

Year A, Easter 5
May 10, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

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

Good morning to you! It is May 10th, Mother’s Day, and it snowed yesterday. We love the Spring here!

Happy Mother’s Day! My mother and mother-in-law are here: thank you for having us! Windy, thank you for having the girls. And for you mothers out there for whom today is a day of blessing and celebration, may gratitude and chocolate reign. But even in this complicated moment, where so many of us just want a moment of normal, just want to have brunch with mom like you do every year, who just need the respite of an it’ll-be-ok maternal hug, mother’s day is not a universally happy day. Some of us didn’t know our mothers, or knew them all too well and those are painful memories. Or you know, being a mother is not source of joy for all women. That hurts, particularly on a day everyone else seems to be being celebrated. And there is the pain I have seen so poignantly in the grief of those who, for whatever reason, did not or could not be mothers. If Mother’s Day is a good day for you, fantastic, I hope you enjoy the flowers. If it is not, I am sorry. May God bless you.

One note on our Gospel selection today. John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Poetry. But it continues, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” That’s a bit more problematic for many, as it implies the exclusiveness of Christianity; that the only way to be reconciled to God, to the ground of being itself, is through Jesus Christ. That is a hard text for our Jewish, Muslim, and none of the above friends. Now maybe that is what Jesus meant, that His way was the only way. That is possible, and if it is, I guess I am grateful I am trying to follow that path. However, it is important to note that He was not addressing everyone here. This text is in what scholars call the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ long conversation with (and this is the key) His disciples. He is not preaching on the side of some hill to the many. For them, for us, followers of Jesus, He surely is the way, and the truth and the life, not Moses, or Buddha or some philosophical ideology. So if you follow another path great, I pray that you are the best Jew, Muslim, Marxist, whatever, the best you can be, because He is not talking to you (unless you are inclined to listen, all were welcome there, as are welcome here). Jesus is a way, He certainly is our way, but He is not necessarily the only way. I know for me, having that understanding in the back of my head allows me to open to the Jesus way more fully, certainly more joyfully.

Eugene Peterson is a Biblical scholar and translator who writes very convincingly about “the way, and the truth and the life” of Jesus Christ. In one book he writes that the Jesus way, wedded to the Jesus truth, brings about the Jesus life. The Jesus way, wedded to the Jesus truth, brings about the Jesus life.

The Jesus life? That is the life of the Beloved. The Kingdom, the Commonwealth of God. The Jesus life is equanimity in the face of the trials and tribulations of life because you are assured that every manner of thing shall be well. Sure, we know we’ll still suffer. We know those we love, including ourselves, will die. The Jesus life is living knowing and accepting the way of things. That doesn’t imply passively enduring injustice, but it means accepting the consequences of not suffering injustice passively. In Christian language we call this the will of God. We call it Blessed Assurance; the peace of wild things; going gentle into that good night, resting in the ever-loving arms of God. That is the Jesus life; that’s our end.

That Jesus life is brought about by the Jesus truth, which is simply that God loves you. That’s the Gospel. You, the infinitesimal mote that you are, is vital to the foundation of the universe. Each hair on your head is counted. And by Grace, God is with you, always and everywhere in Emmanuel, God is with us, Jesus Christ, in His blessed Body, the Church, in His redeeming action on the Cross, in His rising in Glory and ascension to the right hand of God. God is love and you are included. That is the Truth. That brings us to the way.

What is the way? That is super important especially right now, because I don’t know about you, but right now, it can be hard to find God’s benevolent and overarching love in the midst of this pandemic. When I really pray on it, I get glimpse of The Life as I just described it, of equanimity, that “it is what it is”, do your best. But more often it’s “I don’t want this to be happening.” “I don’t know what I am supposed to do right now.” “How bad is it going to get?” What goes through your mind as you try to fall asleep? When you think about your mom in the retirement community? When you think about your grandchildren and their canceled school and missed graduations?

So let’s talk about the Way, the Jesus way in terms of us, right here, right now. What are we, the people of St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church supposed to be and do right now?

One of the things I am gaining solace and direction from is remembering that this, pandemics, plagues, is part of the human experience. Psalm 91 tells us to not be afraid “Of the plague that stalks in the darkness, * nor of the sickness that lays waste at mid-day.” The Black Death is an indelible part of the Western collective consciousness. And, I am joining countless

others revisiting Albert Camus' 1947 gem *The Plague*. It is a great book, it reads very well, and I am learning a lot about the human condition in the time of pestilence.

