

“Jesus of Nazareth – The Perfecter of Our Faith”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

23 March 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Mark 8: 34-37

John 14:1-6

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

- John 14:6

Prayer

Living God,

Awaken us to your truth,

Startle us with your word for your church this morning

And give us courage to journey with Christ.

Speak to us once again

So when we return to our lives outside this time of worship

The Gospel may continue to speak through us. Amen.

I had been serving as a solo pastor for a little over a year when it began to dawn on me that the people in the pews and I had a slightly but significantly different understanding of the word “tradition” and its relevance to the faith and life of the Church. This dissonance came into sharp relief in a meeting with a longtime member of the congregation. Jim sat down across from me at my study and, before saying anything about the purpose of our get-together, he pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket, put it on my desk, carefully straightened it out, and pushed it with two of his fingers toward me. ***“Here, this is for you,”*** he said cryptically. While I was glancing over the list on the paper, Jim explained the reason for our meeting. He had talked to a few old-timers in the congregation, and they agreed that the 15 hymns listed on that sheet of paper covered all the liturgical seasons of the Church. There was no need to sing new or unfamiliar hymns anymore. He also told me that it would be much appreciated if I focused my sermons on the good old-time religion. ***“I don’t need to hear about the world’s problems in church. I can read the paper,”*** Jim stated in a forceful manner and continued on, ***“I just want a biblically based message to remind me of Jesus’ love. That’s what the church is for.”*** Then, he leaned against the chair’s backrest and made a final comment, ***“It might not be a bad idea either to keep your sermons under 15 minutes.”***

I listened to Jim with a smile on my face. And there were two very different reasons for my smile. Firstly, because I had no intention to do any of the things he, very politely, was demanding. Second, I was smiling because Jim, like so many of the old-timers in the pews, cared so much about the Church that they never doubted the music, hymns, liturgies, practices, symbols and language that nurtured their faith were worth

preserving. What he and the old-timers called “*the good old-time religion*” was not merely a willful resistance to change or a nostalgic impulse to keep recreating the past, the religions traditions they cherished were a reservoir of Christian hope, a fountain of spiritual strength, a shelter in an unsafe world, a source of moral guidance and a continuation of a way of believing and worshipping that had grounded them in the Gospels. For more than 50 years, Jim had given his time, money, heart and life to the church he loved, and I could appreciate why he and others wanted to conserve the traditions that had held the congregation together for so long.

The only salient point of difference between Jim and me was how we defined the concept of Christian tradition. He thought of it as an inheritance that passes on the gospel message, virtually unchanged, to new generations of church members. Tradition in Jim’s eyes was how the revelation of God’s love in Christ is codified, objectified, and externalized in the life of the Christian community. The role of the Church in this case is to be a passive custodian of the stories about Jesus, and its most sacred mission is to communicate those stories through permanently preserved doctrines, creeds, interpretations of Scriptures, theologies, sacred music and liturgies. Rather than a handing over, the tradition Jim talked about sounded more like a handing down of the Christian faith and practice to another generation of Jesus-followers who would receive rather than live the tradition as their own. Tradition sounds more like the assurance of predictability and permanence.

For me however, tradition has always been a living force in the Church. While it certainly connects us with the great cloud of witnesses past and present, the Christian tradition is dynamic because it is about a lived experience of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit. Christians are not passive recipients of immutable religious beliefs, each one of us has to experience the Jesus of the Gospels, not only as a treasure to be guarded or as an idea to be entertained or as a story to be zealously preserved or as an interesting religious figure of the past, but as the Living Christ of the present. To journey with Jesus, you and I have to remember the Gospel, tell and re-tell the stories about Jesus, learn and interact with his teachings, and live into the very life of Jesus as if he were walking the earth today. There is nothing safe, comfortable, reassuring and predictable about the Christian faith, because our tradition is at its core an ongoing re-actualization of the Way of Jesus. Not of the nice and tamed Jesus introduced to us in Sunday school, but the Way of the Jesus of the New Testament who, as the late theologian William C. Placher pointed out, “***inspires love, hatred, and fear, but never boredom. The political and religious authorities of his time conspired to kill him. He challenged some of his contemporaries’ most basic assumptions about God and how to live one’s life, and he continues today to challenge many of the most pervasive assumptions of our culture. For example, we tend to think of Christianity as the business of respectable, church-going folk. He particularly welcomed the outcasts and oppressed of his society into his company. Many Christians today comfortably go about our ordinary business and still think of ourselves as his followers. [Jesus] calls on those who would follow him to take risks; he will not tolerate complacency. Many... Americans... imagine the Bible a***

conservative book that comforts those who want to preserve the status quo. But the Jesus it presents shook up his society and would shake up ours if we took up our crosses and followed him.¹

