The Way, The Truth, and The Lifestyle – March 31, 2013

The Way, The Truth, and The Lifestyle

by David Green

Many of you already know our niece, Terry Robertson-Baker. You may have seen her on-stage at Amarillo Little Theatre where she's starred in several productions going back to her high school days, and she's sung here before.

I'm biased and know I'm bragging on her, but she's genuinely so talented as an actress, singer, and dancer – a real triple threat – it's kind of disheartening to the rest of us mere mortals.

Terry also has a venture she first started a few years ago when she lived in Los Angeles. She appears at parties for children – birthday parties – you name it, as a well-known storybook or movie character: Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty, or Belle from Beauty and the Beast. She has costumes and wigs for all these make-believe princesses.

So if you're ever at a stoplight and look over and see Snow White at the wheel of the car next to you, it's probably Terry on her way to entertain a bunch of kids.

Just imagine yourself as a four year old little girl having your friends over for your party, and in walks Sleeping Beauty, in the flesh, who has showed up just for you because she wanted to come help celebrate your birthday.

A week ago Saturday I saw Terry playing the part of just such a character. She was in the children's clothing section at a department store, this time as Cinderella, greeting all the little girls and their parents who'd come to shop for a new outfit for Easter.

Ellen and I stood back and watched as Cinderella – or Terry as Cinderella – interacted with scores of little girls. She exchanged hugs and took pictures with them, and she asked them about themselves.

It was fascinating to watch her work and see how delighted these kids were. It was obvious they completely believed the real-life Cinderella had shown up at the mall just to see them.

For me, it was amazing on a number of levels.

Mostly, it was genuinely sweet to witness the happy sense of wonder on the faces of the children, and I thought that was a great thing in itself: any time you can make a child smile, it's a good day.

But I also recognized that it was savvy marketing on the part of the department store. It's still traditional to go out and buy a new dress for Easter, and if you're going to buy your kid a pastel outfit she may only wear once in her life, that purchase might feel a little more exciting if you're also hanging out with Cinderella. I think they call that a value-added shopping experience.

But on another level, it reminded me of something we often take for granted.

Peeling back the layers of Cinderella appearing in the little girl's section of Dillard's, there's clearly the social convention – or expectation – that for Easter, you show up for church in a fresh, bright new set of clothing.

I don't know how far back that practice goes, but it seems deeply ingrained. It's affirmed in the old Irvin Berlin musical, *Easter Parade*, where the title song is about the importance of wearing a new Easter bonnet.
To me, what someone wears on Easter – in our culture – is a perfect example of how religion, in this case, Christianity, becomes so intertwined with social norms. A Christian might say we wear bright pastels on Easter as an outer reflection of the sense of joy and new life that the Easter story represents.

But it's also obvious – at least in the Northern Hemisphere – where Easter coincides with spring, and flowers are blooming and trees are budding and the weather is warming up, that a religious occasion has been blended with a seasonal observance.

And, it's been done so well and for so long, that trying to separate the two would be like proposing to bake an apple pie without the crust.

There's nothing inherently wrong about mixing religious traditions with cultural expectations or seasonal celebrations. We know that folks have been doing that since the first crops were ever harvested.

Some anthropologists argue that religion didn't truly become an organized group activity until the development of agriculture. Part of your harvest was given as a sacrifice to the gods, who provided the rain and the sunshine to make your garden grow, and allow your community to eat.

And that was cause for a celebration. A celebration that was adopted and highly ritualized by whatever form of religion was being practiced, and that religious system itself sprung out of the fact that plants you could eat, mysteriously emerged from the dirt.

And no doubt, when you had that religious observance, to mark the occasion you were sure to wear an ancient version of an Easter bonnet.

Of course, you and I happen to live in a culture where Christianity is deeply woven into the fabric of what we learn, many of our laws, social expectations, habits, our everyday turns of a phrase, and so many other aspects of our lives and our identity.

So much so that it's largely a given – it's like the oxygen we breathe – and we don't expend a lot of time or energy considering the how and why of all that. It just is.

