

Sermon – Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 14: 1-14

There is an oft repeated saying that “Life is a journey, not a destination.” Some say that Ralph Waldo Emerson is the originator of the quote but no matter who uttered it first many have rift off it, and its powerful truth. Arthur Ashe, the great American tennis player is quoted as saying, “Success is a journey, not a destination.”

As anyone who has ever experienced their life as a journey could testify, the journey of life is not a straight line, rather it is a meandering path that traverses steep hills and steep descents, broad open plans, challenging crossings and risks and rewards. Sometimes our journeys can be full of energy and excitement and at other times can seem quite dark and uninspiring. Life is a journey and quite often the destination so carefully planned, is not where we initially thought it would be.

At all times on our life’s journey we need fuel to continue. Mostly this comes from friends and family who guide us along the way. For Christians and people of faith in God, fuel comes from scripture and prayer, and our common worship and community life. We need encouragement to find the energy to continue on despite the many setbacks we experience. What we are all experiencing now as we find ourselves sheltering at home, or risking our lives in order to support others, is a threshold moment in life’s journey.

Threshold moments in one’s life journey don’t come along that often. They are times when suddenly all that we thought was secure on the road ahead changes, and we have to recalibrate our expectations and our desire to move forward. Times of relative crisis like we are in can be times of destabilization and confrontation, or they can be times of inspiration and invitation. It is often times like these that reveal our weaknesses and confirm our strengths. So these threshold times are times for reflection, re-ordering our priorities and adjusting the course of our life.

The disciples of Jesus experienced their time with Jesus as one long threshold moment. All of the apostles were living life, working and taking care of their families, worshipping in the synagogues and observing the Law, when suddenly this young man called them to leave everything behind and to follow him. And they did! For the next three years they followed this interesting young man, listening to his teaching, witnessing his healing of men and women, experiencing his command over nature and the adverse reaction of many of their communities’ leaders and members.

Was he the Messiah of God, they wondered and discussed away from his ears. He certainly exhibited a lot of the characteristics that the messiah was thought to possess. They drank his teaching in and were nurtured by his love for them. In the last week of his life Jesus ramped up his teaching of the disciples, revealing to them the purpose of his life, the destiny of his life’s

journey, the new commandment to love God first, then love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The gospel reading for today comes from this last week of Jesus' life as told to us by the beloved disciple John. It especially provides an explanation for how the disciples were to find their way to his Father, to God through their belief in him, the Son, the incarnation of God. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." His words of encouragement for the disciples were greatly needed by them as Jesus forecast his own betrayal and demise. Fear rises during times of uncertainty, but Jesus encouraged his friends and followers that there was a welcoming place for them in God's house and that Jesus needed to go and prepare the place for them.

Thomas, that ever-loveable curious disciple, says to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Again, Thomas sums up how difficult it was for him to understand Jesus and the journey he was on to rescue them from themselves. Thomas, like the others had spent the better part of three years with Jesus, as close as anyone, and more than Jesus' family, yet he still struggled to understand. What hope is there for us we might say?

Jesus then stated those famous words, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Phillip, again demonstrating how difficult it was for them to fathom all that they were experiencing, says, "Lord show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus becomes exasperated. He went on to further explain for them that he indeed is the earthly manifestation of God. If they had trouble understanding this fact then then he suggested they reflect on his miraculous acts that they had witnessed.

For us today, we don't get to be present to Jesus alive in the flesh. We do, however, get to be present to Jesus through the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to the disciples, and for which we celebrate at the Feast of Pentecost, coming in a few short weeks. We also get the benefit of reading scripture, reflecting on the similarities between the disciples struggles to understand how Jesus was God, and God was in Jesus, and our own struggles to comprehend this relationship. We get to read the theological works of women and men through the ages who have shared their own stories and thoughts and we get to come together as a 21st century community of faith to find the spirit of God working away in each of us, as we journey to new lives of freedom in Jesus Christ.

When I was a senior at seminary I met a young priest who expressed to me his struggles with accepting that Jesus was, indeed, the only way to God. This young man had been beat up, metaphorically of course, by the church during his ordination process. He had suffered rejection for who he was and initial denial of his ordination. He carried many wounds from his life's journey. But he carried on regardless trying to make sense of whether Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. It was eye opening to me to witness his struggle with this concept. It did then cause me to also reflect on whether Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. I believe deeply that we all must reflect on this passage from John's gospel as we move ahead in life.

So what does Jesus as the way, the truth and the life look like from today's perspective? Well he are my thoughts. For the millennia or so before Jesus was born, God had been known to the ancient peoples in spirit only as experienced by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and others. Then God was experienced by the prophets, still as spirit but a spirit that encouraged them to speak out about the injustices in society that rewarded the rich and held the poor in poverty. Not much has changed has it? The spirit of God accompanied the fleeing Israelites on their way to the promised land and then to Babylon in exile from their homeland, and then with them as they settled back to life in their home country.

Jesus was born, to further affirm to the people that God was indeed a living deity. He wasn't a wooden or cast bronze idol, he was capable of coming close to the people in human flesh, speaking with them and encouraging them in their life. Jesus came to show us, by his lived example, how to live life with God at the center. Jesus, powered by God and prayer, endured many hardships to teach the disciples and to show himself to the masses. Many followed him because of his witness. If we can grasp that Jesus was filled with the spirit of God, empowered by God to heal and proclaim salvation to all who follow, then we can make sense of Jesus as the way to more fully understanding God, and the relationship God craves with us.

Truth has been taking a beating lately. Some academics say that we live in a post-truth world as if truth has lost its cache in modern times. Truth however is timeless. I recall not that long ago that if a public figure was caught lying their careers were largely finished. They resigned, usually willingly, and went away for a time so their reputations could be healed. Today, in some aspects of our life, especially the political theater that is our current federal administration, lying seems like its valued more highly than truth. Truth requires that we acknowledge when we have erred. This can be extraordinarily difficult sometimes, painful and humiliating even. It requires courage and faith that it is right to do and that people will forgive. To distort facts to sustain our egos is a coward's response.

Jesus lived truth and eventually bore the hallmarks of the power of truth when the authorities brought him down. His life was like a mirror held up to the powers of his day. They could either see truth as embodied in Jesus or they could turn away, like Pilate washing his hands and giving in to the crowd. Truth is hard to live sometimes, yet ultimately liberating and empowering. Jesus taught repentance for our missteps as a critical aspect of life. If we are repentant, then we experience forgiveness which helps us to correct the journey of our lives and mature as a person.

So the way of life in the living God, as demonstrated by Jesus, and the truth of living life repentant and forgiven, equals Life, with a capital 'L.' Jesus is the broker of reconciliation between us and God. Truth is the lubrication for life. Truth is the light, in an otherwise dark, self-centered world. Truth always wins out. True life comes when we can understand these two concepts – Jesus as the way and Jesus as truth.

When we ultimately get this – and sometimes it only comes after a lifetime of struggling to make sense of all of this, our life's journey is forever changed, and we head off into a deeper and more fulfilling life in God through family, friends and community worship and service. If we can experience ourselves as loved, forgiven and nurtured by God's Holy Spirit, then we too can love, forgive and nurture those in the world who are adrift, searching for a rock to anchor their lives, in essence the cornerstone which holds up the rest of one's life.

The epistle reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning draws our attention to the example of Stephen, the first deacon of the church and a martyr of our common faith. Rather than me reflect on his incredible story in this sermon, I encourage you to go back and read the full story of Stephen from the sixth and seventh chapters of Acts and use it as a reflection on your own life's journey. His dying words where words of forgiveness for the very people who were stoning him mercilessly. Incredible!

Amen