

*Not a Choice – Just a Fact*  
Scripture Lessons: Colossians 3:1-4, John 14:1-7

This passage in John is one of the most mis-used and mis-understood texts in scripture. In some ways we misuse it at funerals, because Jesus is not talking about the after-life. He is giving them assurance for this life. But the bigger misunderstanding leads to a tragic misuse of Jesus' words to make him say things he would never say, and I am tired of it.

Look at its popular use among some Presbyterians who say they "stand for the Truth" and want the church to go their way. In the more recent history of the church, we have been much more interested in how "no one can come to the Father except through me" than the assurance Jesus gave that He is the way, the truth, and the life." Look at the way that some other Christians are more interested in setting the entrance requirements for being saved than they are worrying about faith and faithfulness as the criteria for following the one who is Lord.

Let me explain what I mean by a distant example that I have mentioned a couple of times here in different settings. In Graduate school at Duke, I had a friendship with a Methodist minister named Frank Buckner. Frank had been a pastor of a "charge" of 4 small churches in the mountains of Western North Carolina in the '70s. He spent his Sundays driving from church to church to lead worship. Frank was a pastor to all of them, and he remembered going to the "tea and cookies inquisition" with each of the Women's Circles. You know, "Tell us all about yourself, Brother Buckner, "and by the way, ...when were you saved?" Frank's reply put the exclamation point exactly where it belongs: "One Easter morning about two thousand years ago!"

Jesus is not Lord because we decide he is, and Jesus is not the Lord of our lives because we make a decision one day that we want him to be. Jesus Christ is the Lord of life because God raised him from the death and proclaimed him Lord of earth and heaven. And Jesus Christ is the Lord of each of our lives because God made him so, not because we chose him to be. The question is not "Is Jesus Lord?" The question is "Do we act like he is Lord?" Do our motives, our decisions, our patterns of living, and our actions in each day reflect the ways we try to follow his truth and live his life in our own lives.

It was that last night he was with them, and all of them knew that the kingdom movement had come to failure. Jesus said a lot of things that night in the upper room to give them assurance and hope and to tell them to have faith and be faithful. It was the night he gave them the new commandment to love other people the way he loved them. He pointed them to a future when all they could see was the past. He pointed them to believe in what they could not see when they could only see the obvious. He pointed them toward trusting what they could not understand when they could only misunderstand him in their fear. Even in those last hours, what they believed about him got in the way of trusting him. They thought he was the Messiah come to save them and make their lives and their nation better. They could never have imagined a different way to see how he was Messiah and Lord. They could never have imagined the kind of way and truth and life he was really talking about.

He told them not be troubled, to believe in God and to believe in him. He was troubled that night, too, and he was trusting God. He told them that there were many dwelling places in the new Kingdom of God's gracious rule, and that in his death he was going to prepare a place for them in that kingdom. He told them that he would come back to be with them, so that they could have a place in that kingdom, and he told them that if they would trust him they would know the way to that place.

Thomas was the honest one, so he said out loud what they were all thinking. "What in the world are you talking about?" (That is not written in the text we read, but it had to be there in the original manuscripts.) It goes with what he said, "We do not know where you are going? How can we know the way?"

How many of us are just like them? We have all kinds of ideas about HOW Jesus is our savior, and sometimes we wonder why he does not save us the way we think he should? We have all kinds of images about the power the will of God, and we wonder why God doesn't seem to get it done more often? What we believe about him gets in the way of trusting him.

We think we know the way, but the truth is that we are not quite sure which way? The Jesus we have heard about, the Jesus that others talk about, the many different pictures of Jesus that so many draw that look so different. They have become different ways, contradictory ways, opposite ways. One book talks about Jesus as a miracle worker and another says there were no miracles. One teacher says Jesus will solve all your problems and another says he will create more. More than one preacher says Jesus will make you rich and a few preachers will preach on all those passages in Luke that we got so tired of last fall.

So here we are in the room with the spirit of the risen Lord *after* the resurrection, and in many ways we are more the followers in that upper room than we think. We are not so sure ourselves about the way. We in this room have a number of varied and contradicting ideas about the truth, and we certainly have some convictions about what it means to live a real and meaningful life that might be at odds among ourselves - some that might be at odds with the more obvious ways and truths of the Christian life. That is one reason we come here and pray prayers of confession about what we do not know and what we do not live. But we come *here* because we hold true to Christ even when we are not quite sure about the truth. Like the followers, we know we are in the right place when we are closer to him, and we wonder where our place with him in the kingdom of his rule is out there where he is not so easy to see.

So Jesus gave them – and us – this word of assurance: he said, "Even I myself am the way, the truth, and the life." John the writer was there that night. He remembered a triple emphaziser that Jesus puts on the phrase in the Greek language, and the triple emphasis is on the "I." Jesus says to them – and to us – "Even I myself...". We are not to worry about all the "whats" we cannot know, and instead trust the "who" who is deeper than all our knowing.

