

The I Ams of Jesus: The Way, the Truth, the Life

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 14:1-7

Do not let your hearts be troubled, Jesus says at the beginning of our passage. I'm glad for that. What good words for us this morning. For here we are gathered together as people who all week long are bombarded by the problems and the uncertainties of our own lives. Our minds are occupied so much of the time with whatever pressing issues we're facing - our health or our kids or our jobs or our finances or our relationships, or the state of our country or world. To complicate matters - life, particularly in North America, is also filled with a multitude of choices, of options, of ways we can go, of things we can try - to address the issues and concerns of our lives.

I have a clear memory of returning to North America after having lived in a remote area of northern Mozambique for a couple years, I was standing in the middle of the cereal aisle at Meijer feeling completely overwhelmed, even assailed by the number of choices sprawled there before me. And this was 20 years ago! I felt like I needed someone to come beside me and help guide me through the maze of options! And since Meijer was not offering that service at the time, though I can imagine they will in the future, I left the store empty handed. Life is like that too, I think. Filled with options. Filled with choices, from what cereal we'll have for breakfast to which cable plan is best to how to manage decisions that will profoundly affect our life and future.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, Jesus says to his followers. In John's gospel, Jesus says this to them, at the very same time their lives are about to get real messy. You see, starting in the previous chapter, Jesus is beginning to indicate to his followers that things are about to change. Remember, they're already in the upper room here. Soon, in fact, that very night, the world as they've known it for the last few years, is going to get turned upside down and it's going to be messy and it's going to be confusing and it's going to be painful and they're going to wonder what to do, where to turn, which way to go.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, says Jesus. And what's so powerful about this message is that it's not an empty platitude Jesus is spouting here. It's not like Bob Marley's "Don't worry. Be happy." No. In fact what Jesus goes on to say to his disciples is a world impacting, life-altering, eternal truth which is also exactly what they needed and what we need - to be able face and navigate the confusing landscape of our lives. Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus says if you want access to God, to God's wisdom and truth, to God's present and eternal embrace and home, look to me. Here I am. In me is truth and that truth leads to life.

How can we know how to live and navigate this world's confusing landscape? How can you and I possibly know the way? By watching and listening to and following Jesus. So what does one discover when they watch and listen to and follow Jesus? Well, one thing that's unmistakably clear is Jesus' love, Jesus' deep compassion for all people. All that Jesus does, his teaching, his healing, his miracles, his frustrations with the Pharisees, his condemnation for those who would harm any image bearer of God, especially the vulnerable ones, all of these are born out of the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Jesus stands right in the middle of the complex messiness of our world and what he offers us as help and hope and guidance, is himself and his companionship in walking God's way of love. This morning, I want to say three things about the way of love that God has shown us in Jesus. I believe these three things can offer us help in navigating this confusing world. Here's the first thing: Jesus' way of love never minimizes evil or harm.

You know, sometimes, when we think about the immense, forgiving love of God, we can fall into the error of minimizing evil in our world. Sometimes with our strong emphasis on forgiveness, we have failed to pursue appropriate justice for people who have caused harm to others. While clearly it's true that Christ offers forgiveness to those who truly repent, that does not change the fact that out of God's great love for us, God set in place a moral order to live by. God lovingly gave us a way to flourish and to help others flourish by laying out for us (as they say in Children's Worship) the best ways to live. God's laws and God's justice are always at the service of God's love.

I was reminded of that recently as I listened to the January Series presentation of Rachel Denhollander, that courageous gymnast who was the first of 150 victims to bring sexual abuse charges against Dr Larry Nassar. These charges eventually led to Nassar's conviction and imprisonment for life. Rachel got the attention of the entire Christian world when she read her victim impact statement to the judge and to Larry Nassar. The heart of Rachel's statement and of her presentation at Calvin had to do with the relationship of justice and forgiveness. Forgiving someone involves letting go of something inside of me. But seeking justice has to do with respecting the moral contours of the universe which are ultimately tied to God's loving desire to protect and enable the flourishing of all people, especially the vulnerable. Here's an excerpt of what DenHollander said in the courtroom that day, "In our early hearings, [Larry] you brought your Bible into the courtroom ... You spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse, without acting as if good deeds can erase what you have seen in this courtroom today.... Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me -- though I extend that to you as well."

Throughout this process, I have clung to a quote by C.S. Lewis, where he says, my argument against God was that the universe seems so cruel and unjust. But how did I get this idea of just, unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he first has some idea of straight. What was I comparing the universe to when I called it unjust? Larry, I can call what you did evil and wicked because it was. And I know it was evil and wicked because the straight line exists. The straight line is not measured based on your perception or anyone else's perception, and this means I can speak the truth about my abuse without minimization or mitigation. And I can call it evil because I know what goodness is. And this is why I pity you. Because when a person loses the ability to define good and evil, when they cannot define evil, they can no longer define and enjoy what is truly good. When a person can harm another human being, especially a child, without true guilt, they have lost the ability to truly love."

Friends, as you and I follow Jesus' along the way of love we discover a way of truth that leads to life, a way that does not minimize evil or the harm done to the vulnerable of our world – all of whom are deeply loved by God. Which leads us to the second point about Jesus' way of love. As Jesus' followers - Jesus way of love must be our default mode, our M.O., our guiding principle as we navigate this messy world. In other words when you don't know what to do in any given situation - first love. When you don't have clear answers to your or your neighbor's problems - first love. When you're not sure which way to vote or how to think about a certain issue - first love. You know, as I was writing this I realized so much of what we do as a church is just that. Loving in the midst of messiness. Loving without all the answers. We can't change the cancer, so we knit a prayer shawl, make a meal, send a card, say a prayer and love. We can't soften the rough edges of a disease like Alzheimers or Parkinsons, so we offer an hour or two of respite for a care-giver and love. We can't erase a prisoner's crime so we join them in worship or Bible study together and love. We can't better a difficult home environment for a young student at risk, so we come alongside and tutor and mentor and love.

As we navigate a confusing world, it's a comfort to troubled hearts to know there is a particular way to go. It's the way of Jesus. It's the way of truth. And it leads to life. And we will know we are on the right path when our default is love. The last thing I'll say about the way of love, is that it's God's default too. In fact, when it becomes our default, it's only because it was God's default first. As we said earlier, Jesus had already set his feet on the path that leads to the cross. Jesus will walk that sacrificial way for love of us. Make no mistake about it, there were other choices he could have made. But I like to think that Jesus saw you, and each one of us, standing alone in our lostness and confusion, and chose to come to us and to save us and to fill us with his love and to bring us back to God.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says to you today. *“For, I am the way, the truth and the life, and by the power of my love, I will lead you home.”* Thanks be to God!

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