

In last week's reading, we heard Jesus' well known and perhaps most misinterpreted words, "I am the way and the truth and a life. No one comes to the Father except by me."

I don't know about you, but that saying, and the way it's been interpreted over the centuries has always troubled me. Its use by Christians to limit the expanse of God's love and to restrict the gift of eternal life to a select few who make a particular proclamation of faith has always given me pause. You've probably heard familiar statements like, "If you don't personally accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you're destined for hell."

Statements like that have always seemed to me to be so exclusive, so absolute, so damning. What about all those people in the world who have never had the opportunity to learn about Jesus? When I was in college, it was that kind of exclusivity by various Christian groups on campus that made me not want to be a Christian. I didn't want to, in fact, I couldn't believe in a God like that. And as fast as I ran in the opposite direction, God seemed to always pursue me, meeting me where I was and hinting that his words had been misinterpreted until one day I stumbled into an Anglican cathedral in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where I discovered the God I had always hoped for and believed in, the God whose love is so expansive that it transcends any and all of our petty and artificial us versus them divisions.

Some years ago, I read a helpful interpretation of Jesus' saying in Frederick Buechner's book *Beyond Words*. He writes, "When Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, but by me,' he didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could come to the Father. He said that it was only by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that Jesus embodied, that was the way. Thus, it is possible, Buechner says, to be "on Christ's way and with his mark upon you" without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God, though maybe you don't even believe in God. A Christian, he says, "is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it, and who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of whom to thank."

I believe, as Buechner does, that it is possible to be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai, agnostic, even atheist, and to be on the way, perhaps even further along the way, than those of us who call ourselves Christians, including me. Today's gospel reading is an extension of last week's gospel. It is just before the Passover festival, and Jesus,

knowing that the hour had come for him to pass on from this world has gathered his disciples in the upper room. He's washed their feet, demonstrating his love for them and instructing them to continue the practice. He's predicted Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial, and he's informed them that he is going away, that he will no longer be with them.

And the disciples are understandably confused and afraid. This was a time of great uncertainty and chaos and confusion. They feared for the life of their beloved teacher and also their own. And Jesus answers their many questions, and he calms their fears making two things plain and simple. First, he instructs them to embrace the love that has defined his life and ministry in their own lives. And second, he assures them that he will not leave them orphaned or alone, but he will ask the Father to give them an advocate to be with them forever.

With these two things, Jesus communicates what they are to do and how they will do it when he is gone. With regard to what they're to do, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And we know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels that of all the commandments in the Torah, Jesus elevates just two. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself."

"All the law and the prophets," Jesus says, "hang on these two commandments. Love God and love one another." And the key word here is love. For Jesus, it is love that defines what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship has little to do with what we believe and everything to do with how we live. Jesus wasn't concerned with religious piety, personal morality, or correct belief as much as he was concerned with how we treat one another.

In her TED Talk, theologian Karen Armstrong notes that the word belief from that Latin "credo" originally meant to hold dear, to love, to prize. It wasn't until the 17th century that we began to associate belief with intellectual assent to a set of propositions or some kind of creed or dogma or doctrine. "I believe," Armstrong says, originally meant "I commit myself, I engage myself." So instead of deciding whether or not you believe in God, she says, you do something. You behave in a committed way, and then you begin to know and understand God."

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. To be a Christian and to follow Jesus on the way is to commit to love and not just any love, not human love, that is conditional and driven by ego and fickle, but God shaped love, love that is deep, active, and absolutely unconditional, love that does not have to be earned, love that never runs out, love that leaves no one outside of

God's circle of compassion, love that embraces all, even, and especially, those who think and believe and act and live differently than we do.

Jesus embodied this kind of God sized, God shaped love in his life, in his compassion for others. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and cured the lame and the blind. He ate with the outcasts, the poor, and the despised. He got proximate to the discarded and aligned himself with those on the margins. He confronted and called out the powerful who sought to exploit and crush the most vulnerable. And in the end, he gave up his own life so that we might live.

"Love is the way," as presiding Bishop Curry says. And so I wonder what it looks like for you to embody that kind of love in your own life. What does it look like for you to love God? Desmond Tutu says that "The more time we spend in God's presence, the more we sort of through osmosis, embody in our own lives the attributes of God: joy, hope, grace, compassion, and love."

I wonder what spiritual practices you might incorporate in your daily life, or deepen, that you're already doing: prayer, meditating on scripture, engaging in the disciplines of self-examination and contemplation. And I wonder what it looks like for you to love yourself, to practice self-care, self-compassion. As Christians, we talk a lot about taking care of others and serving others, but we forget that we have a responsibility to be good to ourselves.

So, what does it look like for you, and I'm also speaking to myself, to love yourself? When you make a mistake, when you do something you're not proud of, when you say something you wish you could take back, when you hurt someone you love. What does it look like for you to love and accept all of who you are, even those parts of you that you're ashamed of, or that others have deemed or labeled different or wrong? What does it look like for you to love yourself in those moments when you're caught up in fear and anxiety and self-doubt, when you wonder if you're good enough, if you matter, if you'll be missed when you're gone?

And what does it look like to love others with the same radical love God loves us. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says that "In every moment, in every encounter with another person, something sacred is at stake." We never know what someone else is going through, and we have nothing to lose when we choose love and compassion and grace. So, what does that look like with your significant other, with your children, with your siblings, your friends, your colleagues, your boss, even your enemies, and those you don't necessarily like.

And finally, what does God sized, God shaped love look like on the level of society? Our faith teaches us that love of God is expressed, embodied, if you will, in love for our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable, especially the historically marginalized, the oppressed, and the outcast. And how could it not be? Omid Safi is the director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and he says, "If there is something of the divine presence in every human being, then to love God is to love humanity. And to love humanity, we must address the conditions in which we live because the dignity of human beings matters. Structures and institutions matter."

Our baptismal covenant calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to respect the dignity of every human being, and to strive for justice and peace among all people. So if we want to make Jesus' love the goal for our own lives, we must get busy as a church locally and nationally and globally dismantling the structures and systems in society that violate human dignity.

So, when we preach God's love, every time we call out white supremacy and Christian nationalism. We embody God's love when we celebrate all people and all identities. We share God's love when we welcome and receive refugees at our border. We extend God's love when we treat our houseless neighbors with dignity instead of asking whether or not they're worthy of our care. It all seems simple enough, right? Love God, love your neighbor. Love justice, love yourself. But in practice, it's not so easy.

I struggle to love myself, my spouse and my children, my friends, my family, my neighbors with that kind of love. Jesus knew we'd need help and that's why he promised to send us an advocate. And that word advocate comes from the Greek word *paraclete*, and it means, "One who has been called to our side." This advocate, Jesus says, will be with us, in us, and among us. And Jesus promises that we will see him and recognize him and know him when we love and serve one another. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me, by love." Amen.