

"Lasting Values"

Date: May 13, 2007

Text: John 14: 1-14

It has been a long-standing custom of mine to use Mother's Day as an opportunity to look at the nature of relationships and family life, however those terms apply to your life. The passage just read could send us in so many different directions. We could talk about Jesus preparing a place for us in the life beyond; we could talk about Jesus being with us in spirit and enabling us to do great things; we could talk about Christianity and other religions. This Sunday, however, I want to connect the passage to Mother's Day and family life by focusing on the brief phrase: "I am the Way."

Specifically I wish to relate Jesus' comment to the current discussion on the need for our society to re-establish a better value system. It seems every place you go you hear about the desire for higher values and there will be more as the next presidential election gets closer. However, except for the religious right only recently have you begun to hear much about the connection between faith and values. I have to say right up front while I understand all the controversy surrounding abortion and homosexuality I can't comprehend why the Biblical concern for the poor and the cry for justice for all people does not seem to receive the same attention. I also find it quite hypocritical that so many of those who would lead us have set anything but a good moral example in their own private relationships.

Can we all agree that a personal value system is essential and all people have one whether they realize it or not? I always emphasize when I am sharing with a couple in preparation for their wedding how important values will be in shaping their lives together. Seemingly simple issues such as differences as to how to celebrate Christmas or what to do on a vacation spin around values. If one looks closely, often the person's faith priorities play a bigger part in their attitude and desires than normally is assumed.

Thus if we are going to talk about values for our society, for families, for children, then, faith principles are going to play a part. Have you heard this story about a man arriving at the airport in Detroit? He rented a car, pulled out a map, studied it briefly and proceeded to get on the expressway. After an hour of driving in circles it was apparent that he was totally lost. He pulled over and looked at the map more closely. It was a map of Chicago not Detroit!

I see that story as a parable for our society. Everyone has a dream of what life should be like: intimate relationships, fun, and a sense of togetherness. That's the dream, isn't it? The problem is that most people do not have a clue what map to use to make the dream a reality. Thus, we have this frantic racing here and there, trying to fit everything into each day, afraid to miss anything and then wondering why we are both exhausted and dissatisfied.

Do you know what the early followers of Jesus originally were called? - "People of the Way." Those around them realized that these believers seemed not only to know what they wanted but they appeared to know how to reach their destination. They were following the Way that Jesus had set out before them. That was their road map.

The secret of success in developing our own value system is to be able always to keep focused on where Christ is leading us. As a practical illustration of what that will mean consider this comment from a young white demonstrator from Birmingham, Alabama during the heat of the civil rights strife in 1965. I don't know why I said no to segregation. I'm just another white Southerner and I wasn't brought up to love integration but I was brought up to love Jesus Christ and when I saw the police of this city use dogs on people I asked myself what Jesus would have done and that's all I know about why I am standing in this protest.

By letting Jesus map out our path do we have a better chance of arriving at our destination? Of course, we get impatient and sometimes we are just like kids who are famous for saying when traveling: "are we almost there yet?" It is natural to have such feelings because the journey takes a lifetime and there are numerous detours along the way. What I want to stress, however, is that there are what I would call signposts to suggest that we are moving in the right direction.

As you travel, look for the signpost of "COMPASSION". Compassion, defined as the ability "to feel with, to sense the brokenness of others," is essential if life is to have meaning and purpose. Compassion is the opposite of selfishness and apathy. Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist and author of many books on moral issues, once wrote, "Our children have everything except moral purpose." That gives pause for thought, doesn't it? Are we really working hard to provide our children and grandchildren with a sense of moral conviction, of the feeling that the needs of others are part of our concern? The little league and soccer season taxi service has begun and families often try to fit in four or five games a week. Nothing wrong with that but it needs to be asked how intentional are we in exposing our children to the deep concern Jesus had for the needs of others? I'd like to see more families making Habitat for Humanity or road cleanup or serving food at Stephen=s Table as part of their activity list. The church has a role in providing such opportunities and encouraging people to participate.

Another signpost to look for is "INTEGRITY" defined as Amoral honesty. Jesus treated all people, whether he liked them or agreed with them, with respect. Always Jesus saw the other person as a child of God. As I said in an earlier sermon, it's interesting that in the Bible when Abraham goes into the tent to share with Sarah on their wedding night the verb "to know" is used to describe the act of intercourse. The sexual act develops from a relationship that has integrity and is the fulfillment of people sharing together. How unlike our society where people are treated as things and even given number ratings in terms of appearance.

Do any of you remember the TV show "Mad About You?" The Buchmans, a yuppie couple, are in trouble. Paul is out of work; they want to have a child and it isn't happening; Jamie has a new job that is creating stress. Quite suddenly both develop the beginnings of an attraction for someone else. One Sunday they owned up to their feelings as painful as that was. That's quite different from the average TV scenario where adultery happens quite casually and irresponsibly. A willingness to honestly confront life issues is what I mean by integrity and it represents another signpost.

"FORGIVENESS" is a third sign to keep an eye out for. Herbert Anderson, a family therapist who offers guidelines similar to what I am suggesting, has written, "Accumulating grievances and resentments is the surest way to undermine the vitality of family life." We need to create an environment where forgiveness can take place: forgiving ourselves so that we are not bogged down in guilt and anger, forgiving others so that we can move on in relationships. Again it is the love that Jesus offered that sets the standard for our lives. His acceptance of us as we are, not the perfect person, not the ace, but as we are, enables us to like ourselves and to be there for others.

Life is a journey, with some beautiful sections of highway and other areas that are rough and bumpy. But do we have a map to get us where we want to go? There are lots of maps available. If you want to have something to live by, a really solid set of values for yourself and to pass on, then, I'd look for the one that says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." I'd look for the one that leads us into paths of compassion, integrity and forgiveness. I'd try to follow that road map to the best of my ability and then leave the rest up to the great Map Maker.