Jesus is not giving them a choice. He is just gifting them with a fact. *He* is the way. *He* is truth. *He* is life. Keep following him. His way, his truth and his life is not an option among all the options. He is quite simply the way among all the wrong directions, the truth in the midst of all the falseness, the life the exposes the delusion of all the lives that we make for ourselves. Jesus is saying that he has shown everyone everything about God they need to live with God, and he has lived everything about life that everyone needs to trust God. He has lived every way that we can live to become truly human when we are true to him. His life is the way, and that is the truth.

So why have we spent so much time putting the other phrase we put in bold type? ...the one about "no one comes to the Father except through me." We have used that phrase to say that people who do not choose Christ as Lord are lost, that people who do not agree with our version of his truth are wrong, that people who do not accept Jesus as their personal savior are going to hell – whether or not say they love the God they know and live a life that looks like Christ's life. Like my sister used to say, "I think we have put the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLAbLe." More seriously, we have grabbed on to the dependent part of the statement, and forgotten the core part of the statement. We are more worried about what will be in store for others, and we have forgotten that Jesus is the way, truth, and life for them, too, whether or not

they know it, whether or not they choose it – because of one Easter morning about two thousand years ago.

When Presbyterians are at our best, we don't worry about who is going to hell and who isn't. We know that is God's place because God is the Savior and judge. To put it more bluntly, it is just none of our business. What we are not so good about is worrying about how Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life of our lives. We need to tend to our own business. Our misdirected focus on other's eternal destiny more than our own faithfulness to Christ only exposes our own hypocrisy. In the season of Resurrection, it is time we put to death the delusion that one has to choose Jesus as the Christ before he can be Lord, and we need to spend more of our focus on being faithful to the Lord that he already is.

What kind of depravity do we reveal when we are willing to condemn someone to Hell because they have not "confessed with their lips" that Jesus is the only way, truth and life, (and joined a church that looks like ours) when their lives may reflect the patterns and motives of Christ far better than we do individually or as a congregation. People who say they are Christians can lie, cheat and steal, and for some reason we never think they will go to hell. But what about the people who love the way Jesus loved, speak truth like Jesus did, live a life that makes us think about Jesus? What about people like Ghandi? We ask whether we will see them in heaven, and some are sure they will not be there. Too often, the church - the "believers only" branch of the church - has said in effect that it does not matter how you behave so long as you believe that Jesus is the *only* way. We live by false grace, as if confessing with our lips excuses the ways and truths and lives we live before God that do not look like Jesus' life.

The test of whether we believe that Jesus Christ, the risen Lord of earth and heaven, is what he said he is - the way, the truth, and the life – is whether or not we follow his way, we are true to his truth, we find our lives in his life. Whether or not we are true in the ways of our living, we are in no position at all to judge anyone at all. Post-resurrection, the time has come for every believer to become a behaviorer. The time has come for each of us to worry more about our own faithfulness than condemn anyone because they have not said something with their lips. When we hear Christ's words to his followers, we all agree we all have to do more than we need to say. We have to live his way as our truth.

Studies of the decline of religious participation in America in the last twenty years have given some surprising results: We think music is the problem. The style of music was irrelevant - as many people leave the church because of the simplistic boredom of contemporary music as for the out-of-century irrelevance of some traditional hymns and anthems. We think politics is the problem. As many people have left the Presbyterian Church because it is too conservative and out of touch with reality as because it is too liberal and has forsaken traditional values. We think people outside church are unhappy. As many people are very happy with their faith out the church as inside the church. All of the things that we think are the reason for the decline of the church are basically irrelevant when contrasted to the significant factors that people report are the real reasons they have left the church in the last twenty years.

What researchers have found was an overwhelming reason against the others. What people who do not go to church say is the primary reason they do not go to church is a bit embarrassing to us who do go: people say that they do not see that going to church makes that much difference. The people who go to church are not much different from the people who do not. They are not saying that church goes should be perfect - just that church goes should be trying to do what they talk about. These people know that being a Christian *should* mean a difference in the behaviors of people who say they are Christians. They stay away because the people who say they are Christians do not seem to follow the way and the truth and the life of

the Savior they call Lord. And add to that the people who say they are like Christ tell the people that don't go to church that they are going to hell, ...and then invite them to church.

In that room the last night Jesus was with them, he told them that the hope of earth and heaven lies in his way, truth and life. And let's be honest. It is just a fact. If it were a choice, the worlds of our making would have been destroyed a long time ago. For centuries in the middle of all our stupidity, inhumanity, evil and sin, what do you think keeps all this going? Even he himself is the one who keeps it going. The risen Lord really is the way, truth and life – sometimes through us and more often in spite of us.

So in the season of Resurrection, let each of us resolve to be the people who act with all the compassion of Jesus, who talk with all the kindness of Christ, who live with all the faith and hope Jesus had in the face of all the choices and temptations he had. Let each of us resolve to live so that people will see the difference Christ makes in our lives - and see Christ in our ways because we are true to his life.

And let us resolve to be a community of Christ at Second that we will be so obviously committed to his way that no one will ever accuse us of being like people who do not follow. Let us be more focused on living true to Christ's ways than fighting over little truths that do not matter much. Let us as a church be the kind of church that people who are seeking a deeper life with God will know they can find it with us here. Let us be so absorbed in the passion and joy of Christ's life that we will look for Christ in everyone we meet, ...instead of wondering if they are going to heaven or hell.

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