

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

Sunday Sermon

Benjamin Eisele

20 April 2008

One of my favorite stories growing up was the children's book the "Polar Express." For those of you who don't remember (shame on you) and for the two people here who have not read the book or have had it read to them (you know who you are), the Polar Express is a magical train that stops at the homes of children on the night of Christmas Eve, and takes them all the way to the North Pole. The train is filled with staff that serve the pajama-clad children hot cocoa while the train journeys through woods and up and over mountains to its destination. At the North Pole the children an incredible sight: hundreds or maybe even thousands of elves, along with Santa's Reindeer, all gathering in the city square to witness the giving of the all-important "first gift of Christmas." Santa arrives on the scene, and selects the protagonist to choose the "first gift." The boy, out of all of the toys and games he could choose, asks simply for a single sleigh bell from Santa's sleigh – a bell that when shaken puts forth the purest, deepest, most magical, musical ringing. The assembly cheers wildly as Santa gives the gift, and then he soars off for the night.

On the train, heading back home, the bell's recipient realizes that he has lost the bell – it has fallen through a hole in his pocket. Heart-broken, the boy disembarks from the train and goes to bed, mourning the loss of the bell. In the morning, the base of the Christmas tree is full of gifts, including a mysterious small package from "Mr. C." The boy opens the box, and in it is the bell! Santa left a note, saying that he found it in his sleigh. The boy rings the bell, and he and his sister smile in delight as the musical sound of pure magic rings through the air. The two's parents, however, cannot hear the bell. It must be broken, they say. Eventually the sister fails to hear the bell, too, but the boy continues to hear it ring clearly and beautifully, as it always promises to do for those who truly **listen** and believe.

Today's scripture reading includes one of the best known verses in Christianity:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you know me, you know my father also.”

I will be honest. John 14:6 makes me nervous. I have difficulty finding promise in John 14:6. It is perhaps one of the most widely known verses in all of our faith, a verse that commonly defines the Christian story because of its constant use in identifying **who** exactly this Jesus guy is. When Christians are asked who Jesus is, the ‘way, truth, and life’ language often surfaces.

This verse makes me nervous because even though the chapter preceding today’s gospel, John 13, contains the story of Jesus lowering himself by washing the dusty feet of his disciples, *even though* John 13:34 sets forth a new commandment to love one another with the love of God, *even though* John 14 verse 18 says that “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (notice the present active tense of “*I am coming*”), an all-too common Christian ‘interpretation’ of John 14:6 dangerously and emphatically emphasizes the “**the**” in “*the way, the truth, and the life,*” contorting the inclusive agape-centered message of Jesus and effectively weaponizing it into an exclusivist, Gnostic ‘members-only’ club, where firm lines are drawn between those that are *in*, and those that are *out*. The primary concern of the story of Jesus and John 14:6 is made out to be salvation, rather than focusing on the **way** in which Jesus lived and the *truths* that he lived out and preached. Those who do not find and come to Jesus Christ, and only Jesus Christ, cannot find or come to God. They are excluded. As another pastor whom I am quite close to said once, ‘I suspect that our Lord grows so tired and so weary of his children continually beating each other over the head with their superior knowledge of the way, the truth, and the life, without any love.’

If we accept the interpretation that Jesus alone is the way to God and reject all others, we risk alienating the 4.5 billion other people on this planet who do not profess Christianity as their religion. Claims like the one the camp director from the documentary “Jesus Camp” makes - saying that we Christians are in the **right** because “lets face it, we have the truth,” - statements like that claim a cornered market on God which isolates Christianity from the rest of the world in its ‘superior knowledge.’ If we take Jesus’ interpretation exclusively, then we turn away those who cannot hear that bell of Christmas, even if they’re attempting to listen – attempting “the way,” but don’t know how, or are distanced from it by tragedy or disaster.

Jesus is prompted to speak these words by a question from Thomas the unsure, Thomas the doubter. “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” he asks. Thomas confesses to not knowing where Jesus is going at all. Jesus’ language, as it does with some regularity in John, confuses the disciples. They do not understand where he is going, nor do they understand this “way” to which he is referring. (Some of my fellow students and I have joked – maybe appropriately, maybe not – that Jesus in John is the ‘stoner’ Jesus, floating around in abstract thoughts. Read John 14:6 like “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life,*” and you would have questions too.”)

Thomas asks for Jesus’ way. And Jesus responds by giving it to him, saying “I am the way.” “Way” by definition means literally “manner or method, path, journey or route.” A way to something is not a one-time doorway, but a way is by definition a *process*. A way is by no means a **destination**, but **how one arrives** there.

“No one comes to the father except through me.” Jesus does not say, no one comes to salvation except **through** me. Jesus does not say ‘no one comes to God **all-powerful** through me.’ Jesus says “father.” A parental figure; a nurturing figure. Jesus’ way invites us into a *relationship* to the parental father figure. And like all relationships, the relationship of human to Jesus to God is a relationship that is in *process*; it is not something that is given and accepted, never to undergo change or growth again. Relationships with other humans, as we know, are not static. They involve nurturing, conflict, and growth. Why would a relationship with a father God, or mother God, be any less complex than a relationship with a person?

