

“WAY. TRUTH. LIFE.”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017

Text: John 14:6

“The way, the truth, and the life.”

This is Jesus’ resume; or John’s claim about Jesus; or both. Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.”

I want to reflect today on the meaning of that pithy little phrase: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote:

All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the following three questions:

1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?

Today’s lecture, which I hope will evolve into a sermon at some point, takes those three questions as a starting point. I want to show you how Jesus directs us to himself as the ultimate answer to those three questions.

Before I do that, I want to tie Jesus’ three-fold claim (way, truth, life) and Kant’s trio of topics to another famous triplet: “faith, hope, and love.”

“What can I know?” expresses the quest for truth. Jesus asserts that the quest for truth finds its result through faith in him.

“What ought I to do?” is asked by one who is looking for “the way.” “The way” of Jesus is essentially love.

“What may I hope?”—Kant’s final question—corresponds to Jesus’ saying that he is “the life.” Death is the end of hope, right? “Life” means a way forward which surmounts the problem of dying and death.

So I am saying that Kant’s three questions are really about faith, hope, and love. And those topics are

addressed in Jesus’ resume: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

“All the interests of our reason” find their conclusion somehow in Jesus? That was not Immanuel Kant’s conclusion! But that is what I am saying.

How do I explain it? Why do I say that the faith, hope, and love which we have on account of Christ Jesus respond to the deepest quests of humanity?

First of all, “faith, hope, and love” are inseparable from each other. A defect in one ruins the other two. Love without faith, faith without love, love and faith without hope? Something’s amiss. People are not full of faith who lack love and hope. We may talk about them separately, but they don’t survive without each other. On the other hand, strength of the one strengthens the others. Together, these gifts are the one gift—health. Or, you might call it “righteousness.” “Being the way a person should be.” People ought to have faith, hope, and love. We ought to be filled with them. When we are not, we cope—but only as a three-legged dog manages.

There are about ten different ways in which our three readings—and the psalm—show the human condition to be one of uncertainty and fear; a bad place to be. People agonize over many questions in life, all of which tie to the question of whether we shall be all right. Whether we will be delivered from harm, and allowed to enjoy the happiness we envision on the horizon, sometimes nearer and sometimes farther away. Everything is not all right with us, and if it’s not one thing it’s another. Can God help us? Will God help us? Shall we be delivered? We are lost, and we wonder if we’ll make it home.

On the other hand, all four scriptures also assert that the way “home” is provided by God out of love. “My times are in your hand,” the psalmist says. “Deliver me in your righteousness.” Peter declares that although we were once “not a people,” now we “are God’s people.” Thomas doubts that they can find their way to the Father, but Jesus declares that they already know the Father, because of him. Finally, in the first reading Stephen shows how true it is that, even in the worst of circumstances, being stoned to death, he enjoys a vision of truth and beauty which translates into faith, hope, and love because he has stuck with the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. No death for Stephen, only life. Because he (a follower of The Way, as Christians called themselves) has faith in his Lord, whom he sees at the right hand of God.

Thomas in the Gospel and Stephen in the First reading could have asked the Kantian questions, and this is what they would have said.

What can I know? Answer: “I know that I am a child of God, and that this fact rests not on my perceptions or achievements but on the solid rock of God’s own promise to me. That is not the answer to any intermediate question. It answers the ultimate question about the meaning of my life.”

What ought I to do? Answer: “I ought to follow the one I love, the one who is my shepherd. I ought to proclaim the praise of God and seek the good of his people, who are all my neighbors. Put simply, I ought to love others as God has loved me.”

What may I hope? Answer: “I hope that where my Lord Jesus is, there I will also be; that where he went I will certainly follow. This robust hope is not something that stones can take away from me, for it is guaranteed by the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.” “Nothing can ever separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

Faith, hope, love. These are not virtues. We do not acquire them by faking them. These are gifts which

are given to us in a bundle by our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was not talking through his hat, there in John 15. He meant it. He is the way, the truth, and the life. You can spend your life agonizing about the answers to Kant’s questions, and perhaps you will provide humanity with a partial clue to a piece of an answer. Or you can stake your life on the veracity of Jesus Christ, and build from there using the faith, hope, and love promised to us who believe in him.

And what will our human life look like, if we accept Jesus as the ultimate answer to these questions? Our living will be re-formed in a unique way.

We will not spend our lives seeking what we want, as the prodigal son did, using the gifts of God to satisfy our own desires. Nor will we spend our lives acting dutiful and smug, like his brother. Rather, we will belly up to the feast of forgiveness which the Father has laid before us. And as long as we live we will be thankful for the gift of seeing the light, seeing Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

Amen.