

Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

The two passages that we read today have something in common; they both come from the Bible – no, just kidding. Something besides that. They are both about people who are killed for their faith. The reading from Acts is about Stephen, the first martyr, who is bludgeoned with rocks for the crime of declaring Jesus to be the “Righteous One” and accusing Temple leaders of having him executed. The Gospel passage concerns Jesus, and is part of what we call the “Farewell Discourse” in John, which is four chapters of Jesus speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper, just before he is arrested, put on trial, tortured and executed. As I look around here this morning I don’t see anyone here who is under any immediate threat of arrest or torture or execution for any reason, and certainly not for their religious beliefs. We are blessed to live in a country where that sort of thing just doesn’t happen,

unlike Sudan where a pregnant woman sits in jail awaiting execution for being Christian. Sure, there may be some discrimination in this country that occurs because of our religion, but there is more discrimination based on race or even gender. We live in a society that values individual rights and freedom, so the sort of thing that goes on in Sudan and what went on in Jerusalem two thousand years ago are foreign to us.

But this leads me to ask myself, “Then why are we so reluctant to proclaim our faith?” If there is less danger involved now than there was two thousand years ago, wouldn’t it make sense for us to proclaim it *more*? No one is threatening us with harm or arrest. And if we, as Christians, believe what Jesus says (“I am the way, the truth, and the life”), if we have faith in our faith, shouldn’t we take advantage of this safe environment and be all the more outspoken?

The answer is, of course, complicated. Among the reasons: We don’t all agree on exactly what our faith is, so two people who think they’re proclaiming the same faith end up arguing about who’s right – Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witness, Mormons – we spend more time arguing our differences than sharing what we have in common. Furthermore, there are always charlatans, just as there were in Jesus’ day; people who are out to make a buck in the name of Jesus. Also, the world has changed in the last two thousand years, and so we can’t always agree on what the Bible says or means or just how relevant certain laws are or which stories are history and which are allegory. There are countless things that we don’t agree on, and disagreement leads to fragmentation, and fragmentation eventually leads to individual belief, which is really what I see dominating our culture. Even within any given church, we may agree or disagree with the pastor; we may recite our creeds with our fingers crossed behind our backs. And so our proclamation lacks cohesion as we lack cohesion.

This is not entirely a bad thing. We should allow for differences in our interpretations without declaring one particular angle; it’s a tragedy of organized religion that factions become so intransigent as to kill those who disagree with them, even under the umbrella of the same religion. Christianity has a great deal to be ashamed of in its violent history – which is of course another reason why we may be reluctant to proclaim our faith. What we need to do as disciples of Jesus Christ is to restore our focus, and I suggest that our focus should be on verse 6 of our Gospel lesson: “Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’” That is the essence of our Christian faith and our proclamation, and it need not be complicated. No sooner do we make such a proclamation than we begin to diverge on our explanations of what Jesus means, but central to it all are Jesus’ first two words: “I AM.” Our faith does not revolve around a set of laws or a code of ethics but rather around a *person, Jesus who is the Christ*. And Jesus who is the great I AM – he uses that expression 24 times in John’s gospel – *I AM...the bread of life, the vine, the good shepherd, the gate, etc*, and in today’s verses, *the way, the truth, and the life*. *I AM* is also the way God names himself in the book of Exodus, when Moses asks the burning bush by whose authority he’s going to tell Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go free: “*I AM THAT I AM*” is what God replies. And so every Christian begins with the notion that Jesus is divine. We may not all agree on what exactly that means, but focus first upon that premise; *Jesus Christ is fully God*.

And how does this God describe himself? First as the *way*. To determine what that means look at the context of this passage; Jesus is leaving his disciples and going to the Father. The day is fast approaching when Jesus will not be around, and the disciples really want to know how they can find him. It's not surprising that this passage is a favorite at funerals, because we need to be reassured not only that the dearly departed has found the *way* to heaven, but that the *way* is there for us as well, when our days here are finished. The way to the Father is through the Son, is through Jesus. It's rather tragic that so many Christians take this verse out of context; remember Jesus is comforting his disciples who long to be with their Master by telling them that he himself is the way. Jesus is not building walls here, as so many evangelists do when they quote this verse as if Jesus is telling his disciples that they better not stray from some orthodoxy – he's showing them a path, not issuing a warning. We should never think of these words as exclusionary.

Jesus says he is the Truth. It's not common for people to think of Truth in terms of a person; we usually think of it as a statement or philosophy or law of science being true or false. So it's quite an assertion that Jesus makes to call himself *the Truth*. What does that imply. Well, as we all quite naturally yearn for Truth, Jesus is saying that he himself is the object of our yearning. Remember again the context of these words; eleven disciples who have seen signs and wonders, who have been taught unforgettable lessons, who have just had their feet washed by their master when the way they've been taught is that *they* should be washing *his* feet. These eleven men have been yearning to know God, who is the ultimate Truth, and Jesus is saying, "I am the Truth." Everything he has said and done testifies to that fact. Jesus is telling them to believe it.

Finally Jesus says, "I am the Life." We yearn for life, for ourselves and others. Though we complain about our medical bills and the cost of prescription medicine, we do almost everything we can to sustain our health, our life. As one of you so aptly told me this week, "If there was no life after death, existence would be a cruel joke." Our belief in eternity is essential to our joy in life, and again, taking into account the context of this declaration, the disciples are about to see their Master arrested, abused, and executed. Jesus has already told them that death will not have the last word for him, and in promising the disciples that he will take them where he is going, the disciples know that death will not be the last word for them either.

And this is a powerful message that we can bear witness to. In our world, the fear of death still holds sway over too many people. That's why the threat of violence, the threat of death, is such an effective way to enslave others. People are afraid to say anything or do anything that would upset the ones holding the guns or controlling the military or directing the police, because they fear for their life or the lives of others they hold dear. And dictators bank on that fear. Jesus says, "I am the life." His resurrection bears witness to that. Stephen's vision before his death bears witness to that. And our lives need to bear witness to that, that God's kingdom built on the platform of love, peace, and justice overcomes worldly kingdoms built upon domination, the threat of violence, and *injustice*, and we can bet our lives on it because our lives are eternally bound to our Lord and Savior.

And if we believe Jesus to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we should take a closer look at our own neighborhood, our own community, our own culture. Do we embody as a nation God's love, peace, and justice, because if we don't we're not living out our faith in Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we are still driven to pursue our own pleasure and profit while neglecting the very real needs of those around us, are we living out a faith in the One who washed the feet of his own disciples? Are we more intent on protecting ourselves from the physically or mentally or spiritually sick rather than reaching out and healing them as our Lord would have done? Do our habits betray a fear of death, even though the One we claim to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life has clearly conquered death once and for all?

Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." We need not argue over such a statement. We certainly should not distort it. We need only believe it and then live it. Let us pray.

O Lord, our Way, our Truth, our Life. We thank you that you have created us as unique people, but we pray that we don't let our differences define us so much as our common faith in you. Help us to focus on you as you have shown us through word and deed, and may we exhibit our faith in you and our love for you through our words and deeds. Remind us that you bring healing to that which is sick, wholeness to that which is broken, and life to that which is dead. Lead us not into the temptation of so narrowly defining you that we would hide your love which forgives all and welcomes all. Amen.