It is unsettling and even shocking that for two thousand years, our faith tradition has claimed that this wild, weird, uncontrollable, provocative, charismatic, unmarried and homeless first century Palestinian Jew from the hick town of Nazareth, whose name “Jesus” in Hebrew means “*The Lord is salvation*” lived the life without sin that God dreams for every human being. This very Jesus who spent his adult life as a wandering teacher of impractical wisdom, breaking the religious laws of his day, stepping over the boundaries of what was socially acceptable, and challenging his closest friends to live by one of the most counterintuitive notions the world ever heard – saving their lives by denying themselves, the Christian tradition insists is the one, the Messiah, the Christ through whom our own faith in God is refined, improved, fine-tuned, and made more whole.

The four Gospels give us very different and unique pictures of this Jesus of our tradition who makes our faith fuller, but the evangelists do agree that there was something about Jesus’ words, his demeanor, his faith, his openness to bless little children, his willingness to sit down to eat and drink with hookers and crooks, his compassion for men and women marginalized by physical disability, something about his courage to love others as he loved himself that made people around him feel the presence of God much closer.

In the pastoral letters of the New Testament, Jesus is described as the Mediator, the human image of the Invisible God, the Head of the Church but unifying all these grand theological titles is the Church’s understanding that Jesus is special to Christians because, as a human being, he dared to let God have full sway of his life and he showed everyone around him how to live with their own hearts, minds and lives wide-open to God. It’s no surprise that the first followers of Jesus called the religious movement he set into motion – the Way.

In the final hours of his life, not too long after Judas had walked away from the Upper Room on a mission of betrayal, Jesus told his friends something that none of the disciples expected to hear, “***Children, I am only with you for a short time longer... Where I am going, you cannot come.***”² The disciples were confused, anxious, afraid, and heartbroken. This was not the ending they had anticipated even though Jesus had told them more than once that he would suffer and die. Standing on the shadow of the cross, Jesus offered his grieving friends words of encouragement. “***Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust God and trust me.***” He promised his sorrowing disciples that he was going to the Father’s house where there would always be room for all of them. Jesus hoped his followers would know the Way by now so he said, “***And if I am on my way to get your room ready, I will come back and will get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the way.***” Stunned and baffled, Thomas

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protested, ***“Lord, we have no idea where you are going. How can we know the way?”***

It is hard not to feel Thomas’ pain and frustration. Jesus had mentioned a house, a place, a destination and rather than assuming the disciples already knew the direction or how to get there, Thomas was asking for clearer instructions, better coordinates, step-by-step information, a pin on the map. With his heart full of love and compassion, Jesus said something startling to his friend, ***“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”***

I will never quite understand how some Christians turned this intimate moment between Jesus and a disciple in the grip of deep sorrow into an exclusionary interpretation of Jesus’ words. Diane Butler Bass, a Christian historian and writer who spent many years in churches that used these comforting and gracious words of Jesus as what she described “*a clobber verse*” says, ***“In some Christian circles, if you dare wonder aloud if Jews, Buddhists, or secular people will be in heaven, a concerned friend will pull out this verse, smashing the words into the conversation to shut you up as surely as if wielding a weapon. The emphasis is not of the first half of the verse—“Way, truth, and life”—but the second half, where the weight falls on “no one” and “except through me.” The way is not a way at all. Rather, it is a circumscribed sheep pen, with fences of razor wire. There is one way: in. The other way—out—means hell.”***³

