

“The Way, the Truth, the Life”

Easter 5

Acts 7:55-60; I Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Mother's Day, Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 14, 2017, dedicated to my mother, Lorene Ahrens (for her 89th birthday), the mother of my children, Susan Sitler; and the mother of my grandsons, Kirsten Ahrens; to the Schumacher award winners, Rachael Harmon, Jordan Schumacher, Alice Shay, to Camille Florence Kirkland and Bryar William Slivo on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“The Way, the Truth, the Life”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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All of us dream of home. We dream of home as the place which has a certain spirit of love and tranquility, with certain people we wish to be close to, located in a place which brings us peace. At some level in our hearts and minds, all of us dream of making home, finding home and eventually – going home.

Set in post-World War II, Horton Foote's book and film, "The Trip to Bountiful," tell the story of Carrie Watts' search for home. In the midst of facing her final days, Carrie has one wish before she dies. She wants to make one final trip to Bountiful, Texas. Having grown-up on a farm just outside Bountiful near the Texas Gulf coast between Houston and Corpus Christi, Carrie remembers the perfect life and town of her childhood in the late 1800's. Now, living in the booming city of Houston, she feels trapped in the home of her son and daughter-in-law – neither of whom listen to her and neither of whom will take her to Bountiful. So Carrie sets out on the journey alone – not knowing that Bountiful no longer exists. The novel and film chronicle her trip to Bountiful.

On the bus journey, the aging Mrs. Watts befriends a young woman traveling alone and reminisces about her younger years and grieves for her lost relatives. When she finally arrives in what is left of Bountiful she comes to realize the truth – the last known resident of the town, with whom she had planned to live – has recently died. Thanks to the local sheriff whom she befriends as well, (who was sent by Carrie's son to return her to Houston), she gets to see her family farm one more time. Weeping on the homeland of her childhood, she realizes her trip to Bountiful is complete. Having reached her goal of "returning home" before she dies, Carrie returns in peace to

live once again with her son and daughter-in-law. She does so having made peace with her past and her present.

Finding home is a theme in our passages today. In I Peter, Acts and John, we encounter three passages of scripture about the authenticity of finding our home in Christ. I Peter 2:2-10, we find “safe haven,” like little babies, the spiritual milk that we need to grow our faith. We ourselves become part of the very “structure,” the home, the spiritual house that First Peter speaks of. If we remember that his audience was a group of dispossessed people, people who had no unifying dignity and identity apart from being a church, the power of these words expands in our hearing. What a transformation, from "no people" to “God's people!” *

If you have ever felt like a “nobody,” and then a “somebody,” you can really identify with Peter’s words. Have you ever felt outside and alone, and then part of something greater than yourself? We can perhaps imagine how it would have sounded to their ears, those dispossessed people, if they knew that they were “nobody” in the minds and eyes of the world, but then became part of a “chosen race” with words like “holy” and “royal” used to describe them. What would it feel like to come out of darkness into the “marvelous light” of God? *

Simply this – it feels like coming home.

The stoning death of Stephen in Acts takes us to another realm of “peace” in Christ. Stephen is so wrapped up in living God’s way that he forgets to protect himself. Other ordinary Christians have been like Stephen – so caught up in being “in Christ” that they give themselves fully to God. Like Stephen, they are not seeking martyrdom. Rather, they are living fully into the call of Christ to serve, to love and be witnesses of our faith. They are “living stones” in the household of our faith. As martyrs of our faith, Stephen and others through the ages find their eternal home in Christ.

In John’s gospel, we truly find our way home in Christ. Jesus is offers his disciples an abiding place in God. Some interpret John 14:1, “in my Father’s house there are many ‘MANSIONS.’” In other words, there is room enough for ALL in God’s abiding love. There is room enough in the pew. There is room enough in the house of God. There is room enough in eternity. There is simply – room enough for ALL in God we come to know in Jesus Christ.

We in the church need to know that the radical inclusion of God in Christ welcomes all. Moreover, this is not our house. It is God’s house. When we speak of it, we need to see ourselves as those who are stewards of a gift given by God. We are

merely residents in God's cathedral of grace – here on earth and throughout eternity.

Jesus also promises his disciples that the pathway to God is through him. He says, **“I am the way, the truth and the life.”** I love what Catholic theologian and Biblical Scholar, John Dominic Crossan says about this. Fr. Crossan's translation of the familiar “I am the way...” verse from John is this: **“I am the authentic (truth) vision (way) of existence (life).”** *I am the authentic vision of existence.* Isn't that beautiful? *The authentic vision of existence.* *

Jesus embodies and “demonstrates absolute, total, and universal love” for all, and his “life, teaching, and behavior do indeed present people with ‘an authentic vision of human existence,’ that is, a model of the way human life ought to be lived” in order to “encounter God, who is Love.”*

What this does is set the vision of Christ in the right light – not one which separates him from everybody else but one which in he draws people into unity in God's name. This must have been a consoling message to the early Jewish Christians and the Gentiles who followed close behind. They could have experienced great anxiety over losing their spiritual home (the synagogue) because of their belief in Jesus. Instead Jesus was

consoling them and drawing them close. In the same way, we can be consoled knowing that his presence in our lives draws us together with our neighbors who may not look like us, sound like us, worship like us, and express their love of God – like us. That is a truly a vision of authentic human existence – which by the way – is Good News!

We are all seeking a way home. As we travel the road to home, will we as followers of Christ be (in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) taillights or headlights on the journey home to justice and righteousness? Will we be led by the prevailing culture of our times and simply be the taillights of this story? Or will we lead boldly, brightly lighting the road before us?

There is a longing, a yearning – a trip to Bountiful in each one of us – we may have already taken it. We may be dreaming of it. Like Carrie Watts, each of us is seeking home. To find our peace at home in Christ, we are called to follow “the way, the truth and the life” who is **the authentic vision of existence.** Christ wants us to be headlights – not taillights. If you are not sure of what a headlight looks like or how a headlight functions in our times– look at Alice and Rachael and Jordan. They are headlights of an authentic way of life and service in Christ. If

you were looking into the eyes of Bryar and Camille – you saw the eyes which reflected the headlights of God!

We need to lead and light the way rather trail behind in these days. Camille and Bryar and all our children need us to lead. They need us to show them the way... the truth... and the life. In so doing we set our eyes on Jesus – the authentic vision of existence. Amen.

**Drawn from The Rev. Dr. Kate Matthews writings on the texts of the day from www.ucc.org, “Weekly Seeds” for Easter 5 in the “A cycle” of the lectionary.*

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