There is one scene that I think will guide me in all that I do from here on out, and is a message desperately needed by all in this moment... The setting is our protagonist, the good doctor Bernard Reix, speaking with Raymond Rambert, a journalist who got stuck in the city when the onset of plague forced everyone into quarantine. Reix says,

“It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is, common decency.”

“What do you mean by ‘common decency?’” Rambert's tone was grave.

“I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job.”

How our nation longs for some plain old common decency! There is plenty in our own lives and communities, certainly there is plenty of common decency in this parish, but in our public discourse? Amongst our leaders? There is some. Keep it up Dr. Shah! Dr. Fauci! But for too many of our leaders, be it in government, media, business, common decency is an uncommon commodity indeed. Political campaigns are being run, ideologies are being pushed, money, un-holy amounts of money is being made by a very, very few, while very, very many won't have a paycheck this week, maybe month, maybe year. And that is hurting all of us, but we, especially in the church, we have the power to make things better if not right. Because as Dr. Reix clarifies, common decency means a lot, and for him (and I think for most of us) it is most about doing his job. His job? He was a doctor. His job was care for the sick and dying in his community. Our job, the church's job, which is just another way to say the Way of Jesus? To love God with everything we have and love our neighbor as ourselves in our community. We know how to do that.

At the very beginning of our corona-time together, the vestry and I laid out three ways to be on the Jesus Way in extraordinary times. And you know what, it is exactly the same as in normal times, just the working conditions are a lot worse. We need to gather in Christ to worship, to tend our faith in the myriad ways our faith needs tending. We need to care for each other. We need to care for the most vulnerable in our community, to do what we can to make Blue Hill a resilient, healthy community, come what may.

We're checking the first box right now. This is ok. It is so much better than I would have guessed. It is great to see you each Sunday, to hear Lorna and Carlton, to pray “together.” Some changes are coming come June. Now things change rapidly as we adapt

to an expanding understanding of COVID-19, but soon, in some form, we will praying together, as in really, not virtually, being together in the same zip code. We'll be masked up, physically spaced, limited to 50 per service... we can do that. We have been offered a 50'x20' tent, so maybe we'll have Mass on the Grass 'til the frost returns. Who knows? If you are interested in working on figuring this out, let me know. We'll still broadcast services because at-risk folks had best stay home, and I will be figuring out some more graceful and higher quality ways to do this than my cell phone taped to the chimney in Cape Rosier can provide. So we are worshipping and will keep worshipping, though how remains to be seen.

Second, we need to care for each other, or rather, keep caring for each other. This church is good at that. What a blessing! The shoppers have been quiet, but they are ready to help. Daily, intrepid members make phone calls, to everyone. If you are not getting them, let me know. My pastoral ministry continues on phone, text and email, and soon, PLEASE soon, in person, at least a little bit. The heart of it is ensuring that everyone truly knows that they are not alone in this or anything. That you may be physically distanced, but not socially, that you are very much in the society of people who love you. As time goes on, needs will shift and increase. Prolonged isolation will become harder and harder. Financial pressure will increase for some of us. No one knows if the virus will follow historical patterns and return in waves. And we, together are here, and we will remain here, together on this Way, for you.

The final way we are on the Way is to care for the vulnerable outside these walls, to help our broader community become more resilient and sustainable. The Outreach folks are supporting H.O.M.E.'s ministry to homeless families as well as supporting other organizations in the area. Our doors will reopen to AA, Tai Chi and the exercise group in June, and will be available for others who need space. And of course, Lobsters! That ministry is winding down. This week is your last chance for Lobster through St. Francis. We helped him through a tight patch, but the price is going up, meaning that markets are improving. The Fish Net is open! That is great news all around. So now we look for our next project. How do we shine the bright light that was the St. Francis Fair onto some other part of our communal life of Blue Hill? I'm looking into farms, in particular those who sell primarily to restaurants to see if we could help, maybe getting CSA shares to church members. There are (and will be) so many needs. Please, if you know ways we could help, and be creative, let me or Milissa or Sue know.

Doing our job, which in our case, is being Church, being on the Way of Jesus Christ, seeking and proclaiming His Truth, fostering and living His Life. Just simple love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, you know, common decency, that is our means of fighting this plague. That is the Way of Jesus, and we are on it. AMEN