

ABIDE IN LOVE
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May 14, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

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This past Tuesday I was officially retired by the Shenandoah Presbytery. I was grateful to be granted the status of "Honorably Retired."

By the way, it required a vote. Those in favor say "yes"; those opposed "no." It's always unanimous. But, I must admit, I was expecting a dissenting vote—at least on the "honorable" part—from a certain minister who once filed heresy charges against me.

He was there. I didn't hear a "no" so I'm guessing he abstained or walked out.

In case you hadn't heard, two years ago a certain minister filed not one, not two but nine counts of heresy against me based on an essay published in the "Good News Paper" in the summer of 2015. I addressed the essay to graduating seniors. It was entitled "Question Authority."

Because the charges were filed by a minister of the Presbytery, the Stated Clerk was obligated to appoint a confidential "Investigative Committee"—something like a grand jury—to determine if the charges had merit. That committee met separately with my accuser and me. It took only two meetings for them to declare the charges groundless and without merit for a public trial.

I must say I was a little disappointed. I had begun to imagine myself strapped to a burning stake and going out in a blaze of glory. Instead, I'll just retire.

One of the most damning of his charges was based on my interpretation of the gospel lesson before us this morning. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

My reading of that is that "love"—not Jesus per se or Christianity per se—but rather "love" is the way and the "Father" is a poetic symbol of our heart's true home. Love is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to their true home except by love.

My accuser claimed I had repudiated the orthodoxy of the church by denying the reality of Jesus and the existence of God the Father. And that adds up to heresy.

The members of the investigative committee themselves were puzzled how I had come to see "love" rather than "Jesus" as the way. I asked them if they'd like me to explain. They did. And so I did.

Maybe they were expecting some tapping dancing, cane twirling razzle-dazzle performance like Richard Gere in the movie "Chicago," but instead they got a

calm, methodical lesson on how one might read this gospel and conclude that love is the way.

First off, I told them, it helps to know what genre of literature you are looking at when you read the Bible. It's like going to the movies. It helps to know that Disney's "Cinderella," Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth," and Stephen Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" are three different film genres. If you don't, you're in trouble.

Like any anthology, the Bible includes multiple genres—from mythic poems like the "Seven Days of Creation" to folktales, proverbs, a dozen or so letters and a cartoon like thriller known as "Revelation," the last book in the Bible. First rule in interpreting the Bible is to know what kind of literature is in front of you.

The gospel of John is not a biography as such. It's more Picasso than Rembrandt. It's a refraction more than a reflection of the life of Jesus—composed 70 years later—to tell a story deeper than history.

This gospel is like a polemic making the case that love is the origin and heart of reality. Through a narrative style, the author argues that everything and everyone has arisen out of love, not out of chance or some impersonal force.

The gospel's opening line is: "In the beginning was the Word"—or what the Greeks called the "Logos or Logic" or what the Chinese call the "Tao or Principle." The author personifies that Word as Jesus of Nazareth who was by then well known for his gracious and generous love.

In the opening episode, two men ask Jesus: *Where do you abide?* And he replies, *come and see.* He would show them his "Father's house" but it wasn't a house in a place you could see or touch.

What they saw instead was a series of seven acts of love—the Word turns water into wine at a wedding, heals a paralytic, cures a blind person, feeds 5000 hungry people, befriends outcasts and raises Lazarus back to life.

Where do you abide? That's where I abide—where people hurt, suffer or are bereft of joy and hope. I have come, says the Word, that you might have life and have it in abundance.

I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the door. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the vine. I am the way, the truth and the life.

In no other gospel—Matthew, Mark or Luke—does "Jesus" speak that way. But this gospel is presenting the Heart of Reality through the voice of a refracted Jesus, the way light is refracted through a prism into colors of the rainbow.

And so the Word says: I am in the Father and the Father is in me. I am in you and you are in me. We are one. Love one another as I have loved you. Abide in me and I will abide in you.

It's not biography. It's not reflection. It's refraction. It's deeper than history.

When Jesus prepares to depart to his Father's house (a reference to his impending death), he tells his disciples that they know the way there. *No, wait, wait,* cried one of them. *We don't know how to get there. Don't leave us. Show us the Father. Show us the way!*

I don't have to, the Word replies. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. You know me. So you know the way. I am the way, the truth and the life. Those who abide in love abide in God.

And finally this: in my Father's house are many—and here comes the loaded word with which the gospel began—*abiding places*, or we could say, many rooms. In other words, there is plenty of room for love at all times in all places.

It's that simple: the way of Jesus is not a way out of this world but a certain way of being in this world, of being in love. Those who abide in love abide in God.

And so I told the committee, it may be puzzling but it's not entirely baffling. You just connect the dots to get to "love is the way." And there ended my razzle-dazzle spinning of the Bible!

The next day the chair of the committee called to thank me and said she was going to incorporate my insights in the Bible class she was teaching in her church that week. So, there you go. Now there are two "heretics" in this Presbytery.

One more thing: all the razzle-dazzle in the world doesn't mean much. And I know that. It might impress others but it doesn't impress Jesus. For, as Jesus says in this gospel: *By this will all people know you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

That's it. Not razzle-dazzle, not orthodoxy, not creeds, not promises, not political rallies, not executive orders, and not inspiring sermons. In the end, only love matters.

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Hymn 693
"Though I May Speak"