“Jesus’ Most Radical Claim”

John 14:1-7

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Intro. When I was in college I took a speech class my very first semester. It was a requirement and I was brain dead at the time. What was I thinking taking public speaking my first term of college! Some of you know I hated public speaking growing up through school. But I had just come to faith in Jesus Christ, in fact four days before I began this speech class in September of 1971 I experienced a radical conversion to Christian faith.

So on the first day of class we were told we had to give three speeches over the course of the class. They had to be the traditional types, informative, persuasive and argumentative. I was terrified. How could I get up and give a speech? But now I had a new faith and a new book, the Bible. So for my first speech I had to give I just opened up the Bible, picked a passage and talked about Jesus. The second speech I gave I just opened up the Bible, picked a passage and talked about Jesus. Before the third speech the professor called me in and said, “John, I know your dad is a religion professor, but there are other things to give speeches on besides the Bible. Choose another subject.”

I did. I have no memory of what subject I chose, but I remember this. The day of the speech I got up to the door of the class and turned and walked away. I was too scared to go through with it. When I was speaking of my faith I had courage. When I was to speak on something else I didn’t. I never gave my last speech. I got a C for the class. How ironic, here I am 44 years later still opening my Bible, picking a passage and talking about Jesus.

Now this is what you need to know. One of those two speeches I did give in Speech 101 my freshman year of college was on John 14:6. I took Jesus statement, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” and gave a three point speech. I even remember what the central, unifying theme was. Jesus is the way to the truth that brings life.

This morning lets go back 44 years and lets listen again to this most radical claim of Jesus that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

“I Am the Way”

“I am the way,” Jesus said. To understand this claim we must understand the context. Jesus is spending his last night with his disciples. The next day he is going to be crucified. In fact he has just told them that. At the end of chapter 13 Jesus says, “I will be with you just a little while longer, then you will look for me...(but) where I am going, you cannot come.”

This was upsetting to the disciples. Remember they had left everything, family, security, livelihood in order to follow Jesus. For three years now they have been committed disciples, traveling everywhere with him. Suddenly now he announces its over! He’s leaving! They can’t follow him now. They are troubled and confused and they express that.
It is then that Jesus comforts them with those familiar words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you...You know the way to the place I am going.”

It was Thomas, the skeptic, who then said, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” There is confusion in that retort. Thomas, like the other disciples, is confused, bewildered, and fearful of what lies ahead. They don’t understand where Jesus is going, nor the way.

It is at this point that Jesus then utters the first of his most radical claims. He says, “I am the way...” Have you ever come to a point in your life when you really don’t know what to do? Maybe you are there today. You feel confused, maybe frustrated with a problem or person. Possibly you feel fearful. Jesus says, “I am the way...”

Any Jewish person would have understood that phrase, “the way.” For it was part of their vocabulary, their belief. Over and over again it is used in the OT. Consider the psalms. David writes, “The way of the Lord is perfect.”(Ps 18) Or, “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.”(Ps 25) Then again, “Teach me your way, O Lord, lead me in a straight path...”(Ps 27) There are hundreds of references in the OT to the way of God. The Jewish person knew and believed God had a way, a path that they were to walk in life. The disciples knew this and in a time of great confusion and fear, Thomas vocalized what they were all wondering, “Lord, where are you going, how can we know the way.”

Jesus responded, “I am the way...” He did not point to a path and say that is the way to go. Many people in life do. They point us to the way we should go. Our parents, our teachers in school, our mentors and models we look up to, all point to a way we should go. This is what made Buddha famous. He pointed his disciples away from himself to the 8-fold path and said that is the way you are to go. Not Jesus. Jesus did not say, “That is the way to go. Jesus says, “I am the way...”

Let me give you an image of what he is claiming. I have done many funerals over the years. The one thing you do not want to do, if you are the pastor, is be late to the funeral. You can be late to weddings, they never start on time, but not funerals. I remember one funeral where it almost happened. I was on the freeway heading to the cemetery where the service was to be held. I was actually listening to the radio when one of those rare traffic reports came on and said there was an accident on the freeway I was on, in fact where I was headed, and traffic was at a complete standstill. I quickly reversed my tracks, took an alternative slower route to the cemetery. It was a huge cemetery and upon arriving I immediately got lost.

