

Sunday, May 18, 2014  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Sayings  
John 14:1-14  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

They thought he would come back. They listened to Jesus teach and preach, they watched him heal and welcome, they followed him as he provoked and challenged, they stood slack-jawed as he was arrested and died, they reported that he rose again and appeared in their midst. But they really thought something would happen quickly and grandly to end life and the world as they knew it. They thought the entire order of things would be up-ended, heaven brought to earth, the crooked made straight, New Eden, all of it. They held onto the words of the prophets, hoping against hope that they had read them right and saw the signs pointing toward a new day. But nothing happened.

Well, not nothing. Things happened in the infuriatingly slow and mysterious way that God seems to work—not in the “I want it right now” way we sometimes hope for God to work. Slowly, in the unfolding of moments, in the movement of individual lives, God’s story worked then as it does now—like a flower steadily opening in Spring, like a sunrise, like an awakening.

Years passed, Jesus was gone, and the aging disciples were left with the legacy of Jesus’ ministry and the reality of mundane days with ordinary highs and lows, just like ours, rather than revolution and reversing the injustices and imperfections of this world. And like many aging people who have lived big and lived well, they knew the stories they told needed to become the stories they wrote lest everything be forgotten.

What’s that thing he always said? The one about worry—do not worry about what you’ll drink or what you’ll eat or what you’ll wear—he loved that line. Remember the story he liked to tell? He’d get to preachin’ about folks who think they know so much about God and he’d start telling that story about the father who stands and waits and sees his good-for-nothin’ son...while he was still far off. Such a great story. Put that one in there.

Write down the one about the poor in spirit, the one about the time he found that short tax collector hiding in a tree, the one about seeking God’s kingdom first and letting the details of life fall together. Remember the guy who was crazy and naked and ran

around the graveyard for years? Jesus just touched him, and he was as sane as anyone could ever hope to be. That was amazing. Or the time when the whole town showed up to hear him preach, but nobody came up with a plan for lunch—he and that kid whispered and giggled together for a while, then all of a sudden there was enough. More than enough. Stuff like that always happened when he was around.

Then they got really quiet and just sat there. Remembering.

Some of the writers shared stories and told versions of the same ones. They remembered those phrases in different settings or on different days, but they matched up on most points. Jesus wouldn't be forgotten (and their lives wouldn't be forgotten) if all of these sayings were passed along.

John remembered it a little differently than the others. He wanted to capture the mysterious nature of Jesus, the poetry, the metaphors, the symbols. His version would have a flare for the dramatic, an obvious gravitas and beauty. John's Jesus would be a decadent, multi-course meal to savor, bite by bite. Jesus' sayings, each a meal unto themselves, could be enough to feed a world. (See? John's poetry inspires poetry. He was on to something good.) John didn't just remember, he organized and crafted. He arranged the memories in such a way that he wove a tapestry of sayings to create a word picture of this man Jesus. Today's is number 6 of 7 in the grouping of "I AM" sayings:

I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger. (John 6:35)

I am the light of the world; he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness but shall have the light of life. (John 8:12)

I am the gate; if anyone enters through me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture. (John 10:9)

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. (John 10:11)

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies. (John 11:25)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father but through me. (John 14:6)

I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. (John 15:1)

The sayings in John, especially those today, serve to remind us that knowing ABOUT Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus, and professing faith in Jesus is only true (only bears weight, only has integrity), if we are living these things out.

Jesus said a lot of things that wanted to be remembered by our lives, and we sing them and preach them and chant them and whisper them. We write them down, spell them out, cast a vision with words like welcome and grace and hospitality. But if we don't incorporate them into our story, if we don't live them, if we don't give our days to these words, then they're just sayings.

We get side-tracked when we become frantic about understanding Jesus in explicit, legalistic terms. We get completely lost in the woods when we dismiss his sayings altogether as impractical or unimportant. The same thing happened with people who heard him in real time: Jesus, do you mean if I follow the rules, give money to the poor, and send my Aunt Sally a birthday card then I'll be in paradise with you? Or we leave him on the shelf alongside the other storybooks, thinking he couldn't really mean to love neighbor and stranger and self in big, graceful, honest ways. Nobody can live that way. It's just a nice idea and falls pleasantly on the ears.

So Jesus said some more things trying to make sense of the first things. Because he wanted to make sure that when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life," we believe him. And the people who heard him say it the first, second, and third times knew that we needed to get it and remember it. When we remember with our lives, the way of Jesus slowly and mysteriously transforms all.

Some preachers today who stand before this same text may want to just make it about heaven and how to get there. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me. But I think he's talking about a real way. He's talking about walking.

We know that to study the sayings of Jesus requires us to study the whole of scripture. If the gospels are a tapestry, then each saying is a thread. When we pick one up, we follow it as far as we can to its beginning. If we do that with this idea of the way of Jesus, we follow Jesus' way through the Greek gospels into the walking ways of God through the Hebrew scriptures.

