

April 7, 2019

I Am

I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

John 14:1-7

Opening words: The Gospel of John is preoccupied with the deity of Jesus. Chapter one sets the tone for the rest of the book. In that chapter, John declares Jesus, the Word, to be God, and goes on to say, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He announces that in Jesus, the glory of God has been seen, and he further speaks of Jesus as the One who has made the invisible God known. And then, we have the multiple "I Am" sayings scattered throughout John's gospel. The title "I Am" is the divine name revealed to Moses by God in Exodus 3:14 from the burning bush. By taking on this name, Jesus claimed to be God! The "I Am" sayings not only speak of Jesus' identity, but each of the seven "I Am" sayings reveal an aspect of Jesus' mission.

During this season of Lent I have been looking at the "I Am" sayings of Jesus. I began on Ash Wednesday and looked at the original "I Am" statement in Exodus 3. Then, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal satisfaction, "I am the bread of life". Then, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal hope, "I am the light of the world". Then, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal love, "I am the good shepherd". Last week, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal power, "I Am the Vine". Today, I conclude this sermon series with Jesus's statement of eternal life. Our scripture reading for today is John 14:1-7. Let me call this message *I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life*.

John 14:1-7 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Reinhart Bonnke (born 1940) is a German Pentecostal evangelist, who is known for his work in Africa. He once said, "*It is not that the church hasn't been trained in evangelism; it is not a lack of institution or information. The fact is, if you don't love people through the eyes of Christ, the world will never be changed.*" That quote speaks to me. If that quote speaks to you, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves in the fourteenth chapter of John. The setting is crucial to your understanding. After three years, it was over. When it all began, the disciples didn't know Jesus; now they loved Jesus. Can you blame them? They had experienced Jesus.

They had traveled together. They had eaten together. They had dreamed together, and what dreams! Jesus had the power to do anything. He healed the sick. He brought sight to the blind. He made demoniacs whole. He taught lessons like no other teacher. Their wildest dreams seemed to be in reach, but now it is over. Jesus has just told the disciples, he is going to be leaving them. The disciples are upset, and Jesus tries to comfort them by making some mighty promises. He tells them that in his father's house there are many mansions, or rooms. When he leaves them, he is going there to prepare a place for them, but he will return. Jesus assumes the disciples know where he is going and how they too will get there, but their understanding is limited. Thomas is the only one bold enough to be honest with Jesus. He said, *"We do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"* Jesus's response is memorable, yet confusing. The Master said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* What is Jesus saying? When Jesus says he is the way, he is saying, he is the path to God. When Jesus says he is the truth, he is saying he is the reality of God's promises. When Jesus says he is the life, he is the source of true living, both in this world and in heaven. Those words are complicated enough, but Jesus continues and makes matters worse. Our reading for today ends with the words, *No one comes to the father but by me.* Your interpretation of that verse is extremely important. Many have interpreted that verse, *No one comes to the father but by me,* wrongly. I know that is true, because I have experienced it in my life.

When I was young, there used to be a man who drove around town in an old black sedan. He was African-American and he wore military fatigues. Everyone knew him, because on top of his car was a sign made of long, thin pieces of wood. On each piece of wood, were hand-painted Bible verses. The sign sat about five feet tall. The Bible verses he selected to promote were not ones that spoke of God's love and grace. They were Bible verses that promoted judgement and hell. We used to laugh at him, but at the same time we were afraid of him. We used to call him "Charles". However, we didn't know his name. Looking back, I don't question Charles's sincerity, but I do question his methods. How many people do you think Charles won for Jesus?

When I was a student at Warren G. Harding High School, there was a student by the name of Mike. He came from a large Greek family and played on the football team. He was popular amongst his peers. One day, he announced to the entire school, he had been saved. That experience changed Mike. He quit the football team and never studied again. He had one topic of discussion, Jesus. He saw himself as a modern-day prophet and went around identifying everyone else's sins. Mike's friends grew tired of the new Mike quickly. I can still see him sitting in the school cafeteria alone. Looking back, I don't question Mike's sincerity, but I question his methods. How many people do you think Mike won for Jesus?

When I was a student at Mount Union College, there was a student by the name of Don. He was a big, muscular guy with flowing dirty-dishwater blond hair. (People often got us confused 😊) He ran a Bible study on campus called Little Flock. The Christian

girls on campus were infatuated with him. I was impressed by his Biblical knowledge. If you gave him a chapter and verse in the Bible, he would quote it to you. It was common knowledge, he had the gift of tongues. In his own mind, that gift proved he was a true Christian. To him, if you didn't have the gift of tongues, then you weren't a Christian. He saw people like me as spiritual babes and looked down on us. Except for his groupies, everyone just wanted to stay away from him. Looking back, I don't question Don's sincerity, but I question his methods. How many people do you think Don won for Jesus?

When I served my first church, I had a parishioner by the name of Harry. He was at church every time the doors were unlocked. He wore a large metal cross around his neck and carried a large black King James Version Bible in his hand. He came to church alone, because his wife had died tragically years earlier. He had three sons in the area. They never came to church, and that drove Harry crazy. He told me every time he saw me, how he hounded them about going to church and reading the Bible. He told them that without the church and regular Bible reading, they were going to hell. You can imagine how that went over. Harry had no relationship with his sons. For that reason, Harry spent every holiday, Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas, alone. However, the three brothers and their families got together. Looking back, I don't question Harry's sincerity, but I question his methods. How many people do you think Harry won for Jesus?

I am comfortable saying that Charles, Mike, Don and Harry loved John 14:6, "*No one comes to the father but by me.*" I am equally comfortable saying, Charles, Mike, Don and Harry misunderstood John 14:6. Jesus was not speaking at a conference where other world religions were represented. Jesus was not speaking to a group of Muslims. Jesus was not speaking to a group of Hindus. Jesus was not speaking to a group of Buddhists or atheists. Jesus was speaking to the disciples. He had spent three years with them, and he knew them. He cared for them, and they cared for him. Jesus is trying to comfort them. Their relationship was going to be interrupted, and they are upset. Here is the question you must answer:

Why did the disciples follow Jesus? Was it because Jesus threatened them? Was it because Jesus intimidated them? Was it because Jesus warned them about eternal judgement and the fires of hell? It is none of those things. You can make a case that they followed Jesus because they felt his powerful presence. However, that really didn't happen until they first witnessed his miracles. I believe, they followed Jesus originally, because they admired him. He was a person of great integrity. They knew Jesus cared for them and wanted the best for them. There was something inside of him that they wanted inside of them. I know that is true, because that is my story. I was won to Christ as a teenage boy by a teenage girl. This is the truth: decades later, I still admire her. What is your story? Who led you to Jesus? Did that person intimidate you into the faith? Or, did that person welcome you into the faith? Who is your spiritual hero? There is a world of difference. Saint Francis (1182-1228) once said, "*Preach the gospel at all*

times, and use words only if necessary.” If that makes you think, say, **“Amen!”** Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a British writer and lay theologian. He held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. This story about him has been circulating for many years. Once, he arrived at a gathering of Biblical scholars in London. He walked into the middle of a great debate. He inquired about the topic of the debate. Someone told him they were discussing the distinctiveness of Christianity among other world religions. Without much hesitation Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy.” The room quieted. It was an outrageous thing to say in a room filled with bright minds. Everyone looked at Lewis to hear his answer. In a clear voice, he said, “What makes Christianity distinct? It’s grace!” Forgiveness is found in other world religions. Compassion is found in other world religions. Love is found in other world religions. Christianity is the only world religion which leads with grace. Charles, Mike, Don and Harry forgot about grace. I hope you never forget about grace.

Do you remember the quote from Reinhart Bonnke? He once said, *“It is not that the church hasn’t been trained in evangelism; it is not a lack of institution or information. The fact is, if you don’t love people through the eyes of Christ, the world will never be changed.”* And all of God’s people said, **“Amen!”** Let me ask you one more question. When was the last time you tried to save a soul for Christ? After all, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.