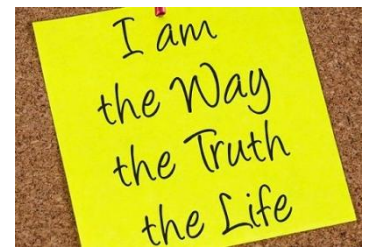


FOLLOW HIM, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: John 14:1-6

June 26, 2016



Growth Questions

“How would you define the good life? From whom are you learning it? What kind of life is your present understanding of reality (way) producing?”

“What kind of questions do you find yourself asking? What kind of answers are you formulating? Have they produced stability in adversity? Have they proven robust enough to prevent you from abandoning them for another option?”

Teaching Notes

When I was in High School (78), a gentleman named Michael Hart published a book called *“The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History.”* Not surprisingly, Jesus made the list, but he was bested by Muhammed and Sir Isaac Newton (that *“law of gravitation”* thing just pushed him over the top).

Interestingly, Hart was willing to acknowledge that Jesus’ teachings were amongst some of the most remarkable and ethically generous ever offered, but he said that the reason that Jesus dropped to the “3-spot” was because of his followers. He determined that Jesus’ popularity and greatness was considerably diminished by those who claim to follow him, but don’t adhere to his teachings; those whose professed beliefs aren’t necessarily corroborated by their lifestyle.

Reminded me of a conversation with a stylist [she said she was a “recovering Baptist, attending Catholic Church and practicing Native American Spirituality”]: *“I’m a Christian, but not in the Bible sort of way. I believe what I believe, but I do what I do”*. That’s like saying, *“I’m an Olympic swimmer, but not in the treading water kind of way”*. It’s baffling at the very least, and self-deceptive at the very worst.

“I am the way, the truth and the life...” John 14:6

First, I’m not certain that Jesus said anything that has been any more passionately debated or hotly contested. Second, I suppose that this statement only matters if the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is the One, true Creator-God. If not, it invalidates everything else.

In one brief statement, Jesus addresses three of the most fundamental needs of humanity:

1. [find] “**a way**”--- some kind of guide/direction which helps ensure that we’re not left trying to sort out all of the complexities of life on our own. A means of addressing the inner-tension that says, “*Something’s not right!*”
2. [know] “**truth**”--- a viable representation of the way things really are; a way to help us make sense of who we are and why we are that will allow us to respond appropriately (truth is what you are “awakened to” when you spend \$4000, but make \$2000). It’s what you are confronted with having believed a lie which has proven deceptive.
3. [experience] “**life**”--- a means of satisfying this deep, heart suspicion that there must be something “more” than 70-hour work-weeks and a new car smell and a new pair of jet skis and sleeping with our backs to one another.

If there is no...

...**way**: life is confusing and ambiguous. “*Where do I go to find the answers when I can’t find them within myself?*”

...**truth**: life is uncertain and pointless; there is no “story”, no “conclusion”, only a mass of contradictions and debates characterized by the phrase, “***It is what it is***”: the modern declaration of futility.

...**life**: there’s only existence; merely vital signs. No intrinsic value to us. “*If this is really all there is, what’s the point?*” It’s like a trip to a really bad buffet: everything looks different, but it all tastes the same. When we feel empty, “more” seems to be the most attractive option.

We live in a world that makes it increasingly difficult to make truth claims.

I’m ready to admit that a significant part of the challenge has not been the truth itself, as much as the way that we have presented it and often “mishandled” it. We’ve attempted to be “right” without being “good”.

But, to say that we have found the **way**, we have found the **truth**, we have found the **life**, is not meant to be arrogant or intolerant, but to simply say that our search has been satisfied in our discovery of Jesus.

Jesus was always really proficient at meeting people where they were: in their confusion and questioning; in their chaos and turmoil; in their celebration and joy.

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus’ primary objective was “not” to convince people they were sinners. He didn’t have to. They were already fully aware that something was wrong. Many of them had already been ushered to the margins of life.

And, if they were content with *“life-as-they-knew-it”*, Jesus had nothing to offer them because the gospel is only for the “poor”: the ones with no leverage on God, no claims on him that would obligate him to them, and the ones with no illusions about their inability to provide for themselves. Life hadn’t worked out well for them.

Jesus was also always attempting to “lead us” somewhere. To connect us with something. To introduce us to someone.

That **somewhere** was the journey with him into life. That **something** was the Story of God and his good purposes for his world. That **someone** was God himself, who desires us and will not be content until we love him completely, love ourselves rightly and love others compassionately.

To such people Jesus frequently offered a simple invitation: **“Follow me.”** And, he was confident enough in his lovingly-restorative approach that he would allow you to choose, even if that choice wasn’t for him, but he would insist that our choices are consequential.

Jesus’ invitation makes explicit that the life that he described and embodied corresponds to the **way** God created human beings to live, but he knows that it’s a life that we can’t manufacture or strategize on our own. We need a teacher. It’s why Jesus referred to us most often as “disciples”... “apprentices”. It means that our lives are shaped by the kinds of questions that we ask in our pursuit of truth (what’s real). Those questions are most often prompted by the story we tell.

The closer your vision is to what is “real” (true; reality), the greater your chances of realizing the fullest experience of life.

We have all suffered some degree of damage because of our failure to discern reality. **“What you don’t know won’t hurt you”**. To the contrary, if you are mistaken about what is “real”, the results can be devastating. Reality never adjusts itself to accommodate our ignorance.

John 17:3 *“This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to the earth.”*

The Biblical Story is always connecting truth (reality) to God, specifically as he has made himself known to us in the person of Jesus. Reality, then, is nothing short of knowing Jesus (personally and interactively) and experiencing his own life in you and the love for which you were made. Anything else would be ‘inhumane’.

Jesus was always helping people IN, not trying to keep them OUT!

“... whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life,...” John 6:37, 40

Far from being “narrow” or “intolerant”, Jesus was making sure that no one who pursued him would be denied accessibility. Jesus was always challenging systems (religious and social) and attitudes which made it difficult, if not impossible, for people to arrive safely at home with God.

Jesus is the Story that God was telling.

Jesus is the way that God comes to us. He is God in **3D**; God speaking in the first person. Jesus is God comforting those overwhelmed with grief, he is God extending mercy to a woman with a string of failed marriages, but still trying to find love on “Match.com”. He is God having covert meetings with religious leaders whose religion has left them pious, but empty.

Jesus is the way that we come to God. Not just as mental assent to some proposed God-facts; not just some prayer offered as a rite of initiation, but the way in which we are restored--- the way in which salvation happens in us and through us every day.

Here’s the irony: **people liked Jesus**. “*Friend of sinners*” (Luke 7). Unfortunately, that was an accusation (from the religious community), not simply an observation. He “*reeked of grace*”, which seemed to create some safe space for people to honestly assess their situation and give them the opportunity to choose a healthier alternative.

Repentance was never a pre-requisite for “*hangin’ out with Jesus*”, but it was often a result of having spent time with him.

Think: consider the conclusions that you have reached about life and God and the life it has produced.

Think again: “repentance.” Sincere willingness to re-align yourself around another’s version of truth.

Trust: the result of a developing understanding of God’s goodness and his good intentions for you.

Accept: “*Everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds.*” Matthew 7

Follow: it means that we have determined that the life Jesus offers to us is so appealing and so resonates with the desires within us, that we would willingly renounce our confidence in our own strategies for making life work and adopt his.