I don’t believe Jesus was revealing a plan of salvation that leaves billions of human beings beyond the reach of God’s saving love or laying out an irrefutable theological proof that Christianity is the only true religion on the last night with his followers. These powerful and beautiful and poetic words of faith in the Gospel of John were shared with Thomas because Jesus wanted his friend to remember that the answer to his question was standing right in front of him. It was as if Jesus were saying to Thomas, ***“You do know the way to God’s presence, to God’s house, to God’s heart, because, Thomas, I am the Way.”*** Thomas had hoped for unmistakable clarity, unambiguous language and a straight path, but Jesus offered him himself, a relationship and a living tradition of faith to guide him along the Way. Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner summed up the essence of Jesus’ words to Thomas in this way, ***“[Jesus] 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 him—by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.”***⁴

“When in doubt, look at me.” This the tradition Jesus was hoping to leave with his followers before his crucifixion.

When confused about what is happening in the world and unsure if your faith can sustain you, look at Jesus. When overwhelmed by the news of the war in Ukraine, look

at Jesus. When feeling unmotivated to come back to worship in person after two years away from the community of disciples, keep your eyes on Jesus and remember why you still want to be caught up by the Way of life Jesus embodied. When life throws you a curveball, look at Jesus and keep following him even if the road twists and turns and it is hard to see the way ahead. When the liturgies, hymns, sermons, and church programs stop animating your faith, look at Jesus and remember that it was centuries after his Last Supper that Christians worked out the theologies, Christologies, and all the permanent dogmas and doctrines of the Institutional Church. At the beginning, what really mattered was following Jesus, giving your heart to him, losing your life for the sake of the Gospel and looking at him as the One who blazed the way to God. Our faith tradition is alive and dynamic because we keep our eyes on Jesus, our way to God and the perfecter of faith.

Jesus was my way into the Christian tradition and the only reason I never gave up on the Church. He handed over to us a faith tradition that is so inhabited, infused, and enveloped by God's Spirit that God's presence ripples out from the Church, inviting us into an experiential relationship with the Living Christ. To journey with Jesus means to believe that each one of us is called to allow Jesus, his teaching, his story, his life, his faith, his death and his resurrection to be our way, our life and our truth. To be a Christian is to actualize the Way of Jesus in our lives today and let his Gospel turn us into walking, talking and living icons of God's presence in the world.

Looking at the list of 15 hymns Jim handed to me in my study made me think of the wise and challenging words of the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, one of the greatest American preachers and Christian prophets of the twentieth century. ***"Of course, the Church is conservative for it has so much to conserve. But let it conserve a vision of the world's destiny and not the structures of the world's past. Let the Church in remembering Christ remember that it is conserving the most uprooting, the most revolutionary force in all human history. For it was Christ who crossed every boundary, broke down every barrier. He crossed the boundaries of class by eating with outcasts. He crossed the boundary of nations by pointing to a Samaritan as the agent of God's will. He transgressed religious boundaries by claiming the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Everywhere he manifested his freedom and called others to theirs, calling them forth from family, national, and religious loyalties to loyalty to [God and] the world at large. If ever there was a man who trusted his origins and had the courage to emerge from them, it was Christ."***⁵

Friends, let us not lose sight of Jesus in this Lenten season. Let's embrace the living, uprooting, revolutionary and transformative tradition of faith Jesus handed over to our church and make it our own. Let's decide this morning to take up the cross and risk everything, even if it means denying ourselves, to allow the Living Christ to renew, refresh and strengthen our faith, and prepare us for the journey to the cross, the tomb, and to a fuller life of faith where the Christian tradition, our worship services, our mission work, our liturgies and music make the Way of Jesus visible right here in Acton Center.

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Keep your eyes on Jesus. He is the Way. He is the perfecter of our faith. He is the only reason why you and I give our time, our skills, our money, our hearts and our lives to this faith tradition that rather than promising us an unobstructed, clear, smooth, simple, comfortable, reassuring spiritual pathway to God, gives us Jesus who makes a scandalous invitation to our church, ***“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”***

This is the Way, the truth and the life at the heart of our faith tradition. Amen.

¹ William C. Pacher in Jesus the Savior, p. 4.

² John 13:33.

³ Diane Butler Bass in Freeing Jesus, p. 166, Kindle Edition.

⁴ Frederick Buechner in Beyond Words, p. 59. Kindle Edition.

⁵ William Sloane Coffin in Credo, p. 138.