

Dwelling in Truth

John 14:1-14

May 14, 2017

For many, our scripture today has been the go to passage in times of death. If you knew my schedule this past week you may think this would be the perfect time for me to talk about that very subject. It seems death and funerals found their way to our FBCJ family this past week. On Tuesday evening and again on Wednesday I traveled to Archdale, NC to be exactly where I believe I needed to be: standing in the presence of Malinda Dillon and her family as they grieved and celebrated the life of her sister Mrs. Doris Hamilton. Then on Thursday, I traveled to Burlington, NC so that I could be present (that is all I knew to do) for Lawrence and Becky Straughn who, along with their daughter Heather and grand-daughters Hadley and Kylee were grieving the untimely death of Nick Carnes, Heather's husband and Hadley and Kylee's dad. I strongly believe it is our duty, if we are to call ourselves a church family, to be present when any one of us experiences the loss of a loved one, and it is scripture like this that proves valuable in such times. In it we find absolute assurances that God always has room. In this text Jesus leaves no room to doubt that our dwelling place with God is secure. We need not worry another second about it, and all of us at one time or another can find comfort in such assurances.

Yet, like I am apt to do, today I want us to spend this time together exploring some of the other ideas Jesus was inviting his Disciples then, and us today, to think about and discuss. Now I want to make clear, my desire to explore other ideas in this text should never be interpreted as discounting the positive power of Jesus' assurances of our place in God's eternal house. Those assurances are invaluable to each and every one of God's children, and those assurances provide powerful support to those grieving the loss of a loved one. I believe wholeheartedly in those assurances, both for myself and for all of God's creation. The thing is, it seems clear to me that in addition to these assurances, Jesus is extending another invitation to all who followed then and continue to be followers of THE WAY. I believe Jesus was extending an invitation to expand our understanding of God and God's continual longing for deeper and deeper connection and relationship with each and every part of God's creation. No matter how scared we may become when faced with a choice of expanding understanding and acceptance; no matter how much those voices of fear scream for us to remain in the comfortable box we have created, I believe Jesus is inviting followers of THE WAY to grab hold of the life in front of them, which can only happen by expansion.

The Goonies

I love movies. Especially those from my childhood that connect me to my past in only the ways those type movies can. I trust we all have movies like that in our life. One such movie for me

came out in 1985 and is called *The Goonies*, and I love it. I love it so much that I couldn't wait to sit with my own kids and watch it with them, and truth be told I rushed the experience for both of us. As I sat beside my then 10-year-old son Joshua, wanting him to connect with *The Goonies* in the same way I did years earlier, I discovered a PG rating in 1985 was a lot more lenient than a PG rating is today.

Even as I squirmed (after all I was now on the Parent side of *The Goonies* whether I liked it or not) I found that I was much more interested in Joshua discovering the power, the liberation and the beauty in *The Goonies* finally answering the never-ending call to journey beyond themselves and their surroundings. Maybe I wanted my 10-year-old Joshua to see what I saw and feel the way I felt because *The Goonies* "had everything you could want, thrills, spills, pirates, treasure, adventure, freaks and bad guys. For most of us growing up when the movie came out, we just wanted to be a Goonie or go on a Goonie style adventure"¹ and I suspect I wanted my son to feel the same way.

For those of you who may not know, *The Goonies* storyline goes like this:

"Mikey and Brandon Walsh are brothers whose family is preparing to move because developers want to demolish their home and the surrounding neighborhood and build a golf course in its place."² The developers' desires will happen unless enough money is raised to stop their construction of the golf course, but there is little chance of that actually happening. All seems lost and while an attitude of DOOM & GLOOM starts to dominate, Mikey stumbles upon a treasure map of the hidden fortune of the famed Pirate 'One-Eyed' Willy. Convinced this is their best chance to save their home and the life they love, Mikey convinces his older brother Brand, and their friends "Chunk", "Mouth", "Andy", "Stef", and "Data", to follow him on the way to recover the treasure.

Right from the start *The Goonies* find trouble as the starting point on the treasure map is a cavern underneath the restaurant of the Fratelli crime family. With little more than this ancient treasure map and the un-ending desire to face his fears and journey beyond the limitations imposed on him, Mikey convinces *The Goonies* time and again that he knows the way to the treasure. At times fearing for their lives, the rest of *The Goonies* choose to trust Mikey and follow him. Each and every time it looks like their pathway will close in on itself, it expands and ultimately leads to One-Eyed Willie's hidden treasure.

Can any of you describe what it feels like to be called? Not on the phone, or not like my mom when I was growing up (JASON TIME TO COME HOME), but knowing that something is

¹ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089218/?ref_=ttpl_pl_tt

² http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089218/?ref_=ttpl_pl_tt

calling you to expand yourself and your life beyond what you already know? Do any of us know what it's like to be called in such a way?

The fact of the matter is that we have all been called like this, but being called doesn't necessarily mean we answer and when we don't answer we might not even realize we are being called. For some reason this seems to be the preferred response when we are called to expand our mind, expand our understanding, expand our world. Answering that call to expand feels hard and more often than not, we avoid working through hard things. We may not see it this way but each time we avoid working through barriers, each time we stay put instead of journeying beyond, our world contracts and we miss out on the opportunity to live life to its fullest. We might just miss the chance to do great things.