Thomas does not cut to the end of the story with his question, to the final destination. Thomas inquires into the ‘way’ Jesus takes to get to the place he says he will prepare for his disciples. No story is complete without processing through adversity, and rising and falling actions to get to the end. The end is meaningless without a journey, and the end, strange as it may sound, is not the goal. The ‘end’ is not the Promise in this passage either.

The Promise in John is in the “life” that Jesus claims to be. The Greek word from where we translate “life” is also translated “the means of living” in addition to simply “life.” It means *life-style* or way of living, right **now**, rather than simply life after death, life after this life. The promise is that the life Jesus offers is available right now, in following the Way that Jesus puts forth. Jesus’ **way** of living is process towards Jesus’ life. And Jesus life is the “means of living” by which we achieve true life.

Notice that the word “only” or any equivalent is completely absent in this text. Notice also that missing is any mentioning of a decision on the part of the disciples.

The Promise is absolutely not always easy to hear – it is certainly not easy to ‘trust.’ In fact, at times, Promise is downright hidden. God’s promises are constantly endangered in the story of scripture. The covenant with Israel is constantly thrown into question when Abraham and Sarah become elderly, when Israel is slave to Egypt, and when Israel is thrown into exile. God’s promise is again endangered on the cross, when the newest and best candidate for messiah is executed by Rome. Endangerment of God’s Promises happen when God does not seem to follow through, when once-perceived joyful noise becomes silenced

This past January I had the opportunity to travel to Vienna Austria with some friends. We stayed with Nora Olson’s aunt and uncle, Mary Ellen and Peter, who have lived in Vienna for some years. Not receiving visitors often – particularly American youth, among whom was their niece – Mary Ellen became our self-appointed tour-guide of the city. We walked the city, taking in markets, restaurants, shops, churches, palaces, capitols, cathedrals, and music halls. Vienna is a city steeped in music – their musical heritage is everywhere. In the Vienna House of Music, there is an entire floor with room after room dedicated to an individual master of musical craft. Mozart, Beethoven, Hayden, Shubert, Strauss, Brahms, Mahler – each had their own display dedicated to their work and their master craft.

On the tour with Mary Ellen, we witnessed numerous times the musical heritage of Vienna at work. Like most major cities, I expect, there were street musicians playing their instrument of choice for tips. You legally needed a permit, we were told, if you wanted to play, said Mary Ellen. But in Austria, the people there *know* music so well, that if you are a street musician, if you are good, you are allowed to play regardless of permit. However, if you are a street musician, and you are not good, then you are quickly removed from your venue, and perhaps even fined. Viennese really know their music.

During the tour we stopped at St. Stephen’s Cathedral, a massive sandstone structure with a great spire reaching into the sky. One of my favorite things about European churches is the **Organs**. Grand, robust pipes almost always populate the loft at the rear of the church. St. Stephens has a grand pipe organ. I was standing and staring at the pipes, imagining a great big

full hymn, full organ, unstopped, bellowing out A Mighty Fortress is Our God (albeit in a very Catholic place), filling the cathedral until it might burst. Deep pedal notes and bold, brassy melodies and harmonies, resounding of the walls. Can you hear it? I almost could as I was gazing and imagining.

Then I heard Mary Ellen say to us that there were two times in the history of Vienna when the entire city wept, both near the end of the Second World War. The first time was when the Opera House was bombed out and destroyed. The second was when St. Stephens, central symbol of the city, burned down after catching fire caused by shelling from invading soldiers.

Mary Ellen saw me looking up at the pipes. “Those pipes do not play anymore,” she said, sadly. “They were damaged in the fire and ruined. They just never moved them.”

I was oddly devastated. In the few minutes I had been watching and hearing this glorious music in my head, I become attached to those pipes in my head. It struck me as heartbreaking, the absence of sound and the inability of those beautiful pipes to do what they were made to do. I sat down and stared at them. I noticed a loud silence in the cathedral that I had not heard before.

The writer of John knows that this Promise is not always easy to hear, either. As the storyteller, he knows that Jesus is soon meeting his death on a cross. Chapters 14-17 of John are sometimes referred to as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. Jesus in John knows that his time is nearing an end. Unlike Patriarchs and Kings, who divvy out their wealth and possessions on their deathbeds, Jesus divulges to his disciples his Way, the means by which to live their lives.