Throughout the Bible we find sayings that use the stuff of everyday life as invitation to consider God's presence with us. For much of the ancient audiences first living and hearing these words, walking was as necessary and ordinary as a day could get. Walking was living. So well-known sayings become theological statements when God is entering the ordinary: God walked in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8),

God promised the Israelites, “I will walk among you and be your God” (Leviticus 26:12), “God also visits and walks around the camp of the Israelites (Deuteronomy 23:14). God’s walking means God is near. Ordinary lives are not isolated lives; God is in our midst.

Sayings about walking also reflect a person’s character: Noah walked with God, Abraham and David were called to walk before God/in the presence of God, and texts like Deuteronomy 8:6 urge listeners to “keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in [God’s] ways.” One’s journey of faith is life; it is to be walked out.

Walk in light, walk in newness, walk with the wise, walk blamelessly, walk in good company, walk in freedom. Walk in the way Jesus walked—follow his steps to discover life as he lived it.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that he was showing them how to live. In John 13, a text we have studied twice in recent weeks, Jesus commands the disciples to love one another. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Only three verses separate the sayings of Jesus’ mandate (Love one another) from today’s text of Jesus going to prepare a place where there is room for all.

Between the command to love and the blessing, “Do not let your hearts be troubled” is a short scene between Jesus and Simon Peter. Peter understands that Jesus is leaving and wants to follow. Jesus tells him no, but Peter insists, “I will lay down my life for you.” Then Jesus predicts that Peter will, instead, deny him.

Do not let your hearts be troubled by those three verses, the gospel writer is telling us. You will forget to love each other, too. You will fail at this command, too. You will say that you want to follow on the way of Jesus and then deny that you ever said it. You will stand in worship and profess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and then walk out the doors and forget every saying you ever claimed to know by heart. You will want to live this out and then fail. So do not let your hearts be troubled.

If you, like the disciples, want to be near Jesus, you draw near by walking. You will trip. You will fall down. But you will rise and walk again.

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<sup>1</sup> See: “WALK, WALKING”, “Followers of the Way”, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pp. 922-923

The friends and students gathered sayings and scenes to build the case for Jesus. No doubt the gospel writers wanted Jesus to be remembered, but they wanted him to be remembered by our lives. When we listen to what Jesus most often said and then embody that listening, we become the story that God continues to write. When we make the shift from being not just hearers of the word but doers also, we join Jesus' story because we are living in his way. We become the sayings.

Give yourself to me. Give yourself to my words, to my actions. Line your life up with mine, step right behind me and follow my lead. Let your tables be long and wide with room for all. Debate the important truths of life and faith with each other as you figure out what matters most and what matters least. Feed the poor, give the thirsty a drink, and clothe the naked. Welcome, really welcome the people no one else wants to have anything to do with. And I don't mean awkwardly pass them by as you hand them a voucher to the salvation army or a bagged lunch that you yourself wouldn't dare eat. I mean welcome them to your Wednesday night dinner table—the one with the white table cloths and real plates. Welcome people in such a way that it disrupts all of your perfect plans and your old dreams—practice a hospitality that reflects faith in the hope that God's house has many rooms. Welcome here like God welcomes there: men, women, young, old, straight, gay, rich, poor, black, white—welcome *everyone* to walk here in the light of God.

Last week we sat with one of these sayings from John—I am the gate. We said that the gate opens freely and allows the sheep to move into the abundance of green pastures. At the end of that John 10 text, Jesus explains his first saying with another, "I have come that you might have life and have it to the full." Just a few chapters later, this idea expands again with the invitation to follow on the way of Jesus. How are we invited to experience abundance? How might we know the peace that God desires for us? How do we settle down into our honest, best selves? It is on the walking way of God. Jesus' way, truth, and life is a thread to be followed back to the fullness of life that God has imagined from the beginning.

In Anna Quindlen's *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, she addresses the difference between true life and false life. Originally written for a university commencement, she writes to all those in need of a new beginning, "Get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house. Do you think you'd care so very much about those things if you blew an aneurysm one afternoon, or found a lump in your breast? Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze over Seaside Heights, a life in which you stop and watch how a red-tailed hawk circles over the water gap or the way a baby scowls with concentration when she tries to pick up a cheerio with her thumb and first finger.

Turn off your cell phone. Turn off your regular phone, for that matter. Keep still. Be present.

Get a life in which you are not alone.”

The way of Jesus is not a solo journey. We live in this way together as a people. Forgiveness can't be practiced alone any more than reconciliation or compassion or hospitality can. Grace and blessing and washing feet need to happen in the life together. Doing the things that Jesus did—loving one another, breaking bread together, challenging powers and authority and injustice in this imperfect world—can only happen in the sharing of ourselves. They happen because we gather up all of these sayings, just like Jesus' friends and students did, and we carry them with us on the way, living them out as we walk.