

Finding Our Way

John 14:1-14

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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Our United Methodist Hymnal contains a Ralph Vaughn Williams setting of a text from 17th century poet George Herbert. George Herbert is an important figure in the history of English literature. He grew up when Shakespeare was writing plays. A celebrated poet, writer and orator, he held important positions at Oxford University and in Parliament before heeding the call to ministry in the Church of England.

THE CALL

George Herbert, 1593-1633

Come, my Way, my Truth, My Life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath;

Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

Such a Life, as killeth death.

The first verse connects with our Gospel reading from John 14.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Jesus said I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. George Herbert is calling to Jesus to be with him, here in this place, in this moment.

This passage is familiar to us in funeral and memorial services. The words comfort us as we commend our loved ones into the hands of God. "I go to prepare a place for you." But we don't have to wait until we die to experience the place that Jesus has prepared for us. We live on the morning side of the Resurrection. Jesus is with us to take us to the place where the grace of God is real.

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." Soon after Jesus speaks these words he goes to the cross. It is on the cross that he is doing the work that prepares a place for us with God. On the cross grace happens, forgiveness happens, reconciliation happens. On the cross God's love for humanity is revealed in its completeness. Jesus did go and prepare a place for his followers. And the risen Jesus returned with the assurance that even in the present moment we may be in that place with him.

John 14 is about our present experience of the fullness of Life, the Abundant Life. Jesus invites us to follow in his Way to the place he has prepared.

"But we don't know the way, Lord." Oh, yes we do. The Way is life patterned after Jesus. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." Those terms form three sides of an equation that can be arranged any way we want. The Way is the Truth. The Truth is the Life. The Life is the Way. The Way and the Truth are Life. The Way, the Truth and the Life is Jesus' path of self-giving love.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath:

The story is told of a group of scientists that decided to develop a fish that could live outside of water. Selecting some healthy red herring, they bred and crossbred, hormonized and chromosomed until they produced a fish that could exist out of water. But

the project director wasn't satisfied. He suspected that although the fish had learned to live on dry land, it still had a secret desire for water. 'Re-educate it,' he said. 'Change its desires.'

So again they went to work, this time retraining even the strongest reflexes. The result? A fish that would rather die than get wet. Even humidity filled this new fish with dread. The director, proud of his triumph, took the fish on tour, but, quite by accident, the fish fell into a lake. It sank to the bottom, eyes and gills clamped shut, afraid to move, lest it become wetter. And of course it dared not breathe. Every instinct said no, yet breathe it must. So, the fish drew a tentative gill full. Its eyes bulged! It breathed again and flicked a fin. It breathed a third time and wriggled with delight. Then it darted away. The fish had discovered water.

Living in the Way is like the fish swimming in the water. It is the environment for which we were created. And yet, also like this story of the fish, the world conditions us to recoil when we encounter the Way of God. The Gospel of love finds itself at odds with the world.

It is Jesus' way of living right side around in an upside down world.

Jesus gave us images of the Way in the stories he told and the life he lived. He told the story about the Samaritan who was a neighbor to the Jewish man who had fallen among robbers. Jesus associated with the poor, with despised tax collectors and prostitutes. These disciples, who we hear doubting whether they know the way, are assured by Jesus that they do know it and they will know it because they know Jesus. The Disciples knew what it was like to be outcastes, and then to be chosen by Jesus. They would see Jesus walk the way of the cross, a way that appeared foolish and powerless, but which they would come to know was God's path of wisdom and power.

The Way is the love made real on the Cross. The Way is a giving-away kind of life, a God-centered rather than self-centered life. This is the Way that gives us breath, for it is the Way we were created to be. To walk in this Way is to come home to our true nature.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath:

Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

The Truth is Grace. It is the inestimable worth of all creation. The Truth is that neither we nor our neighbors nor the fish in the sea nor the plants in the field need to justify our existence. It is God's windborn Spirit, creative Word and holy breath that permeates all and makes all sacred. This is the Truth that ends all strife, for to know the preciousness of all creation is to turn and walk humbly with our God, to walk gently on the earth, to live in peace with our brothers and sisters. To embrace the Truth is to end the strife and heal creation.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath:

Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

And such a Life, as killeth death.

I am focusing on the first stanza of Herbert's poem, but the second and third stanzas are also about the first verse. Look at the capitalized words in verses two and three.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

**Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.**

**Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joys in love.**

They are also images of the Divine Presence: Light, Feast, Strength, Joy, Love and Heart. These words all define the Life that killeth death.

This Life is bathed in Light, nurtured by God's Feast, and sustained by the very Strength of God. The old style English in some lines of the poem causes us to pause for a moment. "Such a strength as makes his guest." What does that mean? It means just what it says. This Strength is the gracious God creating the guest. This Strength is the host of the Feast offering the food of life. This Strength is the Feast itself nourishing all of us who are the invited guests.

This Life is anchored in stubborn Joy ("such a Joy, as none can move). This Life is steadfastly connected with undying Love ("such a Love, as none can part", for "nothing [not even death!] can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" [Romans 8]).

This Life is a life of the Heart that rejoices most when giving of itself, which is exactly what love is ("such a Heart, as joys in love").

For all of these reasons this Life is victorious over the deathly ways of the world.

George Herbert titled his poem "The Call." It is a prayer asking for God's presence: Come – Way, Truth, Life, Light, Feast, Strength, Joy, Love and Heart. We call upon you, O God, come. But note that this God upon whom we call is not a static kind of presence. This place that Jesus has prepared for us is not a stationary abode. It is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is a place of doing. It is a Way of being. It is a Life of living.

And so "The Call" works in both directions. We call upon God to come, and we experience God as we heed the call to walk in the Way, the Truth and the Life.

According to renowned cellist and humanitarian Pablo Casals, "Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again.... And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France.

When will we also teach them what they are?

We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move.

You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel?

You must work - we must all work - to make the world worthy of its children."

Let us today heed the Call. Let us each resolve to find the particular way in which we will walk Christ's Way, which is the Way that lives for the sake of all God's creation.

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