On the other hand, a lot of folks, including many of us, question those assumptions.

And when we do that, it can go straight to the core of thinking about how we treat our neighbors, care for our planet, and become people who are more tolerant, rational, just and inclusive.

Since we do live and participate in a society that's so heavily enmeshed with Christianity, one helpful way to start that process of discovery is to simply look at early Christian sayings and traditions, how those came about, and compare all that to the world we now live in; the culture we navigate.

There's a verse in the Bible from the Gospel of John that seeks to shed some light on life, or at least, what life looked like for a group of early Christians. It's from chapter 14, verse 6, and it's recorded as a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples.

It also happens to be a passage that's often quoted today – and has been for a long time – that bothers a lot of people, almost causing a visceral negative reaction for some, because it appears to be making a very exclusive claim. "Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

That can raise our hackles quite a bit if we hear those words as they're most often interpreted: as a way of saying, if you're not a Christian, you are going to Hell; that Jesus is the one and only way to salvation, or eternal life, or even a relationship with any kind of spirit of love. In effect, believe this, or you're out of luck.

Most of us tend not to appreciate that interpretation because for the billions of people in the world who are not Christian, it cuts them off at the knees. It excludes anyone who doesn't choose to believe a certain way from having access to the divine or even universal love.

And that's something our personal experience tells us is not very accurate on a rational level, or philosophically it doesn't make sense, so we see that claim as exclusive or intolerant. And it then follows that since we can't buy into that, we may have no use at all for Christianity.

But it doesn't need to be that way.

I think it's more helpful to take a closer look at that passage from a historical point of view to find that it can tell a different story; that it makes a claim that might have had a different purpose for its original audience.

In that part of John's gospel, Jesus had been talking with his disciples about his coming death. He was preparing them for his absence and attempting to offer some words of comfort and encouragement in advance of that.

And the thrust of his overall message is that they are not going to be facing an easy life. The truth is, the community of early Christians John was writing for – 70 or 80 years after Jesus had died – were not having an easy go of it.

They were first and second-century Jews living in the Roman Empire. They believed Jesus had been the long-awaited Jewish messiah, and they found themselves at odds with their fellow Jews who were not buying their story.

Judaism in its own right at the time was rather exclusive in claiming that strictly adhering to Jewish law was the only way to be in relationship with God. They also had little use for the Roman lifestyle.

So it was a time when Christianity began emerging as a much more distinct movement, and over and over again, John's gospel reflects this cutting of the apron-strings from Judaism.

Thing was, Judaism was recognized in the Roman Empire as a long-standing, legitimate religion. So, the Romans were all about religious pluralism, as long as you also paid at least some kind of homage to the emperor.

But now you had a new movement, distinct from Judaism: the Christians. And many of them refused to pay homage to the emperor, or at least, to see him on the same level as their God.

So these earliest Christians were not only at odds with the Jews, but the Romans. It was not a happy situation. They were isolated and afraid and not legitimate in the eyes of their neighbors.

So, in that context, and to address that situation, what John records Jesus saying to his disciples, were actually words of encouragement for this Christian community many decades later.

It addressed the religious and a social conflict they found themselves in.

So it made sense, to hold this besieged community together, and to help it grow, to make an affirmation: that Jesus is the way for everyone; that access to God – for all – was made available through him.

We'll never be able to get completely inside the mind of John or his Christian community. But it's worth considering that as outsiders, how much sense would it really make for them to claim things that would only make their problems worse? Things that would make them a more exclusive and suspicious club, at odds with the culture surrounding them?

Wouldn't it make more sense to be inclusive? To say, yes, Jesus is the way, but no one is excluded from that way. It doesn't matter if you're a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, male or female, whatever nationality, you belong. No one's left out of the loop.

So, my interpretation of John quoting Jesus as saying, "No one comes to the Father except through me," is actually *inclusive*.
It's a matter of interpretation, but saying "through me" – or through Jesus – does not necessarily mean that an individual is required to have any knowledge of Jesus, much less make a confession of faith in him, to have access to the divine.