Finally I stopped and asked a man for directions. (I know men aren’t suppose to stop and ask directions, but I was desperate.) He started telling me the best way to go, but suddenly he stopped and said, “Come with me.” He led me through a series of twists and turns, which I never would have been able to negotiate. He then walked me personally up to the door I was suppose to be at and amazingly I was on time.
Listen. Life is like that. It’s confusing at times, anxiety producing. Like the disciples we don’t know which way to go. Jesus says, “I am the way.” He invites us to come with him, to let him personally guide us through the dark places, the uncertain times we find ourselves in. Jesus says, come with me. “I am the way...”

“I Am the Truth”

Then Jesus says, “I am the truth.” John records that Jesus often spoke of the truth. Remember his words to the woman at the well, “true worshipers worship the Father in Spirit and truth.” Or his famous statement, “If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Jesus taught the truth. Jesus lived the truth. Now he says, “I am the truth.”

I do not believe we grasp what a radical statement this is. Think about this. Through the ages men and women have sought the truth; the truth about how to live, the truth about life’s meaning and purpose, the truth about God, ourselves and our world. Philosophers have filled countless, thick text books, hundreds of pages long, in libraries around the world attempting to define what truth is. The problem is few people can understand those books and they collect dust. But people long to know the truth.

In one brief moment Jesus dispels the mystery. He says, “I am the truth.” The search is over. We no longer are in the dark. Jesus revealed the truth. The beauty and wonder of it is that truth is not some abstract concept, or idea, or inaccessible, esoteric philosophy. Truth is a person. Jesus revealed God is a person. Granted he is infinite, all powerful, all knowing, all loving, but God is a person. Which means we humans, made in the image of God, can know him. Jesus revealed this profound reality. Jesus said, “I am the truth.”

When a truth seeker encounters this it is life altering. My parents were missionaries in China. The reason they went there was in part because of this man, James Hudson Taylor. Taylor was a British medical student when he chose to go to China as a missionary. He was one of the first. He had been studying Mandarin, one of the Chinese languages and so when he arrived he immediately began to go around and preach about Jesus in Mandarin. Plus Taylor did something unheard of. He got rid of his Western style clothing and wore Chinese garb. He even weaved his hair into the traditional Chinese pig tail. He wasn’t very effective until one night a man wandered into his meeting.

Wang Ni was a cotton manufacturer, and highly respected man in the city of Ningpo. He was also a deeply religious man, a Buddhist leader in the city. But Wang Ni was also a seeker. Despite all his religious pursuits and knowledge he found himself empty and restless. One evening he happened to walk by this open door in the streets of Ningpo. He was pulled in more by curiosity at this British foreigner in Chinese dress preaching from a book he knew nothing of, the Bible.
That night Hudson Taylor was preaching from the gospel of John, John 3:16. As Wang Ni listen, for the first time hearing of a God who loved, who saved, who gave everlasting life, who sent his one and only son to die and who must be believed in, he was deeply touched. As the meeting came to a close Ni rose in his place and looking around on the Chinese audience uttered these words, “I have long sought the truth, but without finding it. In Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism I have found no rest. But I have found rest in what we’ve heard tonight. Henceforth, I am a believer in Jesus.” Just like that.

Ni was one of the first converts of James Hudson Taylor. And then he joined Taylor and began preaching about Jesus to the Chinese and helped bring many to faith. Taylor went on to open up the whole interior of China to western missionaries. Eventually my parents followed.

Jesus said, “I am the truth.” Jesus isn’t just the truth for westerners. He isn’t just the truth for the Chinese. Jesus is the truth for all seekers of the truth. Because Jesus revealed that truth is a person. God is person; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who enable us to know what life is all about.

“I Am the Life”

Which brings us to life. Jesus said, “I am the life.” This is actually the second time that Jesus has claimed to be the life. Remember when he raised Lazarus from the dead he declared to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” There he was speaking of eternal life. Jesus was claiming that all who believed in him would be raised up after death and given eternal life. But eternal life is not just life after death. Jesus in his prayer in John 17, said, “This is eternal life that you know the one true God and me, the Christ, whom he sent.” Eternal life is knowing God, is knowing Jesus, which begins the moment we believe. We can know the risen Jesus personally, right now, this day. “Life is good, but life knowing Jesus is far better.” It is what life is all about.