Fear can so easily take hold in the moment and when it does a blindness of sorts can overtake us. This blindness would have us believe that life is better by keeping the status quo. We tell ourselves that life is better when we stay within the boundaries of our self-created world. We tell ourselves that we know THE WAY and we don't like our knowing to be challenged.

So today we find ourselves listening to Jesus say I am the Way, I am the Truth, and I believe most of us have a firmly held belief about what all of that means. As my father-in-law says, "Most of my life has been spent trying to be a follower of a first century middle-eastern peasant Jew, known as Jesus. The religion that grew up around his memory and after his death has come to be called Christianity. We Baptists are one of 33,000 different denominations world-wide who say we are Christians.

Across the ages we Christians have developed our different rituals and styles to worship this Jesus, whom we say is the Son of God...and in point of fact, is God himself. At the same time, several other religions have developed, too. And this single verse from John's account of the gospel [that says Jesus is the way to God] has fostered a view of Christian 'exclusivity' that has resulted in wars and heartache and division unlike any other force in our world. It says we Christians are right and everyone else is wrong.

For those who cling tightly to such exclusivity, any attempt to expand understanding is seen as an attack. It is as though attempts to expand the understanding of Jesus' claim of being the way, the truth and the life is blasphemous and must be squashed. Yet, for those willing to face that fear head-on, for those willing to expand their own understanding of themselves, their faith and the created world in general, fear vanishes and love takes over. Jesus' claim of being the way and the truth should never been seen as a narrow road, it should be viewed as the wide, ever expanding road it actually is.

As Professor of Jewish Studies and New Testament at Vanderbilt, and a Jew herself, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine says, "Far too often for Christians, Jesus is seen as the ticket to heaven. You believe in him and you get to heaven, and the most important thing he did is defeat sin and defeat death. So Christianity becomes a matter of belief.

But recognizing Jesus within his Jewish context means recognizing his enormous concern for how people relate to each other on a day today basis. The issue for him is not, "Here's what you need to believe in order to get into heaven." The issue is, "Here's what you need to do in order to have one foot in the kingdom of heaven. Here's what you need to do because here's what God wants you to do, and here's what your tradition calls you to do."

It is his Judaism that associates love of God with love of neighbor; his Judaism emphasizes what

we call the golden rule, also found in a number of different religious traditions. That's why he talks to people about reconciliation and says that human interaction is more important than ritual. Saving a life always trumps any law of the Torah for Jews.

Jesus teaches people how to live, how to act. That's the Jewish Jesus, and that too often drops out. If you go straight from Jesus being born to being crucified, you're missing a whole lot."

It takes courage to embrace such an expanded view of Jesus' statement about being the way, the truth and the life, yet when placed in its proper historical context, it becomes fairly impossible to claim otherwise. When Jesus says I am the way it seems he is calling us to reflect on who he is and what he cares about and then model ourselves in that same way. Love all of God's creation. Care for all of God's creation. Love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself. Make every effort to care for the oppressed, those who are left out. Break bread with them, not because you are told to do so or not to do so... not because you think doing so is going to get you into heaven... Do it because you recognize his enormous concern for how people relate to each other on a day to day basis. Do it because you are willing to face your fears and uncertainties head-on, just like *The Goonies* did each and every time they trusted and followed Mikey. Do it in order to have one foot in the kingdom of heaven now, not at some later unknown time. Do it because seeking justice and loving mercy is THE WAY of Jesus.

Close with Keith Cokely

This morning something told me to stop by the Burger King on Wendover at the Palladium. IK had never been there before but had seen it while driving by on other occasions. So I walk up to the counter and place my order and after handing the gentleman (who happened to be the manager) my money I read his name on his name tag, Keith Cokely.

I had never met him, but I had heard the name numerous times because there was a Keith Cokely who played basketball for my grandfather at Oak Ridge Military Academy (ORMA).

You have no idea how hard it was to be an African-American boy at ORMA during those time. We would go to places to eat as a team and they wouldn't serve blacks. Each and every time we went to places like that your grandfather would say follow me son and I will always take care of you.

With tears in his eyes, Keith said to me, your grandfather cared more about me as a person than he ever did about me as a ball player.

Your grandfather was willing to face discrimination and oppression head-on because he recognized the value in my humanity.

Your grandfather may be the greatest man I have ever known and I want you to know I am who I am because of him.

This is the best example I could ever have hoped for when thinking about what it is like to follow Jesus along THE WAY! Jesus' way is a way of expansion. Jesus' way expands to reach all of God's creation. This is the way for us to follow.

Do it because you are willing to face your fears and uncertainties head-on, just like *The Goonies* did each and every time they trusted and followed Mikey. Do it in order to have one foot in the kingdom of heaven now, not at some later unknown time. Do it because seeking justice and loving mercy is THE WAY of Jesus.

Amen!