

A meditation delivered by The Rev. Laura A. Tisher, Minister of Youth and Young Adults, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, April 20, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“The God of Jesus”

John 14, 1-14

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“Christ dwells amongst our pots and pans,” according to Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Catholic leader. So often the assumption is that Christ is only present among the more glorious and pious parts of life. But scripture tells us that God really does live “in the pots and pans” – so to speak - of everyday life. God is indeed present in the messiness of our daily lives and never deserts us, abandons us or leaves us hanging. To be reassured of this, we simply have to look at the life of Jesus.

Jesus truly lived every aspect of his life in such a way that led many to see him as Christ - as the fullest human representation of God. This God that was made incarnate – that came to life in Jesus – is one who has always been and continues to be very present in the midst of everyday life, even in the grime and grease of our pots and pans that clutter our kitchen sinks.

Somehow this concept of God – as one who is present even in the most mundane activities of daily living - was difficult for Jesus’ disciples to understand. “Show us

God and we will be satisfied,” they pleaded. Jesus seemed taken aback by this question. “What do you mean?! If you’ve seen me and you know me, then you know God. We’ve been together so much lately, ministering together all over the place and yet, now, you say that you still don’t know me? How could that be?”

Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He nodded off to sleep in the garden of Gethsemane, out of sheer exhaustion. Neither of these actions are something that you would imagine as actions of a powerful, stoic, almighty God – for that was the God that the disciples thought they knew. Jesus’ followers had watched him laugh and hug little children. That certainly doesn’t seem like something the distant God of heaven would do. That God – the one who is up there, far away - was the God the disciples thought they knew. Yet Jesus was talking about something completely different. To see God in this new light totally shook the disciples up. It totally shifted their assumptions of who God was.

In an attempt to help the disciples begin to get a better understanding of God, Jesus told them, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This statement and Jesus’ comments that follow this one are some of his most well-known and central statements, yet they are also phrases, which have become some of the most controversial.

“I am *the* way,” Jesus says. “Anyone who comes to God comes through me”. In our ecumenical world, where Christianity is actually a minority amongst all of the other world religions, this can and actually has been a very troubling and damaging statement. It has been used to justify a narrow-minded exclusiveness that is hard to

reconcile with the gospel of love that Jesus taught and lived. Let's take a closer look at this statement. Jesus' *way* is often called the third way – not the way of violence nor the way of pacifism, but the way of *non-violence*. Jesus' *way* is the *way* of justice, of co-creation, of unconditional love. Wherever people work for humanity, for a more just society, for liberation from all forms of oppression – there, *the way* of Jesus and the way of God – is being done. Through these actions – through *the way* of Jesus – the world is being made a better place.

Theologian Marcus Borg was once at an interfaith worship service where an unfortunate oversight led to assigning a Buddhist man to read this passage during the worship service. After the Buddhist read the passage, so many people figured he would be totally offended. But instead, he said, “This scripture is absolutely true! Jesus is *the way* – the *only* way that one comes to know the divine. Jesus embodied *the way*; he was the incarnation of *the way*; he exemplified *the way*.” This statement of Jesus, “I am the way” does not have to be interpreted as a divisive statement. It, in fact, can be quite a unifying claim. This way – the Jesus way - is also *the way* of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and so many other religions. In this passage, the writer is not saying, “Believe in Jesus”. He is saying, “Believe in the *way* of Jesus” – believe in and follow the way of nonviolence and unconditional love, which is also the way of God, whom Jesus embodied.

Jesus then says, “I am the truth.” What truth is that exactly? Whose truth? “Truth” and “justice” are the same word in Hebrew. This connection can really help us understand this passage even more. “I am the truth – I am *justice*,” Jesus is saying. Who can deny that? Throughout

his entire life, Jesus fought for justice. He stood up for the most marginalized. He preached about equality for all. Jesus was the truth. Jesus was justice. And God, whom people came to know by knowing Jesus, also embodied this same truth – that of justice. Just open your Bible to practically any page and you will see God doing justice.

The final thing that Jesus tells the disciples in this threefold passage is “I am *the* life.” This short phrase tells us even more about both Jesus and God. Jesus was a life giver. Just as God was a creator, so too was Jesus. Throughout his ministry he created, or brought about new life, for so many people in so many situations and circumstances. This not only includes stories like raising Lazarus from the dead, but Jesus also brought new life to people who had given up on all that life had to offer them. He gave new life to those who had nothing more to survive on. He gave new life to people who were in need of new visions and new dreams. He was the life-source for so many people who encountered him.

Jesus was the way, the truth and the life.

This passage in the Gospel of John is Jesus’ farewell discourse or final testament. It follows the literary form for the day of the last testament of a famous person as he prepared his followers for his departure. Scripture outlines similar farewell discourses for other great leaders, like Jacob, Moses and David. The purpose of a farewell discourse is threefold: to comfort the followers of the famous person, to help them understand the significance of his life and death and to lay out future directions for the community.

Throughout this passage in John, Jesus was ultimately trying to convince the disciples that believing in him was not a misguided action on their part. He wanted to reassure them that embracing his dream of a kingdom of God was not a mistake or a waste of time. After his death, Jesus knew that his followers would be tempted to think, “Jesus has failed. He didn’t bring about this new kingdom of God that he preached about all the time. Things are still the same here. The oppressive Romans still dominate over us. Jesus must not have been the messiah we’ve been waiting for. Jesus must have been misguided in all that he preached. We have been deceived!”

So often it is easy for us to think along these same lines today. We come to church; we pray; we follow Christ; we are faithful people. Why then, do we still encounter so many struggles throughout life? We, too, must have been deceived! Jesus never said that the struggles we encounter would completely disappear. What he preached was that in the midst of those struggles, we will inevitably encounter, we ought to – we need to – remember *the* way of Jesus, *the* truth that he embodied, and *the* new life that he created in the midst of dryness and despair. For these three things not only describe Jesus, but they also show us who God is and help us understand the potential God has for acting in our lives.

In this short passage in John, Jesus repeats the word “father” 13 times! As the worship planning team was preparing for today, I pleaded with them to use an inclusive version of this text, replacing all of the “fathers” with “God”. We do try to be inclusive these days. As I wrestled with this text in my preparations for today, though, I kept coming back to this word, “father”. As Jesus was trying to

explain to the disciples who he was and who God was, “father,” or “Abba” in Greek, must have been the best word he could find to describe the intimate connection that Jesus and God had with each other. His repetition of this word shows that he must have thought that was the best way to explain to the disciples – in a language and context that they understood – that Jesus and God were indeed one and the same. Jesus used this word, “father,” to help them understand that not only was he the way, the truth, and the life, but so was God.

These challenging, yet rich words from the Gospel writer, John, give us a clear glimpse at who Jesus was. But not only that, this passage helps us make the connection between God and Jesus, who was the fullest human representation of God. It helps us recognize the importance of Jesus’ humanity and at the same time, his divinity, as one with God. It gives us a fuller understanding not only of who God was during Jesus’ time, but also who God is for us today, as one who continues to encourage us to live out the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

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