

Sermon Title: The Line In the Middle  
Text: John 14:1-14; 1 Peter 2:4-10  
By: Rev. Terry Carty  
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Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church  
Season: Fifth Sunday of Easter

Main Point: Peter's baptismal sermon calls all to be part of God's priesthood and "living stones" in a building that God is building. It is not anti-Semitic, narrow-minded to claim Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life by the way we live. If we see Jesus, we have seen God.

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### The Ugly American

Glenn Abernathy taught me how the lead international mission teams. The first team I ever 'co-lead' with him was a trip to build a Methodist conference center in Panama. Glenn went a week ahead of the team to make sure all materials were on site by the time the team would arrive.

When we finally got to the remote province where we would build, I saw Glenn in a way I had never seen him before. He had assumed the persona that I soon found out the local Panamanians called 'El Hombre Grande' - The Big Man. And he looked big indeed. Glenn is about my height but much heavier built. He looked even more 'grande' because he wore a white explorer's shirt with shoulder pleats and flap pockets, khaki pants, a pair of cowboy boots, and it was all set off by a big, wide brimmed, white straw Panama hat. Glenn looked 10 feet tall and solid as a wall.

I learned the next day why Glenn did an 'Indiana Jones' transformation. The delivery truck with the bags of cement did not show up for us to begin our work, so Glenn and I got into our rented pickup and drove to the supply store in the town nearby. He strode in there looking like John Wayne and demanded, in English, to see the 'jefe' - the Boss. Then he proceeded to bully the jefe into loading the delivery truck and following us back to our construction site.

I was embarrassed by how this might seem to our Panamanian hosts. We don't want US Americans to seem that way, so I asked Glenn about it. He told me that he found out years earlier that our mission teams would sit around for the whole two weeks and get nothing accomplished if we waited for 'mañana' to come. He had started coming down a week early to make the arrangements, but also dressing as 'El Hombre Grande' so they would take him seriously. It seems that he had to fulfill the stereotype of the 'ugly American' - pushy and demanding - in order to get anything done on our timetable.

I have often been embarrassed by the ugly American attitude when I have traveled outside the US or when I have hosted international visitors. I have always been apologetic when I have seen the stereotype lived out. It worked for Glenn to imitate the stereotype - in future trips I used the same strategy except that I dressed in a black

clergy shirt and collar in order to get the respect I needed to be successful when I demanded service.

### Not the Ugly Christian

Just like Glenn's portrayal of the 'ugly American,' the words of Jesus sometimes bother moderate Christians: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me." The reason they bother us is because we do not usually hear them from the mouth of Jesus. Instead we hear them from an 'ugly Christian' - some overbearing, rude Christian zealot who is using them as a weapon to fend off those who do not worship the same as they do or to condemn those of other faiths. We have come to hear this passage as one that suggests that God only offers salvation to those who proclaim the name of Jesus and without that no one can go to God.

This 'ugly Christian' approach does not feel like it would come from a God of grace nor from a Jesus of compassion and love. We who seek faith by peace and understanding feel embarrassed to be associated with that kind of Christianity. And we often subdue ourselves to the point of silence in expression of our faith.

But we cannot allow this powerful passage to be taken out of its context and its meaning denied to us. As it turns out, Jesus is not the 'ugly Christian.' In the verses before this Jesus has just told the disciples that one of them would betray him, one would deny him, and he, himself, would leave to prepare a place for them. Thomas asked him how they could possibly know the way to follow him if he leaves them. Jesus responded that He is the Way. He is the Truth. He is the Life. They will come to the One who Jesus knows as 'Father' by living the Way Jesus has taught them, by believing the Truth Jesus has taught them, and thus by finding their Life in union with Jesus.

He addressed those words to his closest followers. Not to Hindus or Muslims or Buddhists or agnostics. Jesus was not asserting the Christian faith over all others at that point - he was leading his disciples. No one could show them the way of his Father except the one who came from the Father.

### A Narrow Road

But don't misunderstand. Jesus taught a 'Christian way' that is distinctive and unique. It is a journey that is walked with others who seek the Life that God intends. Although this passage is not a passage of exclusion, it also is not to be considered as universalist. I am NOT suggesting that any pathway leads to God nor that all faiths are equally valid.

In Matthew Jesus said that the road that leads to destruction is broad and the gate is wide. But the road that leads to life is narrow. The problem we have is that we don't really know how narrow the road to Life is. We don't know where the edges are. We sometimes find ourselves wandering on the road and worried that we might fall off.

### Foggy Night

I have made far too many trips on dark, foggy nights where I could barely see the road. My lights shown into the fog bank and reflected back into my eyes so that could not be

sure that I was not driving into a curve or approaching another car on the road. I learned to put my lights on low beam so they would illumine only the road close to me - and to look for the centerline of the road. I knew that if I could keep my eye on the centerline and stay just to the right of it, I would be able to safely reach my destination.

Jesus painted a centerline for the disciples - the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And that centerline continues to lie in the fog of our lives to guide our way to God. The Way is based upon the Truth that Jesus told. You find that Truth by the "Golden Rule," love of God and love of neighbor as oneself; or by Matthew 25 - when did I see you hungry, thirsty, naked; or in Romans - one that loves another has fulfilled the law. But it is all the same central Truth - all find their roots in Jesus' central message of love. Studying Jesus of the New Testament gives us the painted centerline we need to keep us from getting too close to the edges of the road of acceptable faith.

### Be a Line Painter

Today I want to call you to be a line painter. You may have always thought the those who talk about Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life were those who thought that they knew the whole the Way and could draw a straight line to God. But that is not how Christian line painting works.

Christian line painters are most often painting their line on a foggy night. They struggle to see the line that someone else has painted for them and they try to stay as closely as possible to that line. That line has been drawn for us by those who have gone in front of us. They were following a dim line drawn from studying scripture and following the line drawn by the faith of those before them.

Our lives can count most if we just open the sprayers of our lives and let them paint as we follow as closely as possible to the line we see as Truth. We open our sprayers by talking with those we love the most about our faith. We live authentically and publicly according to our faith - we claim prayer and trust and forgiveness and love. And we share with others all the gifts and graces that God has given us. That is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.