

I AM: Building a Christ-Centered Church *Way, Truth, Life*

John 14:1-7

January 21, 2024

Who is Jesus? That's the question guiding our sermon series these five weeks at Second Church. Last Sunday, we focused on an exchange between Jesus and a large crowd eager for miraculous provision. They wanted the loaves and fish; Jesus offered himself. *I am the bread of life.* This morning, it's different. We listen to a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. This week there is no crowd. The setting is intimate. Indeed, Jesus is speaking final words to his dearest friends. There is a reason you are likely to hear these verses in a cemetery. Jesus has gathered his disciples again around a table, this time the Passover meal. I imagine he spoke the words in a hushed tone. *Little Children, I am with you only a little longer.* It is interesting to watch as the disciples rapidly cycle through the stages of grief in real time, right before our eyes. There is denial. There is bargaining. There is anger. Peter, as ever, leads the charge. "Lord, where are you going? And why can I not follow you there?" Recognizing the sadness and fear that often lies beneath the surface of anger, Jesus offers comfort. "Do not be afraid; don't let your heart be troubled. I am preparing a place for you. You know the way."

Thomas is next in line. I imagine exasperation in his voice. After all, we've been told that time is short, answers still elusive. "Jesus, we have no idea what you are talking about. We don't know *where* you are going. How can we know the way?"

I don't know about you, but I can *totally* relate to Thomas here. I prefer to know the plan. I prefer to have a plan. I want an agenda for the meeting. I want a map for the journey. I want a set of instructions for the process at hand. I like five points, seven habits, nine steps, and Ten Commandments.

Jesus has shared this heartbreaking, soul-shaking, world-changing news, and Thomas just wants more details. Jesus has talked about a *place*. Thomas wants the address. Jesus speaks of a *way*. Thomas wants a map. His question: *How can we know the way?*

Now, here I like to picture the look on the face of Jesus as he responds. In the Gospel of Mark, there is this wonderful encounter between Jesus and a young man who asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Mark paints the picture this way: *Jesus looked at the man and loved him.* I think Jesus loved Thomas in this moment. I believe it is out of love that he responds. *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* In other words, the answer to your question is right here in front of you. It has always been in front of you. It comes in relationship. No map. *I am the way to God.*

Philip, chimes in next with his own question, and so we don't get to hear how Thomas responded or even how he felt. But I'm drawn to linger on that intimate moment between Jesus and Thomas, those words spoken in love to a grieving and anxious friend.

Thomas, I am the way. We do a disservice to this encounter when we reduce the words to a secret plan of salvation, or a systematic theology, or a definitive statement on comparative religions. I've heard them used that way. Perhaps you have too. Here's the problem. Those interpretations make the moment a transaction, the exact opposite of what Jesus does. Thomas wants the destination. Jesus says, "I am the way." Jesus says, "Follow me."

I am aware that Jesus speaks another sentence. *No one comes to the Father except through me.* He speaks to friends in the grip of grief, preparing for an

overwhelming loss. He speaks to those who need to know that this love can be trusted. I'm helped here by an analogy I heard theologian Bill Placher give. Think of it this way. A fearful child turns to his mother. "Do you love me, Mommy?" And the mother replies, "Of course I do. I love all children." That's not the most helpful answer. Jesus here speaks not in ambiguous or uncertain words but with the specificity of love in the intimacy of relationship. This love can be trusted. *No one—nothing—can separate you from my love.*

Let me be clear. I believe with all my heart that Jesus is the way to God. I believe that Jesus offers the way to discover our life's purpose, to experience abundant life now, and claim the promise of life eternal. When I read these words in hospital rooms and standing at gravesides, I know that I am speaking the gospel truth. Do not be afraid. Jesus has prepared a place for you. He is the way to God. He is the truth of God. He is our life with God. Jesus intends these words to offer assurance to his disciples.

