

“Heart Trouble”

John 14:1-7

Sermon series: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Today’s answer: Jesus the way, the truth, and the life

September 29, 2019

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

In one of his recent blogposts,
the entrepreneur Seth Godin
discusses the difference between a COMPASS and a MAP.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we always had a map?” he asks.

“A set of step-by-step instructions on how to get from here to there...”

Then he tells the following story:

“A Gurkha rifleman escaped from a Japanese prison in South Burma and walked six hundred miles alone through the jungles to freedom. The journey took him five months, but he never asked the way and he never lost the way....

“He used a map and when he reached India he showed it to the Intelligence officers, who wanted to know all about his odyssey. Marked in pencil were all the turns he had taken, all the roads and trail forks he has passed, all the rivers he had crossed. It served him well, that map.

“The Intelligence officers did not find it so useful. It was a street map of London.”

Godin concludes:

“Happy endings come from an understanding of the compass, not the presence of a useful map.”¹

I thought of that blogpost in light of our scripture text for today.
I wonder if our text for today—

¹ From “The compass and the map,” by Seth Godin, April 21, 2019.

which includes one of the best-known passages of scripture, John 14:6—

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me...”*

I wonder if that verse has traditionally been read as a map,
when Jesus really intended for it to serve as a **compass**.

What does that mean?

I suspect you’ve heard the common interpretation of this verse.
That no one “gets to heaven” without believing in Jesus first.

That Jesus is the only way, and Christianity is the only truth, and this verse is then used by some Christians as a justification for judgment, a WEAPON to say that people of other faiths are doomed forever.

If you’ve ever heard that reading of this text,
or if someone has ever FED YOU that understanding of these words,
let me encourage you to check the “use by” date on that reading—
because I suspect it’s gone pretty stale.

I don’t believe that’s what this verse is about at all, because it completely ignores the context, the setting of Jesus’ words.

Do you remember the setting in which Jesus spoke these words?

It’s the last night of Jesus’ life.
He has just shared his final meal with the disciples.
And he’s told them that he’s going away.

All of which leaves the disciples are BAFFLED.

In the 13th chapter, Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, where are you going?”

In our text for today, Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Do you hear what’s happening?

The context for this verse is NOT Jesus talking to a roomful of Buddhists and Hindus and atheists, addressing the question, “Who will be saved?”

Jesus is talking to his disciples.
The context is bewilderment, loss, grief.

The disciples cannot see or comprehend the prospect that Jesus will be leaving them.

Friends, this is not a text in which Jesus hopes to convert someone.
It’s a text in which Jesus is trying to ENCOURAGE someone.
Not just anyone...his disciples!

“Do not let your hearts be troubled...”

That’s how the 14th chapter of John begins.

Jesus wants to give his disciples COURAGE for the road ahead, because things are about to change, and he will no longer be with them,
and he does not want them—
when he goes away—
he does not want them to LOSE THEIR WAY...

So he gives them a compass.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life...”

All of which is fine and good for those disciples.
But what about these disciples?
Are you and I really in danger of losing our way?

After all, I didn’t leave worship last week with a troubled heart.
I left with a pretty joyful heart.
Did you see all the new members that joined our church last Sunday?
(They’re listed here in this morning’s Harbinger, in case you missed it.)

And this kind of growth has been the trend since well before I got here.
Just consider the past decade at Westminster
Going back to 2010, Westminster’s membership was 1581.

Our membership right now? 1863.

That's an 18% increase over 9 years.

For any number of reasons, Westminster is clearly going AGAINST all the trends with church these days. According to a recent Gallup poll, church membership has declined by 20% over the past 20 years in our country.²

And in our own denomination, the PC(USA) has shrunk by 200,000 members over the past 3 years.³

And here we are, just trying to find enough Sundays for all the baptisms that need to take place around here.

Why am I sharing all this?

Maybe you're thinking I picked the wrong text for today.

Do not let your hearts be troubled?

This is not a congregation that's got heart trouble.

Before we put this text aside, I think...I think I know why I chose it.

