

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 5: Way

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

–John 14:6

“Throughout the New Testament, Jesus invites people to follow him. To walk with him, to go on a journey. There is nothing particularly new in this, as the Hebrew scriptures are full of stories of wanderers, pilgrims, exiles, and immigrants. And, of course, in the ancient world, teachers of all sorts...gathered followers, those who embraced the master’s message and put it into everyday practice. However, in the gospel of John, Jesus upped the theological ante. He not only taught a way of inviting the curious to follow him, but he said *he* was the way.”

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” What does this mean? Diana tells of the struggle to interpret these words more broadly in the face of the narrow interpretations that have come to dominant contemporary North American Christianity.

It is worth remembering that Jesus was speaking to his disciples when he said it, and his arrest death were imminent. In this context the real possibility existed that his disciples would be next since they had chosen to follow him. Perhaps he is assuring them that they had made the right choice in following him.

Jesus statement could perhaps at least be taken to mean that he is in charge of deciding who is on his way and who is not. If there is no other way to God, there is no other guide. Jesus alone is the arbiter of salvation in his name.

Diana tells the story of beginning to lose her way while attending seminary. She matriculated at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary outside of Boston. “In the 1980’s, the seminary was divided into two groups. One group was made up of those professors who were generously minded...supportive of women, and willing to engage new methods of biblical studies. The other group included those who were concerned with boundaries, purity, order, and orthodoxy, especially as interpreted through the theology of John Calvin. The first group was open to changes in American culture, wanting to ask new questions of the Bible and theology; the second group was increasingly worried that Western Christianity was being overly influenced by secularism and compromised by sin.” This is similar to the old school/new school debate that led to the formation of Second in 1838.

The chapter goes on to develop and unpack several terms and ideas that are related to the idea that Jesus is the way: is the way of Jesus a map or a maze; the idea that following the way of Jesus leads to a less-traveled road; the risks involved with in following the way of Jesus; the intellectual and moral wrestling involved; the way of love; and intention of liberation.

To say that Jesus is the way, means we should look to the life and teachings of Jesus to discover how God acts in the world. As the embodiment of God's love and purposes in the world, Jesus lives out and exemplifies the way of God in the world. He was sent not to condemn the world, but to save the world (John 3:17) by telling not only teaching us about God but to demonstrate how God wants us to live.

And how does God want us to live? While sometimes complex, the short answer is to love: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). We learn about love by looking at Jesus and following his way of life.

Jesus is the living embodiment of God's gracious character as the One who loves. This love is not an abstract notion or a set of feelings, but is rather characterized by the *action* of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Our understanding of love, the love of God, is shaped by the particular way in which God loves in and through Jesus.

We might say salvation from this perspective is exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation of God in Jesus, but not in the sense of denying the reality of salvation to those outside of Christian faith; inclusive in the sense of refusing to limit the saving grace of God to Christians; and pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but not in the sense of denying the unique nature of what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

"The way of Jesus is the way of love. It is also a labyrinth, a meandering but purposeful path, from the edge to the center and back again...Jesus is no interstate to glory, as I had thought in high school, college, and seminary. I had been so certain. Then I was not certain anymore. Everything fell to pieces. And then new life began, and love. The Jesus way is full of switchbacks, spirals, and unexpected turns; mystery, paradox, unknowing, unsaying. Whenever you think you are near the center, the path suddenly veers in a different direction and you find yourself again at the edge of the way. No wonder Jesus says, 'follow me' and 'I am the way.' But for a guide, you might never find a path, even if sometimes you are only following bread crumbs he left behind."

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea that Jesus is the way? How do you understand this notion and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as your way? Why or why not?

Are you familiar with the broader understanding of John 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” developed by Diana? What do you think of this and what are its implications in the present?

Does it surprise you that the Christians have debated so fiercely about the meaning of Jesus as the way and divided over their differing conceptions? Why or why not? What is your response to this situation?

Diana says that while the way of Jesus is the way of love, it’s a labyrinth rather than an interstate. What do you think this means? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?