I believe that Jesus is the path to God not because I have explored every other road and found them all lacking. I believe it because the witnesses of Jesus in the community of faith have provided a compelling and inspiring path for me. I resonate with the words of a friend who says, "I didn't choose Christian faith; it chose me. As a child, I learned from my parents and Sunday school teachers that God loves me. I discovered that God knows me by name and claims me as God's own child." My friend writes, "It has always been easy for me to dance with the one who brought me."

Her words describe my journey. Still, four decades in the Church have sometimes left me wishing we followers of Jesus would spend *less* time obsessing over secret plans, litmus tests, lists of names, and final destinations and more time focused on the *way* of Jesus. So let's ask ourselves—what is the way of Jesus?

We might begin with what it is *not*. The way of Jesus is *not* an express route that bypasses suffering, or gets around grief, or eludes pain. The way of Jesus is not a

secret passage to permanent pleasure. The disciples will soon learn this in their own experience—and so will we. If the walk of faith asks nothing of you, if the walk of faith confirms all your prior assumptions, it is not the way of Jesus. Put another way, author Anne Lamott writes, "You can safely assume that you have created God in your image if it turns out your God hates all the same people you hate." You see, there is a cost to following Jesus.

The way of Jesus is also not a highway. It is neither arrow-straight nor crystal-clear. Our son Benjamin loves mazes and dot-to-dot pictures, so we've been collecting activity books filled with meandering paths, crossroads, tangled webs, switchbacks, spirals, labyrinths, and tough choices on which direction to go. And this week it occurred to me, leafing through one of those books, that the way of Jesus is more like a maze than an interstate. We cannot always see what's just ahead of us. Sometimes—often, in my case—we have to retrace our steps. Start over. Like Ben, sometimes we need an eraser. We get frustrated. We need to ask for help.

Jesus had no map for Thomas, no directions to follow. But what Jesus offered Thomas, offers us, is a guide through the maze of life. You see, the way may be winding but it is not aimless. We don't need directions. We need to trust the one who says, "Follow me. I am the way."

The words of Jesus reframe our perspective. The way to God is not found in abstract idea or well-formulated statements. Jesus is the way. He defines truth. He is our life.

And when we trust in him, our way of life begins to resemble his way of life. We will seek justice despite opposition. We will practice kindness when it is hard. We will walk with humility and grace. And when the night is dark and the path unclear, we will keep following his voice. We will keep walking. We will keep hoping.

Perhaps, like the disciples, you want more information, a roadmap, a plan. Perhaps, like the disciples, you are tempted to stop where you are, to be huddled in fear over what comes next. I've heard those temptations. I've experienced that fear. I get it. The allure of authoritarian absolutes is that they sort everything out for us. Right and wrong. Enemy and friend. Us and them. And, once sorted, they can be evaluated. These praised, those judged. But here's a hard truth. Only an idol always answers. And the answer is always yes. *Yes, you are right. Yes, you are the friend.* They are the enemy. Living the way of Jesus will always be more difficult than that. We will have to retrace our steps, change our perspectives, hold our tongues, and, yes, get out our erasers.

Sometimes we take steps forward when we aren't quite ready. We lean in, trust God, let go. Thomas wanted a place, but Jesus offered the way.

You might know the name stuck. Early Christian believers came to be called "people of the way." They were a community whose distinctiveness was found not in identity markers but in unusual practices—acts of sacrificial compassion, radical inclusion, forgiveness, generosity, costly love. To be a disciple of Jesus meant to be on the move. Still does.

Because if we stand still, frozen in place by the ubiquity of uncertainty, or plagued by an aversion to self-denial, if we stand still, we will lose sight of Jesus soon enough. Listen. It is okay to change directions. It is okay to start over. It is okay to admit that you were wrong. It is okay to ask for help. As a community of faith and as disciples of Jesus, we have to honestly and repeatedly ask ourselves—*is our way in alignment with the way of Jesus?*

In the final analysis, it's the only question that matters. The only one that Jesus points to again and again and again in the gospels. Friends, this is no time for fear. Do not let your hearts be troubled. The road ahead may be daunting and will surely ask much of us. But we have a guide. He knows the way. He is the way. Amen.