

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE
(John 14:1-14)

When Tony Blair was British prime minister, he practiced a something called the Third Way. The Third Way was a political and economic philosophy that tried to steer a middle course between laissez faire capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other. In 1999 Blair was in Washington for a conference on Third Way economics and he got lost in the building where the conference was being held. So he asked a janitor, "What room is the Third Way meeting in?" And according to Blair, the janitor replied, "There ain't no third way, sir; there ain't but one way, and it's straight ahead."

The janitor could have been speaking about Christianity – or what became known as Christianity.

Here's an historical tidbit: you won't find the word "Christianity" anywhere in the Bible. "Christian" is used twice (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) and "Christians" exactly once (Acts 11:26). In fact, "Christian" was probably a derogatory label used by outsiders to poke fun at followers of Jesus, who after all had come to an ignominious end on the cross. To be identified as a follower of a condemned criminal wasn't no compliment.

Jesus' followers seem to have called themselves "the Way" without any adjectives – not the One Way, not the True Way, not the Christian Way, simply "the Way." We don't know where that name came from or why Jesus' followers would have chosen "the Way" to identify themselves. But they probably didn't pick it up from Jesus or from what he says in today's lesson, where he says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).

Those nineteen little words have caused a lot of discord and heartache. They've set Christians against people of other faiths. They've been used to divide the world into the saved, i.e. Christians, and the damned, i.e. everyone else. If Jesus is the Way, then Judaism can't be, and Islam can't be, and Buddhism can't be, and Hinduism can't be, and humanism definitely can't be.

Some Christians get very upset when anyone suggests that Christians may not have an exclusive lock on heaven. For them, "There ain't no third way, there ain't no second way; there ain't but one way, and that's Jesus.

Every year around Christmas and Easter, religion stories make the news. This year one of the stories was a book by Rob Bell, pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan – a book with the modest title *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. That's pretty ambitious stuff. *Time Magazine* made Bell's book it's cover story for Easter week with the caption "What if there's no hell?"

You might think that the answer to a question like that would be, "We can only hope so! No hell, that's the greatest news ever." But think again. R. Albert Mohr, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary calls Bell's book "theologically disastrous" and says, "Any of us should be concerned when a

matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way.” In North Carolina an Evangelical congregation fired its pastor for saying good things about the book.

Bells begins his book with an anecdote. A few years ago the Mars Hill Church put on an art exhibit and since the exhibit was about peacemaking, one artist included a quote from Mohandas Gandhi. Someone came along and stuck a note next to the Gandhi quote: “Reality check: He’s in hell.” Rob Bell’s reaction was just a bit more charitable and a lot less presumptuous than the anonymous note writer’s:

Really?

Gandhi’s in hell?

We have confirmation of this?

Someone knows this?

Without a doubt?

And someone has decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?

Threatening people with hell is a tried and true method of manipulation. I’ve jokingly said that if we would just bring back hell, we could get our finances straightened out in no time. Who wouldn’t up their pledge by 25% or 50% or 100% if the alternative was going to hell? That would be a small price to pay to avoid eternal damnation.

Maybe the threat of hell worked for Jonathan Edwards 300 years ago when he preached about an angry God dangling sinners over the fiery pit, but it doesn’t work for us today. I heard enough sermons about hell when I was growing up to last me a lifetime, and I’m certainly not seriously suggesting that we bring it back.

Whatever Jesus meant when he said he is the way and the truth and the life, he didn’t mean that he’s the way to steer clear of hell. Jesus didn’t hammer people with threats to scare them into believing.

Here’s what I think Jesus meant when he said he’s the way. I think he was saying that what matters most is not what we believe about him, but that what matters most is that we live a life like his. Henri Nouwen says that these final words of Jesus to his disciples are a reminder to them to “love Jesus, and love the way Jesus loved.”

As Christianity grew and spread and became a major world religion, its claims got bigger and bolder. But it wasn’t always a major religion and it definitely wasn’t when Jesus got together with his confused and frightened little band of followers. They were a miniscule, insignificant minority in a hostile religious world. Their faith had gotten Jesus’ followers kicked out of the synagogue, which was their “church home.” And now they were trying to create a new home for themselves – a new home grounded in what they had experienced in Jesus. They were a distinct new people who found their way to God through Jesus. They had seen God in Jesus. So when Jesus says, “no one,” what he means is “none of you.”

What might be different if we didn’t tend to reduce Christianity to a set of beliefs and thought of it more as a way of living? How many religious wars have

been fought and how many people have died because of some dispute over doctrine and belief that only a theologian could begin to understand?

It's kind of ironic that some of the fiercest battles between Christians have been about Jesus himself. The 4th and 5th centuries saw one controversy after another, until the Council of Chalcedon finally defined exactly what Christians are expected to believe about Jesus (I'll spare you the details) and then in the spirit of Christian charity and love, declared anyone who believed anything different to be anathema – cut off, cursed, damned, excluded.

To be sure, Jesus spoke about judgment, and we shouldn't pretend that he didn't. But he never makes what people believe about him the deciding factor. His clearest statement about who will go to heaven and who will end up in hell comes in the gospel of Matthew, where what separates the saved from the damned is how they treat others, and specifically how they treat the poor and the sick and the marginalized.

When Jesus healed sick people, he didn't ask them first to recite the Nicene Creed or ask them to believe in him. He just healed them. He offered them God's love and mercy without requiring them to pass some kind of litmus test.

That was Jesus' way, and that's the way our faith calls us to follow. That is the way to God. That is the way to life.