Writer Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird* tells the story of her good friend Pammy. Pammy had developed cancer, and was dying. In the last six months of Pammy’s life, she took a turn for the worse. Lamott writes that she called a doctor of Pammy’s who always gave her straight answers. Lamott called her asking if the doctor could give her any good news when Pammy’s health was worsening. Lamott says she reminds herself daily of what that doctor said to her. Lamott writes, “[The doctor] couldn’t [give me any good news], but she said something that changed my life. “Watch [Pammy] carefully right now,” she said, “because she’s teaching you **how to live.**”

Jesus in John, in describing himself as “way, truth, and life,” is teaching us in the days before his death how to live. If we listen carefully, we can hear that Jesus is trying to tell us that we can live and have life **in** him and **with** him NOW, regardless of our decision about this gift. “Trust in God, trust also in me,” asks Jesus in verse one. Which is not easy to do, we know. And perhaps Jesus knows this too, because later, in verse 18, Jesus says “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” Jesus is already coming, constantly and without end.

Though the way is difficult and the life that it brings is not always evident, abundant life is still there, freely gifted to us. Listen for it.

As I sat, silently mourning the death of St. Stephens magnificent pipe organ, I began to hear something, faintly. Faint music, again. A new song, a different song, for some reason caught my ear, became audible to me. A single, mellow melody line flowed slowly and evenly through my head, through the cathedral. The tune of Now the Green Blade Rises. First a lone, calm, single organ line, then suddenly the pipes were proclaiming loudly with full brass accompaniment that from the once fallen and buried and the bombed and silenced, new growth and music and life rises. Can you hear it?

Like the bell in the Polar Express, promised to be heard by those who believe, if we listen carefully, we can hear the pure ringing of the bell – the pure Promise of Christmas and Promise of Easter we can find in Jesus’ way, truth, and life. And even if we cannot find the promise, if it is hard to hear, the promise finds us and will not leave us orphaned. The promise is there, like the ringing out of that Christmas bell, whether we accept it or not. Whether we hear it or not, whether we trust it or not, it is there – it is still ringing

Listen for Jesus, beckoning you to follow him in his Way – not *the* way reserved for God’s chosen few – but the way set forth for **all** and given **to** all - a process, a means of living that follows Jesus to the cross but **through** the cross, into a relationship with a nurturing God that promises that though Jesus died, we might live, and live abundantly. Amen

MORNING WORSHIP
Sunday, April 20, 2008

Prelude	<i>“Blind Man”</i>	Chapel Musicians
Welcome/Announcements		
Invocation		
Confession and Forgiveness		p. 94
Opening Hymn	<i>“On Eagle’s Wings”</i>	ELW# 787
Greeting	ELW Setting Three	p. 138
Kyrie		p. 138
Hymn of Praise	<i>“This is the Feast”</i>	p. 140
Prayer of the Day		
Readings		Acts 7:55-60 Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 - read responsively
“Alleluia”		p. 142
Gospel		John 14:1-14
Hymn	<i>“Just As I Am”</i>	ELW 379
Sermon		Ben Eisele, ‘08
Hymn of the Day	<i>“Now the Green Blade Rises”</i>	ELW 379
Creed		p. 105
Prayers		
Peace		
Offering	<i>“Thank you, Lord”</i>	Dennis L. Jurnigan
Holy Communion		p. 106
Dialog		
Words of Institution		
Lord’s Prayer		
Distribution	<i>“Better is One Day”</i>	Matt Redman
Blessing		

Benediction & Dismissal**Postlude***"Blind Man"*

Chapel Musicians

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS**CHAPEL PRESIDENT CANDIDATE STATEMENTS:**

JENNIFER FALKENSTEIN - Senior Communication/Business, German Major- The chapel of reconciliation is a place where we as individuals and as a community can come together and discover life awakening in the spirit of the almighty God. My visions and hopes for campus ministry is a welcoming community that which inspires a daily walk of worship, questioning and curiosity for a life of faith. I would like to see Augustana as a community willing to embrace one another at all walks of life, welcoming with open arms every individual to find the chapel of Reconciliation as a place of peace, rest, worship & joy.

JESSICA MASKE - Senior Religion/History Major Experience: 2 yrs. Outreach Coordinator, 3 yrs. Chapel Musician, 2 yrs. Faith Fest Central Committee. Campus Ministries is an organization that has allowed me to contribute through service to the Augustana Community and it would be a privilege to support Campus Ministries in a larger way as president. The Chapel has been a place of great reflection and inspiration and I hope to help others find their place in this great community of believers.

KARI RASMUSSEN - Senior Religion Major - Campus ministries can help the members of the Augie community feel at home in the chaos of campus life and in an ever-changing world by being a home congregation for the students and faculty. Each year campus is a new community and I would like to see campus ministries embracing and reaching out to the changing campus. I would also help chapel staff work efficiently to meet the needs of the campus congregation.

Balloting for Chapel President will be on Sun., Apr. 20, Mon., Apr. 21, and Wed., Apr. 23.

CHAPEL CALENDAR

Mon (21 st)	Worship, 10 am - Mark Hecht, Rec. Serv.
Wed. (23 rd)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Tamera Jerke, Dir. of the Banquet; Brass Choir; Covenant Award for Service
Fri. (25 th)	Worship, 10 am - Andrew Kightlinger, Sr. Spkr
Sun. (27 th)	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul