



God surely has a sense of humor! With the challenges in our community around bullying, and the source of the bullying being religious faith, I have to admit that reading the Gospel for this week did not strike an immediate note of "oh yes, preach on that!" It was, to be truthful, more of a groan.

"I am the way, and the truth and the life." The words themselves are not the problem for me. The problem is how some of our brothers and sisters interpret these words. These words are the heart of our faith: through Jesus we can know the way- the journey into a deep and fulfilling relationship with God. The truth- perhaps not factual or historical truth - but truth in that belief in Jesus tells us something important about God and about us and about what is possible. The life - the opportunity to have a full and productive life when we love our neighbors even as we heartily disagree with them.

▲ Note that the connector is "and" -not "but". Not "or" but "and." Jesus is the way AND the truth AND the life. Jesus is all of these things and so much more. Remember also that when Jesus said these words to his disciples, he was speaking to a minority within a minority. The followers of Jesus were a minority within Judaism. Judaism was a minority within the Roman Empire.

These words by Jesus were possibly said to help the disciples remember who they were and what they were doing as they spread the good news of Jesus as Messiah. I do not believe these words of Jesus were ever intended to be a bludgeon used against others who may not believe the same things in the same way about God.

One scholar has suggested that Jesus is acting both as midwife, because he is creating a new way of understanding a relationship with God- giving birth if you will, to new ways of being in relationship with God and each other; and also a hospice chaplain, for this chapter in the Gospel of John starts what is known as "the farewell discourses." Jesus is preparing his disciples for Jesus's arrest, trial, crucifixion and death. Jesus knows his time is short to help the disciples find their footing so they can go on after his death and later his assumption into heaven.

David Zaslow in his book Jesus: First Century Rabbi¹ argues that Judaism and Christianity are not intended to be one in form but rather one in substance (84). God created everything, including a variety or diversity of religious traditions, he suggests as one way of helping all of us see the fullness of God and the variety of ways that we can come to understand God and each

¹ David Zaslow. Jesus: First Century Rabbi (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2014).

other better. We can, as he says, "walk on together" and "be one in purpose" as we struggle with understanding the text and our response to God and to each other.

Setting aside the arguments of the church fathers who tried to explain the relationship of God and Jesus as being of one substance - just listen to the Creed!- I like Zaslow's metaphor of us walking on together and being of one purpose.

The earliest followers of Jesus were referred to as followers of the way- and this term is used in the New Testament. It reflects the reality that we are on a journey. A life of faith is not a moment of time, captured and put into a bottle, but rather is one that unfolds as our lives unfold. Moments of certainty and moments of doubt. Moments of obedience and moments of rebellion. The way is sometimes smooth and sometimes rocky. The way, then, is the journey, over our lifetimes, to get to know Jesus as Son of God, as God become incarnate, as the human being so in tune with God that we can only aspire to live such a life.

Within Judaism, "the way" refers to the lifestyles of the wise, the sages. Living the way connects us to God in the most powerful and positive manner.

The word "truth" in the context of the Gospel of John means revelation. In Jesus, God is revealed in new ways. It is definitely not truth equals fact or truth equals historicity. Rather, by Jesus becoming incarnate and living among us as a human being, God's truth is revealed to us so that we can live more fully and deeply and more in tune with God's hopes for us and for all humanity.

Similarly, the word "life" is both our temporal and temporary lives as human beings and the goal of eternal life in the sense of being reunited with God at our death. Physical death is a reality but human life and human death is not all there is. We are offered, through understanding Jesus as the way, and the truth and the life, a permanent relationship and dwelling with God.

What troubles me most about the recent bullying using religious faith is that whenever the church has taken the position that "we" have it right- a concept called "triumphalism" we have most certainly gotten it wrong. Think of the Crusades. Think of the Inquisition. Thousands of people killed simply because "they" didn't believe as "we" do. So what we are facing now is not a new phenomenon. It is also not time to say "it's always been that way; there is no point in worrying about it." We can make a difference. If we stop one suicide due to bullying, we have taken an important step towards what ought to be: living in ways that glorify God as creator of all that is and of respecting the dignity and worth of all human beings.

Triumphalism is an evil, in my mind. It pits us against one another over who is right and who is wrong. And if you or I am labeled as wrong, we are cast into the pit of hell. This is not God's will. This is not a correct and loving reading of Scripture. You only have to look around us to see and hopefully appreciate the diversity of God's creation. This includes ways of understanding and knowing God. It includes ways of worshipping God. We are not made less - we are not less faithful- because someone understands and worships God differently than we do.

Zaslow believes that God has a purpose for every religion, like the various instruments in an orchestra or the organs in a body (195). I don't have to play every instrument to have an important role in the orchestra. I don't even have to like every instrument in the orchestra to

understand that the music and harmony is better - more pleasing to the ear- because that instrument I don't like is included. Wouldn't music be boring if the orchestra only had one instrument?

I am the way and the truth and the life. Hope and guidance, not a bludgeon. Expansive and not limiting.

Robert L'Esperance tells a story about someone who, as he puts it: "is a bit egotistical and bigoted but who also considers himself a born-again Christian. His conversation is liberally sprinkled with "The Lord" this and "The Lord" that and "praise The Lord." L'Esperance says that whenever he speaks with him for any length of time, he can't help thinking of the saying of Jesus that "not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the ones who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 7:21). L'Esperance reminds us that being saved by Christ's work on the cross is only a starting point- being ready for heaven is quite another matter. That's the working out of our salvation. That's putting content into that word "saved." There's nothing magical about it, L'Esperance says, God doesn't wave a magic wand over us and - poof- we're ready for heaven. As loving as God's methods may be, we still have to be shaped and molded inwardly to resemble Christ until Christ is all in all."²

As we protest bullying, keep in mind that we, too, are in need of working out our salvation. We, too, continue to need shaping and molding until we resemble Christ. Tough work but well worth it. **Amen.**

² (<http://ssje.org/ssje/2012/09/16/faith-and-action-br-robert-lesperance> 5/1/14).