

Title: The Inclusive life-giving path of Jesus, I AM the Way.

Text: John 14: 1-14

Rev. Sharon Smith

I have a memory my mother, carefully teaching me how to water African Violet indoor plants. You gently left the leaves, the leaves have fine protective hairs on them, they do not like to get wet. Use tepid water, not ice cold, and pour until you see some seeping into the draining plate. Then wait and listen. And sure enough you would hear the plant begin to drink. And soon all the water from the plate below was now firmly in the root system of the plant. I have never forgotten the way this act of giving a plant water, taught me to slow down, to pay attention, to honour the specific needs of each plant. My mother gave me a way of being grounded. And a way of nurturing all living things.

It was like she gave me a set of glasses through which to see the world of plants and flowers and trees and birds. I way to love.

Yet she was not only the one offering me a way of seeing, women and men in our community, would read poetry with me, play cards, make side comments, offer wisdom, answer my questions. My brother and his friends would play Guns and Roses cassettes and for better or worse embody the lyrics; and my peers would be kind and cruel and everything in between.

It is no wonder that when we live through our teens, we find ourselves sifting through the many lenses we have been offered, in search of our own way. Our own set of glasses through which to see the world. To find a way, our way to walk in the world, a way that leads to life.

The Apostle John writes a story of Jesus who offers “a way” to his friends.

A path that prepares a way for them, and all humanity.

An alternative way. It is a way that leads to truth and leads to life.

And it is at its heart a way offered by the cosmic Christ, it is a way to God, Yahweh, the I AM.

The uncontainable, enigmatic, mysterious God.

This God, who met Moses and provided a way (a radical new way of thinking – an alternative way from the social reality of Pharaoh’s Egypt),

And this became a way for oppressed slaves to leave the Empire and experience freedom.

A way to form a nation, and a way to be sustained – from king to king, and to endure exile.

Jesus words: “I AM the way” to a group of Jewish friends, in Roman exile, would have made the room alive with anticipation. Like Moses in Deuteronomy and Isaiah’s prophecies, Jesus was able to articulate a future that was distinctly different from their unbearable present. But that future was energizing only for those for whom the present had become unbearable.

Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination

So why is it when I read John chapter 14, do I experience a constriction in my throat? A loss of wonder? A threat instead of an opportunity for freedom?

As Catherine Keller writes – it seems that “the way has become a wall”.

On the Mystery: Discovering Divinity in Process

I think it has something to do with the glasses we have been given to wear.

Dominant cultures have the power to articulate exclusionary claims.

The Christendom era has left us with a Christianity that claims to have **the ONLY way**.

An arrogance that doesn't resemble anything like the Jesus we read in the gospels.

Inclusive alternatives, like the one articulated by Roman Catholic Missionary and theologian Karl Rahner, who tried to bring together the universal saving love of God and the specific path of Christ. He created a category for the anonymous Christian. Those who find their way to God, without a conscious knowledge of Christ. **Opening up the way**.

What if Jesus words in John's gospel are not to be extracted as passwords for exclusion or inclusion? But are part of a narrative that continues to express the Wisdom of Jesus to a group of first century friends. Where Jesus offers a lens for a life of suffering, as a path to unity with God in Christ?

Catherine Keller, On the Mystery: Discovering Divinity in Process

John chapter 14 occurs within a context fraught with tension and betrayal, in the upper room. Judas has dipped his bread, identifying himself as the betrayer, the political tension is growing as the Jewish Nation divides on their hope/fear of this Messianic figure, in the midst of Roman oppressive rule.

Peter has sworn allegiance and Jesus warned him of his propensity for betrayal.

Jesus utters the words – where I go, you cannot go with me.

And Jesus looks at all these beloved friends who are so bewildered, anxious and troubled. And longs to lead them, to shepherd them, to take them with him to safety. To offer them hope, a way.

As a friend, Jesus reassures them that they will find their way. And that his presence in Spirit will always be there.

And as a Wisdom teacher, Jesus shares with them that the echoes of his path will also be theirs:

- My path – a path of pain, struggle and suffering– will prepare a way for you
 - o That is the way of suffering mysteriously leads to strength and freedom

- It is not the way of powerful victory, or war... it is a mysterious way of vulnerable solidarity.
 - It is transformative way of befriending our wounds and the wounded around us, and experiencing shalom, wholeness.
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This is gospel to us, good news. For in this time of global uncertainty, where many suffer. We are not being called to further separate out or proselytize.

Rather my friends, we are invited to offer welcome to those around us who wear different sets of glasses, to listen with curiosity as they speak their truth and to speak out ours.

For there is so much to learn from the many other ways that surround us. The many other forms of faith in our world that articulate the human journey of suffering and transformation.

I follow the way of Jesus,
and I experience the transforming presence of the risen Christ especially in this time of human separation,
and I invite any who are curious to explore this way deeply with me. It is a deep well, that offers life.

Life giving water.

And I have found that the gentle love I receive walking this way, is just what I need to draw up into my roots.

And if you sit still and wait and pay attention,
you may hear thirsty souls drinking.

Just, like my mother taught me.

Amen.