

"Where the Road Goesö  
 Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
 Acts 7: 55-60 John 14: 1 ö 14  
 April 20, 2008

In today's reading, we find Jesus saying words that for many people are central to their Christian identity; but for others these words raise troublesome questions. Jesus says, "I am the way; I am truth and I am life; no one comes to the father but by me". This text is particularly difficult to understand for people who are not Christian fundamentalists. Some people wonder: Does this statement by Jesus really make Christianity an exclusive religion? That is to say, öIf you have Jesus as your Savior, you are in, if not, you are out!ö In our pluralistic world where we have increasing awareness and understanding of the world's religions, what is the implication of these words? Is everyone else wrong and Jesus is right?

The challenge before us today is to find a way to read these words so that they can be seen and experienced as nourishing, inviting, and affirming rather than narrowly excluding and judgmental.

As usual, I am not content to read this text in the traditional manner. I do not look at "The way" as simply the means to eternal salvation, as much as I see it as the literal and metaphorical road that Jesus traveled. I combine this perspective with the many places in the Gospels where Jesus calls us to follow him and to do what he has done, and more. So, what does it mean to follow Jesus? To live as Jesus lived requires us, first, to determine where our particular roads lead as clearly as Jesus determined where his road led. Then, our responsibility becomes the task of following that road with all the integrity we can muster.

We might wonder what Jesus teaches us that can help us determine where our own roads go. When Jesus says he is öthe wayö, people in 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture tend to assume he is making a theological statement about his role as the heavenly gatekeeper. It's conceivable that it means precisely that, but he could just as easily be referring to his particular approach to faithful living so that we might be able to learn to take a similar approach ourselves.

The hallmark of Jesus' life is the depth and quality of his integrity. He lived in keeping with his deepest identity. Therefore, I hear Jesus calling upon us to live with a similar level of integrity. I think he challenges us to determine where the road (the way) goes for us as individuals and as a community, and he implies that if we don't do that, we will miss the depth and richness of life. Furthermore, without traveling the road with integrity, we never really come to know how God is present in our lives. These words from Jesus are not about living öcorrectlyö in a moralistic sense, said in other words, that certain ways are arbitrarily right and other ways are wrong. Furthermore, these words don't translate into some sort of Christian secret password that allows us entry into heaven. Rather, they call upon us to live every bit as fully as Jesus did, even when the road appears to lead us to contradict commonly held wisdom. We "see through a glass, darkly", (as Paul wrote in I Corinthians 13) so we can never fully understand, even at the purely practical level what those absolute rights and wrongs must be. We are only capable of living with as much honesty as we can muster.

How else might we understand Jesus' words? When we let go of the narrow notion that Jesus merely acted on our behalf, saving us so we wouldn't have to act ourselves, then Jesus' life can

be seen as a "true" **metaphor** for our lives, meaning, as Carl Jung says: Our goal in life is to be as much who we are as Jesus was who he was. We get a hint of that idea when Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me".

A decision to follow Jesus could be understood as an expression of obedience, a sacrifice, if you will, or it could mean taking a stand about something that you believe deeply or about life's deep truths that you have discovered. Looking at these words of Jesus from a wider perspective suggests that they might refer to truths beyond individual behavior, perhaps pointing to the very nature of life itself. Following "the road that we find before us" with integrity always involves wrestling with paradox, just like Jesus did.

Let me illustrate: Jesus followed a road that was dangerous. That road led him to a confrontation with the religious and political authorities of his day. Isn't it noteworthy that he chose not to use his considerable power to overwhelm his enemies? The disciples and others who went with him expected that he would take dramatic action to restore the Jewish people to power over those who were oppressing them. They expected that Jesus would command the heavenly forces leading to a great spiritual and perhaps political victory. This language is not so different from the apocalyptic language we hear from some parts of Christianity today. So, why didn't he use his power? What do we make of the fact that, instead, he simply chose to be fully present exactly where he needed to be?

In order to have integrity as his unique self and in order to respond faithfully to a most profound truth of life: the paradox of powerlessness, it was necessary for him to follow the particular road. **Jesus knew that the road went exactly that way. So if he was going to live with integrity, the road to the cross was necessary to follow.** There were no other viable possibilities and he took no short cuts.

We are called to travel many similar roads. There have always been socially unpopular causes for people of faith to embrace. Often these causes have to do with ensuring dignity and freedom for those who are disenfranchised by the powerful institutions and people in their culture. In our enlightened age, a most unpopular stance is to avoid using our massive power to subdue those whom we perceive to be inferior or to be in our way. As a culture, we value power-over ó rather than empowerment. Jesus challenged those who exercised power over others and he empowered the disenfranchised to participate fully in the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, we too often ignore Jesus's example, because to admit that we don't know the answers and to ally ourselves with natural creation over against human ego needs, puts us at odds with the very political world we have to live in. Consequently, a decision to follow the road of integrity requires us to leave security and guarantees behind.

As it did for the Israelites who left their bondage in Egypt, the road to freedom often leads into the "Wilderness", away from that which is known and predictable. To stay put is to remain in bondage, even if we can convince ourselves that there is no problem where we are. The illusion of security is addictive, and we live in an addictive culture that does not help us deal with ambiguity, diversity, or anything that is uncomfortable. The addictive patterns that affect individuals and even our whole culture can be defined as a disease that attempts to deny reality while promising to make us feel better. Addiction tells us that we can have guarantees and predictability in life. When we look from our addictive frame of reference, we come to believe

(as Rabbi Edwin Friedman said) that if we have enough knowledge, power, or time, we can fix anything. Of course, in reality we never seem to possess quite enough of those.

Still, our reliance on knowledge, power, and time as the means to overcome problems is precisely what must be left behind in order to follow Jesus and in order to survive in the wilderness. There are as many unique applications of this approach as there are individuals, but they all come down to living out the integrity of our unique selves.

The Park Church is at one of those proverbial crossroads moments in its history. Its most consistent mission has been to take on important social issues in behalf of those in need. But at times, it has been the church of the politically powerful and the educated. At times it has lost that deep identity as a church that is always ready to advocate for those who suffer in our culture.

As you prepare to select a Search Committee in a few months, you will need to answer the fundamental question about who you are. And you will have to discern where your road goes, based on your discovery of your deepest integrity.

Jesus' life stands as "The Way" of integrity. His life stands as an active expression of the value of courageous truth. And the way he made his choices tells us that we, too, must choose. We have a culture that pushes in one direction and a faith that pushes us in another. Which way will this congregation take? Where will the road go for Park Church?

Time will tell. Meanwhile, Jesus' approach to life requires an honest assessment of our deepest integrity, not simply to make a choice about what we want, but to discern who we really are and where our road leads. I predict that the road for Park Church will take you beyond the limits of knowledge, power, and time. It is by following the road that Jesus identified as "The Way" that this congregation will come to God, as individuals and as a church. Perhaps in the final analysis there really is no other way ...