I think I chose it because it could be tempting—in the midst of this kind of growth—to pat ourselves on the back. To say that being church is all about numbers and new faces, and as long as we're growing, that's all God wants from Westminster.

Please don't misunderstand.

I'm enormously excited about our growth, and all that God is doing around here.

But are good numbers and growth all that God wants from Westminster?

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life...” said Jesus.

THREE WORDS...for Westminster to follow like a compass.

² Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” April 18, 2019, found at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>

³ Leslie Scanlon, “PC(USA) releases 2018 statistical report,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, April 24, 2019, found at <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/04/pcusa-releases-2018-statistical-report/>

“I am the way...”

Pop quiz: when did Jesus speak these words?
Last night of his life, right?
And where was he headed?

He was headed to the cross.
Headed to a place of sacrifice and self-denial.

Ask yourself: is that where you're headed right now?
To a place of sacrifice and self-denial?

Let me get at it this way.

In my first year out of college, before I went to seminary, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, so I spent a year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps has four principles that govern their volunteers:

Social justice, community, spirituality...and simple living.

During the course of that year, I was fine with the first three.
But I had some difficulties with the fourth...simple living.
Not that I wanted to spend the year living high off the hog.

But I quickly discovered that when it came to other people's ideas of simple living, well...we weren't all on the same page.

Take cable tv.
This was back in the days before YouTube tv and Direct tv.

I didn't just WANT cable tv that year...I NEEDED cable tv.

How else could I watch ESPN?
How else could I see my beloved Yankees play?

I appealed to my 5 housemates, but we were split down the middle.
Three for, three against.

So I told my pastor back home of my quandary, and a few days later, I received a note in the mail. It wasn't a note. It was a TREATISE.

The title of which read:

“Why Cable TV is Consistent with Simple Living...”

It was three pages long!

He made arguments from church history, he cited Protestant theologians, he cited Catholics like Thomas Aquinas...

But my favorite argument was this one.

JVC is a Catholic organization. And my pastor said that only a couple years before, he had been traveling in Italy, and went to the Vatican.

He was ready to see the beauty of the place.

Be taken in by the reverence and majesty of the Church.

But to his great astonishment, the first thing he noticed on the roof of the Pope's home....was nothing less than 3 SATELLITE DISHES!!

So my pastor wrote: If the Pope deems it necessary to have his faith strengthened by satellite, surely a measly \$30/month for cable will not fracture the ideal of simple living!

And wouldn't you know it...the tie was broken.

By a 4-2 vote, cable tv entered our household, and I got my ESPN.

I watched it all year.

Yankee games galore!

I wonder now if maybe I missed something.

I wonder if, by not even trying to have a simple lifestyle—by not practicing self-denial, by refusing to work with my housemates who wanted to pursue that goal—I wonder if I was letting something else guide me, some kind of short-term happiness serve as my compass...

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever let short-term happiness become your daily compass?

I AM THE TRUTH says Jesus.

That's another example of how a growing church like ours can get lost.
By forgetting the truth that Jesus spoke and embodied throughout his life.

What is that truth?

That every person in this room is a child of God.
And everyone out there is a child of God.

That means something...

In Jesus' day, it meant that when women were often treated like property, he treated them like people. It meant that when Samaritans were seen as the enemy, he treated them like friends.

And it means something in our day too.

When we see pictures of migrant children in cages...those people are precious children of God.

When social media is used to break other people down instead of building other people up...we must remember the truth that Jesus taught:
everyone is God's precious child.

Father Greg Boyle once put it like this:

“The wrong idea has taken root in the world. And the idea is this: there just might be some lives out there that matter less than other lives.”⁴

Boyle, as you know, runs “Home Boy Industries” in Los Angeles,
helping gang-members to get out of gangs and into a new way of life.

⁴ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

So Boyle was traveling to give a few speeches about his work, just like he came here to Greenville last spring.

On one occasion, he took Richie and Chepe with him.

They went to a restaurant called Coco's.

Coco's was, as Boyle puts it, "one notch above Denny's, one notch below everywhere else."

When they walked in, they encountered a hostess who made no secret about the fact that she strongly disapproved of Boyle's **tattooed** dinner companions. She didn't move from behind her hostess station...she just kind of waited for them to get the hint and go away.

