

Finding Our Way
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John 14:1-14



When I was in elementary school, sometimes my grandpa would pick me up from school. He'd drive up in his Camry and announce that we were going on an adventure. Usually this involved some form of getting "lost" along the 15 mile stretch of farmland that separated our small towns. Grandpa would ask me which way to turn onto country roads flanked by rows of corn, wheat and soybeans, and then at some point say delightedly, "Ok, we're good and lost. How do we find our way home?"

And I, aged six or seven or eight years old, learned not to be scared by being lost. You see, Grandpa had shared with me some skills to help me find our way home. He had taught me to navigate by the sun. With a map in hand and a watch telling the time and a clear view of the sun, I could usually get us homeward bound. Every time I look towards the sky, I remember those lessons in way-finding.

In this Scripture passage from John chapter 14, Jesus is surrounded by people who are feeling lost and confused. This passage is part of the Farewell Discourse, kind of the last instructions Jesus gave before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well. In God's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going." And Thomas, bless his heart, says, "But we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

And then Jesus shares these words, "I myself am the Way—I am Truth, and I am life."

Well, ok, Jesus, that really clears it up. Thanks for the obvious and to-the-point answer.

Honestly, I feel a lot of kinship with Thomas, whose name is often synonymous with a lack of faith. Especially right now, as institutions across the country and world are planning the way forward with reopening industry and businesses. Especially right now, as some shelter in place orders remain through May, as they do in Washington State, and others expire earlier, or have expired already. I wonder how we can know the way forward when so many talk optimistically about the lessons our society can learn during this pandemic, and yet every news cycle reveals this country is still dreadfully sick with the poison of white supremacy that results in the murder of beloved black and brown children of God.

Thomas has a point, doesn't he? How can we know the way?

Most of us are probably familiar with sayings that assure us that meaning is in our journey and not our destination. I wonder what Thomas would say about that. It seems like in this passage the disciples are taking Jesus' words literally, concerning a literal destination of a house that has many rooms that Jesus is going to visit ahead of them. Thomas, Philip, Peter and others were worried about the physical location of Jesus so they could accompany him and continue ministry with him. But Jesus had different ideas. For him, The Way was not a path that could be marked on a map. The Way was a mode of living in

collaboration with Truth and Life. The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures often referred to the way of wisdom, and following a path of life. This was the worldview into which Jesus was born, grew, lived and died. In fact, the early church was called “the followers of the Way.”

Now, this famous Scripture passage continues as Jesus says the only way to know Abba God is through him, and that he and Abba God are one, indwelling together, recalling the poetic prologue to John that reads “In the beginning, the Word was with God and the Word was God.” We must be careful with this text because so many Christians over time have used it to further their agenda of exclusivism. As followers of the Way of Jesus today, we know from living in this world, that nothing is so simple as insiders and outsiders, sheep and goats, good and bad. Those who show us the way are not always practicing Christians, are not always people we expect, people who are like us. Part of the Truth of living is that God is so much more than anything humans can conceive, and so we must not put God into a box that reflects our image. It is in this context of living everyday in a grayscale world, we join with Thomas in asking, “How can we know the way?”

The answer is right there. Jesus is the Way, and the Way is Truth and Life. Jesus has shown us how to follow him, perhaps not footstep by footstep but by transforming our lives so we are people who understand our wellbeing as intimately tied up in the wellbeing of others. Jesus has shown us what truth is, what justice is, how to resist the tyranny of Empire, how to turn over tables used for economic exploitation. Jesus brings children to his side and listens to them, Jesus believes women and allows them to share their gifts in ministry, Jesus ministered to people who society had thrown away. He has shown us the Way, and we are called to Follow.

Today, the Way of Jesus may seem hidden in our USAmerican society that prioritizes profit over people, but it isn't going away. We can always come back to the path, pull away the vines and remove the logs from our eyes and follow once again. And, as Athena so beautifully sang, “no one is alone...people make mistakes, holding to their own, thinking they're alone...no one is alone...” Friends, as we follow the Way, as our complicated humanity causes us to stray from the path, let us know deep in our bones that we are not alone.

That is one of the gifts of being community together: we are not alone. The saints of our hearts who have gone before show us the way. The church elders who love us and count us as family show us the way. The Godly Play teachers and youth group leaders and storytellers and poets and camp directors who help us experience the sacred stories and find our place among creative rituals show us the way. The parents, siblings, guardians and chosen family who nurture us and teach us how to *be* in the world show us the way. For Baptists, we proclaim our commitment to follow the Way of Jesus by participating in immersion baptism, surrounded by a community that covenants to journey with us on the Way.

But how can we find the way in this time and place, when so often we feel, and are, isolated and alone? Social connection in the time of COVID-19 has proved to be a challenge. Technology is a blessing in many ways, and I count myself as one of many people who have learned so much throughout this time of physical distancing. But even as we gather using online platforms, there is a dynamic of connection that cannot be recovered, and that I pray about every day...the feeling of being present with each other in

body. I feel so much joy in the dance parties and storytimes and Wednesday community gatherings and all of the online events we are doing together...and I also miss you.

Last Sunday night, our youth group gathered virtually to watch Frozen 2 together. As we were messaging while watching the movie, there seemed to be general consensus in the appropriateness of this movie for the pandemic in which we find ourselves. For example, the magical snowman Olaf described how he practices “controlling the things I can when things feel out of control.” Perhaps living in this time is, as the Princess Anna sings towards the end of the movie, a matter of “doing the next right thing.”

In the powerful song where Anna describes her descent into depression following a traumatic journey to find truth, Anna sings,

“I won't look too far ahead
It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath, this next step
This next choice is one that I can make
So I'll walk through this night
Stumbling blindly toward the light
And do the next right thing
And, with it done, what comes then?
When it's clear that everything will never be the same again
Then I'll make the choice to hear that voice
And do the next right thing.”

Beloved church, what is the next right thing for you, and for us? In this uncertain time, you don't need to have it all figured out. Heaven knows I don't. But the way forward is remembering that we are not alone, and dedicating ourselves to doing the next right thing.

Jesus left his disciples to follow the Way of Truth and of Life. The disciples had learned to navigate by following the Son, and so must we. We must follow this Way today, and every day of our lives. As we follow the Way we must proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of all people; decry white supremacist violence; and fight for economic justice for those living with their backs up against the wall, as Howard Thurman would say. This way is one that places the common health of our community above our desire to get a pedicure, that holds in the highest regard the freedom of religion for all, even those with whom we disagree. This Way is one where we proclaim Black Lives Matter, and where we join our voices from wherever we are worshipping this morning with Sweet Honey in the Rock's version of Ella Baker's words, “We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”

The next right thing is always advocating for freedom, for justice, for peace, for truth, for life, for love. This is how we can know the Way we are called to live. We are called to make this world a true home where all belong and are free.

May it be so.