

Jim Vitale
5/6/20

Jesus the Way
John 14:1-14

Pr. Jim's Sermon
5th Sunday of Easter
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John 14:1-14

Many years ago, my parents, my brothers, and I decided to go for what we expected to be a straightforward day-hike up Gothic Mountain in the Adirondacks. As we got a little way up the trail my parents decided to double-back. We boys would hike the remainder of the mountain and then meet them back at the car when we were done.

When we summited Gothic, a thunderstorm set in. Feeling the urgency in our unsafe environment, we knew we needed to get off the mountain as soon as possible. The problem was, we had no map; we didn't know the way and the trail was not well marked. As we hurried on we arrived at a fork—one way led back to the car, the other led deeper into the woods. In our haste, we went the wrong way.

Throughout the gospel of John we hear how humanity, too, has lost its way. We once enjoyed relationship with the Father, but now that relationship is broken; we've gotten lost, and we don't know the way back. Jesus' ministry, according to the gospel of John, is all about restoring that relationship with the Father.

This is what Jesus is talking about in our gospel reading today. It's Maundy Thursday and Jesus is anticipating his own arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. Just before this passage, at the end of chapter 13, Jesus says that he must walk the rest of his journey alone. Peter balks and claims he will follow Jesus anywhere, to which Jesus replies that Peter will actually abandon him instead. Jesus tells his disciples that he must go the way of the cross, the way of death, alone. But it is not just to death that Jesus goes—the way also leads to resurrection, ascension, and eternal life with the Father.

The way back to the Father has always been elusive for humanity, and our inability to make our own way is summed up in Thomas' response to Jesus. Jesus says that the disciples know the way to the place he is going, and Thomas, who struggles harder than most to understand Jesus, replies "No! We don't even know where you're going. How on earth would we know the way?" Jesus then replies with his famous line: "I am the way." The elusive way back to the Father is made clear, it seems, in Jesus.

But doesn't Jesus claim seem a bit contradictory? He must *go the way* and yet he *is the way*? How can that be? Despite appearances, these two truths come hand-in-hand. The place to which Jesus goes is the Father. That is his ultimate destination, and it is the place that he desires to bring the world as well. The way of crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension is the way by which Jesus restores our relationship with God. He is the only one who can walk the way to the Father, and in doing so, he becomes for us the way to the Father.

Indeed, in the second half of verse 6, Jesus makes the claim that, “no one comes to the Father except through me.” Not only is Jesus the way, it appears he is the only way. Taken out of context, this line is often used as a threat: if you don’t accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, then you are going to hell. But hear me when I say that that is not the spirit in which Jesus speaks this line. This passage begins with Jesus saying “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Therefore we must read verse 6 as comfort, not threat.

When Jesus says that no one goes to the Father except through him, he is not acting as some sort of bouncer who decides who’s in and who’s out of the Father’s club; he is not handing the disciples an ultimatum; he is not threatening them with hell if they don’t believe. He is rather saying that it is by his work that our broken relationship with the Father has been restored. Jesus has gone and done what we could not do *for us, for you, for me*. This line has been used to reinforce the exclusivity of Christianity, when really it should be used to proclaim the profound inclusivity of God’s love for all. Jesus comes not to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus’ words are grace, not judgement. Jesus has restored the way to the Father, and soon he is returning to take us with him into the Father’s loving arms.

With all this talk of Jesus as “the Way,” I think we have to ask what it means to follow Jesus on his way to the Father. What exactly is required of us to go that way?

The first and most important answer is this: “Absolutely nothing.” Nothing is required of us because Jesus has already walked the way for us. The way is restored and Jesus is coming to get us and bring us back to the Father. As far as your salvation is concerned, there is nothing you *need* to do because there is nothing you *can* do. You are saved.

When my brothers and I got lost on Gothic mountain, we ultimately found our way through the work of others. We eventually contacted park rangers who gave us directions to the nearest parking lot and who, in turn, contacted our parents to notify them of our location. At the risk of making this story seem far more dangerous than it actually was, we were ultimately “saved” through no work of our own, but rather through the help and support of other people.

With our salvation secure, however, Jesus calls us to live a certain way, to follow the way of Jesus. Ancient Christians sometimes referred to discipleship as “the Way.” To illustrate what this “Way” looks like, I want to show you a clip from the Star Wars spinoff *The Mandalorian*. Side note: I highly recommend this show—it’s so good. Anyway, the story follows a bounty hunter who stumbles upon the child of his enemy. Over the course of the first season, he becomes the child’s guardian and at the end of the season, he must choose between his own well-being and the well-being of the child.

As he and his friends flee from danger, the Mandalorian stops to speak with his teacher. She reminds him of the oaths he took in becoming a Mandalorian, to protect “the foundlings” (abandoned children who have come under the care of the Mandalorian bounty hunters). She reminds him with a simple phrase: “This is the way.”

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(If you want to watch for yourself, see Episode 8, from 27:35 – 29:10)

The phrase “this is the way” is used by the bounty hunters throughout show as a sort of call-and-response liturgy. However outlandish it may seem, these bounty hunters live by a moral code, a creed, and all are honor-bound to obey “the way.” As I prepared this sermon that phrase “this is the way” repeated in my head over and over again. The Mandalorian is told that *his way, the way* is to give up himself for the sake of a child. And that is also what it means for us to walk *the way* of Jesus. We give up ourselves for the sake of our neighbors; we give up ourselves for the sake of the poor, the weak, the lowly, the grieving, the young, the old, and the abandoned.

Jesus is the way. He has gone to the Father and restored our relationship with the Father. Your salvation is secure because your relationship with God is secure. In the light of that grace we now walk the way of Jesus, giving of ourselves for the sake of the world. We love because the Father first loved us.

This is the way.

Amen.