This, of course, made Boyle furious.

Instead of leaving, he played a game of charades with her...he played dumb, as if she just didn't know why they were there.

Holding up the number "3".
Making eating motions with his hands.
Pretending to sit at a table.

Finally, she grabs three menus and takes the trio to the back of the restaurant, where there are no other diners nearby.

"Everybody's looking at us," Richie whispers.
"We don't belong here," Chepe chimes in.

"Don't be ridiculous," Boyle replies, and they sit down to eat.

Their discomfort lasted until their waitress came.

For whatever reason, she was a whole different person than the hostess and all the other diners.

She put her arms around Chepe and Richie, talked with them,
joked with them, asked about them,
called them "Sweetie" and "Honey"

and brought them refills they didn't ask for.

What that waitress didn't know, what she couldn't have known, was that Chepe and Richie had never been in a restaurant **where you sit down to eat and someone serves you.**

But she treated those boys like they were her favorite customers.

After they left, one of them said with satisfaction and WONDER:
 "...she treated us like we were somebody."

Greg Boyle had a more explicitly THEOLOGICAL interpretation.
 He writes: "**She [was] Jesus in an apron.**"⁵

Jesus in an apron...

It strikes me as an excellent description of God's CHURCH.

How do we know when we're headed in the right direction here at Westminster?

Not just when our membership numbers are going up, up, UP...but when every person who comes in here, and when every person we encounter out there—is treated like the child of God that they are.

Don't get me wrong, it's exciting to talk about the growth and the good things that God is up to around here.

But in the end, Jesus does not want us to say to the world:
 "This is what our church is like."

Jesus wants us to show the world:
This is what God is like.

That's always the job of the Church.

Jesus wants people to look at Westminster Presbyterian Church

⁵ Ibid.

and say, “Huh...I wonder if that’s what God is like.”

When we care about the vulnerable and the voiceless, maybe people will say, “Huh...I wonder if that’s what God is like.”

When we get busy loving not just our friends, and not just our neighbors, but even our enemies...maybe people will say, “Huh...I wonder if that’s what God is really like.”

Our job to show the world what God is like.
And how do we know what God is like?⁶
Look at Jesus.

I AM THE LIFE said Jesus.
If you want to know what God is like, look at the life of Jesus.

You remember when the crowd was hungry and there was no food in sight,
and Jesus fed them all with more to spare?

According to Jesus, that’s what God is like.

You remember when Jesus took his friend Lazarus, who was dead as a
doornail, and called him out of his tomb?

That’s what God is like.

You remember when Jesus took out his towel, and washed his disciples’
feet, and then he took a cross and headed up that hill to give his life?

That’s what God is like.

Do you remember in your own life when you were down—
and your own heart was troubled—
and someone came to you,
and they sat with you,

⁶ Years ago, I heard Fred Craddock use the refrain “...that’s what God is like” in a sermon, and this portion is indebted to that sermon.

and they brought you a meal,
and they wrote you a note...

And that note said, “I don’t know what it’s like to carry the cross you have to carry, and I’m so, so sorry that you have to carry it. But never forget—you don’t have to carry it on your own...I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

When you got that note, you KNEW—that’s what God is like.

Now I hope you don’t picture this way,
and this truth,
and this life...as one big burden,
just bereft of joy.

Is that how you picture Jesus?
“Ugh, gotta carry this cross, can’t believe God signed me up for this...”

No, no...when I picture Jesus, I see great joy in his life.
And moments of happiness for him along the way.

But happiness is different than joy.
And happiness was not the goal of Jesus’ life.

The poet Christian Wiman has written:
“One doesn’t follow God in hope of happiness
but because one senses...a truth
that renders ordinary contentment irrelevant.”⁷

Become part of Westminster, and ordinary contentment becomes irrelevant?

That sounds like the right compass to me.

Amen.

⁷ Christian Wiman, “I Will Love You in the Summertime,” in *The American Scholar*, February 29, 2016, found at <https://theamericanscholar.org/i-will-love-you-in-the-summertime/#>.