

“Jesus Is the Way”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning John 14:1-14
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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“How, oh how, will we know the way?” the disciples are desperate to know. Jesus smiles an obnoxious smile, tilts his head, and winks. “I *am* the Way,” he says, which is not so different from what he said to them in the beginning, “Drop your nets and follow me.”

It was difficult enough back then, leaving so much behind to follow this unusual man. Now he is suggesting—insisting even—that they continue on this Way he has started but with one significant complication: He will no longer be there to guide them! He is going away.

Welcome to the club, Thomas and Philip! This is how we modern folk feel *all* the time. We want to know our Creator, the Father and Mother of us all, but how, oh how, do we know the way without a guide? Jesus isn’t physically here to show us.

Some people have tried to resolve this dilemma by forgetting there is a Way altogether. Instead of Way, they adopt doctrine. Instead of following Jesus, they attempt uniform belief. It is by no means easy to get everyone to agree or submit to the same set of assertions about God . . . but it is a whole lot easier than transforming one’s self and one’s community to *live* like God.

But Jesus did not say, “I am the creed,” or “I am the answer,” or “I am the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Repeat after me or you shall be anathematized.” He didn’t say that.

He simply said, “I am the Way.” Just because he left this earth doesn’t mean he stopped being the Way, nor has he stopped asking us to follow.

Jesus’ disciples want to know the way, and Jesus says to them, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The disciples do not yet know it, but this is a very important message.

The disciples will need this grounding, because many people will come to accuse them of false teaching, of being NOT-the-Way. They will be kicked out of their own synagogues and turned away from houses of worship. Their own religion will disown them and kick them to the curb. The religious leaders and political leaders will not only kill Jesus, they will persecute his followers.

Put yourself in their shoes for a moment. If you experience that much hate and that much death—especially at the hands of the people of God, you’re likely to question whether you got it all wrong somehow. Maybe they are right and you are crazy. Even if you are right, is the risk really worth it? Your mother will write you letters begging you to come home and stay safe.

Your friends who are sympathetic will plead with you to stay quiet and keep the peace. The authorities will demand your silence, and the masses will shout over your voice so that you cannot be heard. Finally you will watch them stone Stephen and wonder if perhaps your friends and family had a point. Maybe you should have stayed home. Maybe you shouldn't have followed if following him leads to this. Maybe the risk is too great.

And yet, you do not wish for Stephen to have died in vain. You do not wish for Jesus to have died in vain. Despite all the opposition that says you are wrong or bad or too much or too loud or too radical or too unorthodox, you remember what Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and you know your opponents are not telling the truth and their violence isn't honoring life. You remember Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and so you know deep down that if you are walking this world as Jesus walked, full of compassion for the outsider and healing for the wounded, then it is true that you know God, no matter how much they say that you do not. If you are telling the truth like Jesus—especially if you are speaking truth to power while also telling the truth to yourself about yourself—then it is true that you know God. If you are an advocate for life, if you resist violence and protect the vulnerable, then it is true that you know God.

But it won't always feel like you know God. It might feel more like rejection, like hardship. "Just show us the Father and we will be satisfied!" cries Philip and who can't identify with that? Who among hasn't at some time in their life asked a similar question? "God, if you would just show yourself, I would be satisfied, and I could believe?"

And Jesus, ever patient with our demands, reminds us gently, "My child, you have seen God. If you know me, you know God." And while we present day disciples do not have the advantage of seeing Jesus physically, we do have the advantage of knowing the completed story of his death and resurrection. We know that right before Jesus said, "I am the Way," he washed their feet, and right after he said it, he went to the cross. We know that after washing their feet, he told them, "Love one another as I have loved you," and a little later he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

So, when Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me," I don't think he means it in the egotistical, it's-all-about-me sense. It wouldn't make much sense if Jesus were a narcissist, would it? I think he means there's only one way to God and it's paved with compassion. I think he means it in the it's-all-about-love sense. Like, if someone claims to speak for God, but acts nothing like Jesus, that person cannot show you the way to God. To the extent that any person does act like Jesus, they are showing you the way to God.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." Only two kinds of people would dare to proclaim something as bold as that—sociopaths or God's anointed one. And we know by his example that Jesus wasn't puffed up on hubris, rather "he did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross."

Jesus' own example places some pretty strong parameters around the Way, and in this sense, the road is narrow. Open to anyone, but narrow. The Way is not egotistical, which makes the Way nearly impossible for a lot of people. The way is not violent, not cruel, not self-indulgent, not domineering, not unjust, not weak, not easy. How can we be so sure? Because the Way looks like Jesus. The Way is Jesus.

Jesus, who healed the sick. Jesus, who took time for the hurting. Jesus, who welcomed the sinner, the outcast, and the child. Jesus, who came to bring good news to the poor, to set the captive free and give sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

Can you imagine there being any other legitimate way to God? There is only this way, this path to God, and it is impossible to know God without caring for the poor, the oppressed, and the sick. It is impossible to know God without following the Jesus Way.

If we're being honest with ourselves, our society is pretty much set up so that we can avoid the Way if we want to. Consider shopping for example: even if we *want* to know (and usually we don't want to know) how a product was made and whether the working conditions were fair before we make a purchase, it's often pretty difficult to find out! The more privileged we are, the easier it is to remain insulated from the world's suffering and from the reality of poverty. But if we're listening, especially when we listen to the voices of those less privileged than us, their voices will call us back to the Way of Jesus. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders of liberation theology writes, "Our conversion to the Lord implies conversion to the neighbor. To be converted is to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed."

Jesus says to the disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do." In Jesus' theology, belief is an action. He then adds, "In fact, you will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Honestly, I wasn't quite sure what to do with those comments. It hasn't rung true in my life—I've yet to out-work or out-shine Jesus, and to top that off, I don't get everything I pray for.

But Curtis made an interesting point when we were discussing this passage in staff meeting. His face lit up and his eyes sort of sparkled as he expressed his amazement that Jesus *trusted* them. They've been asking Jesus all these rather clueless questions, revealing once again that they still just do not get it. And yet Jesus is leaving them behind and entrusting to them the work. It's like he fully expects them to do great things and to know how to ask for what they need.

What qualified them to be his disciples was not that they always understood. What qualified them was that they dropped their nets and followed. Jesus is the Way, and what do you know, the Way is forgiving. Despite being intimately acquainted with their quirks and flaws, in this moment Jesus appears to be brimming over with confidence in his disciples, which is another way to say the Way isn't easy, but the Way is possible.

When Jesus says, "I am the Way," he means the Way is patient. The Way is kind. The Way is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The Way does not insist on its own way (interesting paradox); it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. The Way bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The Way never ends.

May you and I be followers of the Way. May we be converted to the neighbor again and again. May the insulation that keeps us removed from our suffering brother, our suffering sister be stripped away, in Jesus' name, amen.