our indigenous friends.

This is just one example of the work we have done in this regard – work that has required us to be honest and sometimes vulnerable. Work that has seen us make missteps and mistakes, sometimes bringing offense without intending to do so. But this is part of the work in walking in the way of Jesus – to do the work of restoration and peace. It is not a threat; it is a promise. A promise for life for all – an abundant life.

There are several policies making their way through school boards before the start of this next academic year, and in some state houses there are laws being drafted that are similar, all with language that forbid educators to introduce or teach any subject that might make students uncomfortable or feel guilt or distress. Some policies or proposed bills ban any teaching with “inherently divisive content.” These bills are directed at curriculum that discuss in honest ways the horrors of chattel slavery, the massacre of indigenous peoples, and the oppression of the LGBTQ community. It seeks to put the comfort of the privileged over against an honest accounting of a difficult past and how that past continues to impact communities of color and queer people negatively. These policies and laws ban books. They lead to books referring to slaves as “involuntary workers” or “immigrants.” At their worst, they seek to invalidate the lived experiences of people and erase their very being. At the least, these policies and laws seek to prevent even a conversation. But context matters. Honesty matters. Even if it means being a little uncomfortable at times.

Jesus shows, again and again, in the “I am” statements that he comes not to keep people out, but rather to demonstrate that God’s love is wide, that God’s mercy is unrelenting, and that God’s grace is an already existing reality. And if that’s not enough – we are also given the promise of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that abides with us so that we may remain with, endure with, and hold on to one another. So that we may walk in the ways of truth so that all may have life and have it abundantly.

There are many things that are uncertain. There are many things that can cause distress. Being in community – honest, authentic community can be messy sometimes. It can be disquieting and challenging. But with the

abiding presence of God’s Spirit, we seek to abide with one another in love.

There is a wonderful African proverb that says, “Because we are, I am.” “Because we are, I am.” We can only be fully us – fully an “I am” – because of the “we” – because of the community in which we are connected.

“...what Jesus invites us to do is to be real, to be honest about who and what we are.... Jesus invites us to be honest, to be real, and having confessed our hopes and fears, our dreams and disappointments, our accomplishments and failures, our blessing and our sin, to know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Jesus reveals, after all, the God who loves the whole world enough to send the Son.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In light of the love that abides from God in Jesus, in light of this acceptance of us, we can then turn and accept each other, bearing with the imperfections of even our best relationships and communities because we know ourselves to be imperfect but yet also loved. We are called, then, in our communities, in this congregation, in our relationships to be a place where we are honest – where we admit who we are, and we allow others to do the same. When we abide in love, and bear with one another, when we are authentic, and real, when we are mutually interdependent upon one another then we belong to one another, we are bound together in relationship. We follow the way, the truth and the life. When we abide in love, we are able to say, “because we are, I am.”

ⁱ David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3218>

ⁱⁱ Jaime Clark-Soles. *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*. (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 92.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose “Getting Real” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1532>