It only means that Jesus saw himself – or what he represented – as the conduit to God, whether you were aware of it or not. In fact, that's a very ancient line of reasoning, and we now know it as – guess what? – Universalism.

Some scholars have questioned whether those exact words ever came from the mouth of Jesus in the first place, but either way, I think John's community was hearing an affirmation that amounted to this: Forget the old, narrow, exclusive laws as the only way to have life. Think of me as the oxygen you breathe; it's everywhere, all around us, and without breathing oxygen, no one lives.

You can argue with me on that idea, and a lot of Christians certainly would, but for me it helps explain how the early Christians not only survived but thrived.

Not by being exclusive but by being inclusive. And not merely by being inclusive, but by adopting and adapting – in a big way – the customs and traditions of the culture surrounding them. By reaching out to the Roman world and claiming, "Look: we actually have a lot in common."

There are plenty of examples of this. There's a reason Christmas falls on December 25th.

It was already the day celebrated as *natalis solis invicti, or* the “birth of the unconquered sun.” It was the birthday of Mithras, the Persian “Son of Righteousness” who was worshipped in particular by Roman soldiers, on the first day of the week, which they appropriately called Sun-day, or the “Day of our Lord.” So, there’s a tip if you want to start a new religion: it’s good to have the army on your side.
Even the earliest form of the Jesus story would have been familiar, and resonated with popular Roman culture.

For instance, most every Roman knew about – and many already worshipped – the Greek god Adonis, whose name means The Lord, and who died and then rose again on the third day. And just like the later gospel stories about Jesus, it was a group of women who mourned Adonis and who discovered his resurrection.

Which was sort of like another deity well-known to Romans: the Egyptian god Osiris, who died and rose again on the third day. You get the idea.

Christians – in developing the story about Jesus from early on – seemed to be following the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

In fact, one way to look at John’s gospel as a whole is to see how agreeable it would’ve been to the Roman world. In John, the Romans aren’t portrayed as the bad guys. Sure, they executed Jesus, but in John’s version of the story, only reluctantly, and only because the Jews insisted. Which unfortunately, later led to centuries of anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution.

John’s doing nothing less than encouraging his readers – as they break away from Judaism – to find common ground with Roman culture, the prevailing lifestyle, to be seen less as outsiders, and to win converts.

So, over and over again, what had been native or so-called “Pagan” celebrations, cultural expectations, and images and ideals of what a god looks and acts like for people in the Roman Empire, were actively – and eagerly – integrated into Christianity.

Until, within only a couple hundred years, the movement that had once been on the outskirts of society became the dominant force in western culture.

It became less about a harsh life of being at odds with those around you, and much more about representing the prevailing lifestyle.

And it was the Roman Emperor Constantine who eventually recognized the legitimacy of Christians; that despite going through periods of persecution, he saw they had integrated so well into Roman society and adopted Roman ways of being, and had grown by doing so, they could be a useful tool to maintain and increase his own hold on power.

And he forever changed the course of history by making Christianity completely legal, and even claiming to be a Christian himself. From that point on, the life Jesus had spoken of, and the lifestyle of the culture Christianity found itself in, merged into one.

To one degree or another, that's where we find ourselves today. That's why you and I are here on a Sunday, and it's why we have laws that are rooted in Christian interpretations about how society should operate. My hope is, unjust laws will soon change, as laws and religions always change to reflect cultural realities.

So, whenever you and I hear someone talk about the decline of morality or threats to their way of life or being religious, we need to remind them – or share with them for the first time – the fact that all religions have always been fluid, and adaptive to their culture.

The long arc of history proves, the way, the truth, and the life, is inclusive.

Humanity does travel through peaks and valleys. When any one form of religion becomes dominant, it can easily become dogmatic and repressive. So it's also true that our society, and our world, never travels in the direction of justice, peace, tolerance and being more inclusive on its own.

It's up to you and me to make that happen, one person at a time.

Just start by asking why little girls wear new pastel dresses on Easter, and go from there.

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