

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

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John 14:1-14

Last week, the Ford Motor Company issued a recall of 1.4 million vehicles—the Ford Fusion and the Lincoln MKZ. If you own one of these and it was made between 2014 and 2018, then you may want to take it to the dealership before your steering wheel falls off. Apparently, Ford under-engineered the bolt that hold the steering wheel onto the steering column.

When I was a kid, I remember this recurring gag that I would see on TV in cartoons and comedies. The gag itself originates in silent film. Two people are riding in a car. The driver asks the passenger if they would take the wheel. When the passenger says yes, the driver pulls the steering wheel off and hands it to the surprised passenger. Always funny.

If I were making a car, that bolt that holds the steering wheel onto the steering column is not one that I would under-engineer. I would over-engineer that bolt. I would fabricate it out of titanium and carbon fiber. I would encase it in Kevlar. One bolt would not be enough. I would then use six or eight of them just to be safe. I'd throw in some Gorilla Glue and duct tape for good measure. The steering wheel is not something you want coming loose when you are zipping down the interstate.

When I first met my wife, her mother drove an Oldsmobile that she had owned for many years. We were all riding together one day zipping down the interstate when my mother-in-law turned to me and said, “watch this,” and casually pulled the key out of the ignition. The car kept going. The key and the ignition had both worn down over the years to where the key was almost unnecessary. It scared the daylights out of me and I begged her to put the key back in before we crashed.

My grandfather was an engineer and he worked for a large corporation with plants all over the US. He traveled a lot and did a lot of driving. Since this was long before cruise control had been developed, on these long trips his right leg would get tired from holding down the gas pedal. So, being an engineer, he engineered a solution. He installed a third pedal for his left foot as a secondary gas pedal. This worked well until he had a trainee traveling with him who offered to drive. In a moment of confusion, the trainee depressed what he thought was the clutch and drove the car into a building. So much for that experiment.

We all love our cars and all have stories about them. Cars can be fun. They take us places. They offer us independence and freedom. But now, companies are working on developing autonomous cars, driverless cars. In the future, we won't have to drive anymore. We won't even have to know how to get where we want to go. We will simply punch in our destination and sit back [and pray].

Our reading today from the Gospel of John is something of a car ride. It is about Jesus and where he is going and how we might ride with him.

The Gospel of John has 21 chapters. Chapters 13, 14, and 15 make up what we call the Farewell Discourse. The Farewell Discourse takes place at Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Over the course of that meal, Jesus washes the disciples' feet. He foretells his betrayal by Judas. Then, during the meal, Judas slips out into the night. Jesus informs his disciples that he will not be with them much longer. He will be leaving them, and where he is going they cannot come. Finally, he tells them of Peter's upcoming denial.

The disciples are understandably shaken by all this. Their teacher and leader is leaving them, Judas has gone rogue, and Peter is about to fail in his loyalty. Because their anxiety levels are through the roof Jesus says to them, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.* Jesus reassures them that he is not abandoning them. Stick to your roots, he says, God and me. "You know where I am going," he tells them. "I'm going to my Father's house. In that house are many rooms. There is a place for each of you there. I'm going to get it ready for you. I will be there and you can be there as well."

One of the disciples—Thomas—responds to this news. He says, *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?* Thomas acts like the disciples need a map, or a GPS, or an autonomous car to follow Jesus. But they don't. Jesus explains to them that they already have what they need. He points to himself and tells them, "I am what you are looking for. I have been right here with you all the time. You don't need to look any further. I am the way." Then Jesus says, *No one comes to the Father except through me.* "If you know me, you know my Father. If you've seen me, you've seen him."

It is clear that Thomas does not get it. Another disciple, Philip, steps up but he doesn't get it either. Philip says, *Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.* Jesus has already told them, *If you know me, you will know my Father also*, but still Philip demands, *Show us the Father.*

Jesus says to him, "Philip, we've been together all this time and you still do not know me. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. The words that I speak are the words of my Father. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If you don't believe me, think of the works of power that you've witnessed. Where do you think that came from?"

Then Jesus says something even more remarkable. He tells the disciples that those who believe in him will do the works that he does. In fact, they will do even greater works. Yes, Jesus promises that believers will do greater things than he. *If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it*, he tells them.

Jesus is clear in this passage about his identity when he says, *I am the way, the truth, and the life*. If you see Jesus, you see God. If you hear Jesus, you hear God.

But I want to step back a moment and look more closely at something else he says. When Thomas asks, *How can we know the way?* Jesus answers, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*. Most of you have probably heard that statement to mean that Jesus is the only road to salvation. *No one comes to the Father except through me*. Indeed, it sounds like that. This verse is frequently referenced in discussion about the validity of other religions. It is easy to cite this verse and then declare that Jesus is the only way.

But to do this, I believe, is to take the verse out of context. Remember, Jesus is not speaking to a random crowd; he is talking to his inner circle—the disciples. They have been with him, have watched him, and listened to him. For them, the way to God is indeed Jesus. *If you know me, you will know the Father*. They know him.

Jesus is not the bouncer outside of a nightclub determining who gets in and who does not. The disciples are already on the guest list. They are getting in. All they have to do is go to the bouncer and gain entrance. He is the way.

For us, as believers, we only have to follow the disciples past the bouncer into the club. We've seen Jesus. We know Jesus. This is our appointed path, our way to salvation.

Think of hikers lost in the woods in a snowstorm. Rescuers go to the woods and call for the hikers. Are there other ways out of the woods for the hikers? Yes. But if you are a hiker and you hear the voice of the rescuer then that is your best way out.

Instead of a bouncer, I prefer to see Jesus in another way—maybe as a carnival barker, the one shouting “Step right up. See the amazing sights inside.” The barker is inviting and welcoming everyone. The barker is not judging or excluding. All are welcome into that tent.

Is there more than one way to salvation? Not for me; not for you, not for anyone who believes. Our way is Christ. For everyone else, I cannot begin to predict God's plans. I do know that in the parables that we find in the other gospels, that when the banquet is thrown and the invited guests don't show up, the doors are opened and everyone is invited to the feast. It is those who reject God, they are the ones not getting in.

Through this season of Lent, we have been looking at the I Am statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John: I am the light of the world, I am the gate, I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, and today, I am the way, the truth, and the life. These statements are powerful clues to Jesus' identity as the son of God.

Jesus is the light which illumines God for us.
Jesus is the gate which takes us to God.
Jesus is bread which feeds our spirit.
Jesus is the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.
Jesus is the way.

Jesus is not a wall built to keep people out. He is the way in and wants everyone who hears his voice to come to God through him. This is the great gift of the gospel, that all are welcome. It is the message that we should proclaim from the rooftops and the mountaintops, “God loves you.”

Today is Palm Sunday—the end of Lent and the beginning of Holy Week. Although today’s reading isn’t specifically part of the Palm Sunday story, it is certainly a reflection of Jesus riding into Jerusalem as part of a grand parade of people going to the festival. By symbolically riding the donkey as foretold in Zechariah, Jesus is proclaiming to the world, “Join with me, follow me into the holy city and you will encounter God.”