What is life? When you think about it there are different ways of looking at life. There is physical life. We are born into this world and we discover we exist and have this body that needs food and warmth and sleep and golf on Mondays. There is social life. We live in this web of relationships with parents and children and friends and neighbors and those we like and those we don’t. There is an interior life. We live most of life inside our heads. We think and carry on conversations in our head. We feel emotions and have hopes and fears, joys and frustrations in our souls. Life is hard to define, it is so complex, so multi-leveled.

Life is not easy either. No one gets through life without some pain along the way. There are disappointments and deep losses and emotional wounds and physical sufferings we must cope with. But there is a deeper life than physical or social or mental. Augustine put it so well, “Our heart is restless until it rests in thee, O God.” There is a spiritual life, a life with God, with the risen Jesus that is real and comforting and full of meaning and help. Jesus said, “I am the life.”

I mentioned Hudson Taylor. You would not believe how much this man sacrificed and
suffered. When he went to China to serve he gave up the woman that he loved who did not want to go. He gave up his study of medicine, his family, his comfortable life, ultimately his health. He battled various physical ailments in China. He did marry another missionary in China, but she died at the age of 32. They had 8 children, only four of them survived. Yet it was one line from Hudson Taylor’s journals that captivated me. He said, “I never made a sacrifice.” He felt the compensations were so real and lasting. He wrote and I quote, “Unspeakable joy was my experience. God, even my God, was a living, bright reality. All I had to do was serve him.”

Jesus said, “I am the life.” Life with Jesus is a life of joy and of bright reality.

Only One Way

As radical as the claims Jesus made about being the way, the truth and the life, there is a fourth claim here isn’t there. In our day and age the next claim may take the cake. Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This should not surprise us. After saying that he is the one way, the one truth, that he is the one who gives life, it follows that he is also the one way to the Father. Remember he had made other claims, “I am the light of the world...” “I am the bread of life...” Jesus made these all exclusive claims and so it should not shock us that he also says there is only one way to God. But in our day and age this is unacceptable. We live in a day when truth is not the sole property of any one religion, or any one philosophy. We live in the post modern era where there is no one truth.

Ghandi, the great Indian Hindu leader, wrote of this, “God cannot be the exclusive Father and I cannot say that Jesus was uniquely Divine. He was as much God as Krishna, or Rama, or Mohammed, or Zoroaster.” Ghandi can say that, speaking for many in our culture today, but we must take Jesus at his word. He claims to be the one truth and the one way to the Father.

Let me end with a picture of this and the reason Jesus can be the only way. Tony Campolo, Christian professor, writer and comedian, boarded a plane once from California to go home to Philadelphia. He was tired and wanted to sleep, but sat next to a man who was awake and wanted to talk. Tony made the mistake of telling his talkative companion that he was a Baptist evangelist, which normally kept fellow travelers quiet. Not this man. He said, “Do you know what I believe?” Tony inwardly said, “I can hardly wait.” The man said, “There are many ways to get to Philadelphia, by plane, by train, by bus, by automobile. It doesn’t make any difference how we get there. We all end up in the same place. So it is with religion.”

Tony was too tired to argue and fell asleep. The next morning, as the plane was descending into Philly, the city was fogged in. The wind was blowing, rain pelting the plane. Everyone looked nervous and uptight. As they were circling the
airport waiting to land, Tony turned to his talkative companion and said, “I am sure glad the pilot doesn’t agree with your theology. Right now the people in the control tower are guiding the pilot. They are saying, “Come in north by northwest at 3 degrees. You are on beam, your on beam, don’t deviate from the beam.” Tony then said to his companion, “I’m glad the pilot’s not saying, “There’s many ways to the airport, many approaches, many runways I could take.” I am glad he is saying, “There is only one way we can land this plane, on beam, and I am going to say with it.”

That is what Jesus claims. He is the only way to the Father. There is only one flight path. “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” Then after claiming that, on the very next day, Jesus went to the cross and sacrificed his life for us, atoning for all our sins, removing the barrier of our sinfulness that kept us from God. Then Jesus rose from the dead and calls us to believe. That is our choice, to trust Jesus and Jesus alone. When we do he unites us with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever. It is the only way, for it is the one way, the one religion that does not depend on what we do, but on what he has done for us.