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AMDG

Easter 5A – May 14, 2017

This week's Gospel reading is no doubt familiar to all of us. It's often used at funerals, because it can be comforting for the faithful. And, it's one that we often referred to by those who take a very literal view of the Bible and a fundamentalist view of religion, because these verses give a soundbyte to those who profess a "my way or the highway" approach to Christianity. It's easy to see how one would get the impression that this passage states that belief in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. However, when it's used in this way, it's often by those who have some particular creed or doctrinal stance, or some specific set of beliefs that are their litmus test for Christianity. They are the kind of Christians that give Christianity a bad name, and alienate people who have a broader sense of the world and appreciate the beauty of its diverse cultures and belief systems. These "Christians" use Jesus like a weapon. They have an exclusivity mindset, which is the root of evil in the world. This is not what Jesus intended, and if we look deeper at this passage we'll get a better sense of what he really meant.

Just as I discussed last week, to effectively study scripture we have to consider it in its broader context, as part of a larger message, and within the historical timeframe in which it was written. Then we get a fuller understanding of what the Spirit might be saying to us in our own lives. Today's gospel is a third of the way into the "Farewell Discourse" of Jesus -between the Last Supper and Jesus' Betrayal and Arrest. It is very long and contains four parts. Chapter 13 is the Last supper; chapter 14 contains the farewell and encouragement to the disciples we just heard; chapter 15 and part of 16 contain warnings to the disciples about how to conduct themselves within the community and how to meet hostility from others; and the final section through chapter 17 contains Jesus' consolation to the disciples and a farewell prayer.

In the description of the Last Supper is a phrase we now use in Eucharistic Prayer D, "having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end." It beautifully captures the essence of God's love made manifest in Jesus, and sets the tone for the rest of the discourse the

selfless love demonstrated later in the chapter when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. Peter protests and Jesus says you must let me demonstrate my love fully or you won't know what I am about.

Jesus drives this home by saying, "For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." and at the end of the chapter, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples..."

Today's gospel follows this passage. Jesus says to the disciples, "And you know the way to the place where I am going" with Thomas responding, "how can we know where you're going when we don't even know the way." Thomas doesn't get it. He's clearly speaking of "the way" as something knowable like a set of directions. Jesus explains that "the way" is not something knowable like facts, but knowable like a person. "The way," along with "the truth, and the life" is incarnational not conceptual. The "way, the truth, and the life" aren't a set of directions, but a relationship. When Jesus speaks of "the way and the truth and the life" he's not speaking of esoteric knowledge, memorized scriptures, or any other 'person/object' relationship. Jesus is speaking of personal relationship, and he is the *embodiment* of this relational type of knowing. To know 'the way and the truth and the life' is to meet Jesus *and* God, in a "person to person" relationship. Today's passage continues, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And, the commandments he refers to are demonstrated just a half chapter before. He is commanding selfless love. To know and love Jesus on a personal level, we must love *selflessly*.

This selfless love is so difficult for us to grasp. Jesus had to use parables, examples, and finally his own death to describe it. I think we come closest to that kind of love within our families – with our mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, children, and sometimes very close friends. But, even then we only get glimpses. However, there's no denying that when we fully throw ourselves into this kind of love, it changes us. We are transformed, even when we do it imperfectly. And the Final Discourse shows just that - a love so deep that it transforms us. In the next chapter, Jesus gives another description of the kind of love that he is about. He speaks of love that completely unites us with the

divine. It's the reading often used at weddings, because the love of two married people signifies the union between Christ and his Church. Jesus speaks repeatedly of this unifying love, describing a relationship with God so intimate that we become one with the Divine. "The Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Thus, continuing to practice self-less love we live in God, and living in God's love completes us.

And, if Jesus hasn't already been explicit enough, he says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

In the last two chapters, Jesus tells the disciples all the terrible things they will face as they try to live out his commandment of radical love. He then finishes with a prayer, with one final reference to God's extravagant love, "I made your name known to them so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." - again, a love so complete that it unites us with God.

Now, considering the full context of the Final Discourse, it's not hard to see that the phrase "I am the way, the truth, and the life," is so much more than a tag-line with which to feel superior to others, or with which to hit our unbelieving friends over the head. As part of Jesus' full message and ministry this passage calls his followers to love beyond creeds, beyond doctrines, and beyond all the human constraints we use to separate us. It calls us to live a life of love which is manifested in servanthood. It is a washing of feet kind of love, it is a forgiving of enemies kind of love, a welcoming of strangers love, and a feeding of the hungry love. It is the love of complete openness and vulnerability. A love that animates us to confront the evils of the world not with arrogance and bluster, but with humility and prayerful action. This is the fullness of Christ's message.

We should ask ourselves, is Jesus the way, the truth, and the life, for us as a set of doctrines, as a creed, or as another way to set ourselves apart from others and to exclude others from God's extravagant love? If that's the case then we are no better than any other faction or party, we're no

different than the many other fundamentalist religions or sects throughout the history of the world, including ISIS and the Crusades. This exclusivity mindset of winners and losers, included and excluded, worthy and unworthy is what keeps us stuck in the evils of the world. It's a mindset that requires defending, protecting, guarding - and it is the opposite of Jesus' example of vulnerability. It is certainly not the mindset of selfless love.

Jesus' final words to his disciples, with so many references to God's love, and the unity and wholeness that is found in that love, it's very difficult to understand how "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" could possibly mean "this is the only way to get to heaven." Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life is relationship - transformational relationship, in which we participate in God's love and become God's love for one another. Jesus shows us that the way to eternal salvation will always be within us - when we are fully ourselves, fully embracing life, and fully loving our fellows. And the only way to connect with God, with each other, and with all creation is through this fearless and selfless love. Jesus said, "do not let your hearts be troubled," because his resurrection freed us from the exclusivity mindset, and joined us once and for all with the mindset of love.

My brothers and sisters, we are each walking our own pathways to the many dwelling places - guided, encouraged, and led by the brilliance of the Spirit of Love. We believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life without denigrating other faiths and casting doubt on peoples' eternal destinies, because the love Jesus embodied is found throughout the human family, across cultures, and across the millennia. We follow Jesus' **way** of extravagant selfless love which animates and empowers us to be Christ for the world. We understand Jesus' **truth** as reflecting all truth that is grounded in love. And we know Jesus as **the life** that embraces and unites all Creation in the fullness of life in God.