

You Know the Way

John 14:1-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin this morning with a confession. Your pastor recently betrayed the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a Zoom meeting, no less!

I was on a meeting with a group of provincial church leaders and the discussion turned to the question of whether or not it was ethical for Mennonite churches to access government funds being made available for small businesses to keep them afloat during this pandemic to pay their staff.

It could certainly blur the lines of separation between church and state which Mennonites have historically been pretty insistent on!

There were some comments about how the church already takes advantage of government tax breaks for charitable giving, and about how we already allow clergy to claim housing allowances to offset their taxable income. In the end, most decided that this wouldn't be appreciably different.

Heads nodded, including mine.

And then, I interjected these words: "And you know, the government kind of has a vested interest in keeping churches afloat. With all that's going on in the economy and with the isolation and social dislocation this is requiring of people, there could be a mental health crisis on the not-too-distant horizon. We could be useful in helping with this."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth when I could hardly believe I had said them out loud. My face probably looked rather blank on Zoom for a few minutes. I thought that I may even have heard a rooster crow in the distance.

Perhaps you're a little confused. Perhaps you're thinking something along these lines: What's so bad about that? Don't you think that the church *should* provide spiritual resources to address people's loneliness and mental health? Don't you think that our nation *would* benefit from having churches around during a pandemic? Don't you think that the church *should* be "useful?"

What exactly is the problem here? And how on earth could such a harmless statement be a "betrayal of the gospel?" Aren't you being a little overdramatic here?

Well, yes, I am. "Betrayal of the gospel" is a bit strong. I said that mostly to get your attention.

But my words didn't feel right even as I was saying them. They felt inadequate and partial, at best. This is because what I said about the church didn't fit with what I actually believe the church or the gospel to be.

The gospel is the good news that God, in Christ, has established his kingdom of justice and peace and that this kingdom will one day come in fullness.

The gospel is the good news that God, in Christ, has rescued us from the clutches of sin and death done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

The church is called to bear witness to joyfully proclaim this good news in word and in deed, to testify to the love of God, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of glory.

In my comment about how the church could be "useful" in the days ahead, I had implicitly reduced the church to a kind of auxiliary service to the state.

I had described the church as basically taking our place alongside counseling services and mental health supports and personal development webinars and various other strategies to help people cope with stressful situations.

None of this is unimportant, incidentally. All of these things can be helpful and necessary.

But it felt like I had reduced the church and the glorious cosmic good news it is entrusted with to a kind of portfolio in the mental health department.

I had described the church and the good news it proclaims as mostly about us and what it can do for us. And that's a problem.

Because the church, and the good news it proclaims is not primarily about us. It is first and foremost and finally about God.

I think that as Christians we have always been good at turning good news about God into news about us. We've done it with our passage this morning. *I've* done it with our passage this morning.

The words come from Jesus' Farewell Discourse, his last words to his disciples before going the way of the cross.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me.

The church has often weaponized these words of Christ. We have used them to say that we are right and everyone else is wrong about religion. We have used them to say that we alone understand God and what God wants. We have used these words to mark out boundaries between the "saved" and the "lost."

We have often turned a passage that is fundamentally about Jesus' identity as one with the Father into words to justify and support and legitimize our religious systems and structures. We have often implicitly said, "Our beliefs and practices and structures are the way, the truth, and the life and nobody comes to God except through them" instead of "Jesus is the way..." Which is an important difference.

Again, it's not as though the passage has nothing to do with us. It does.

Jesus talks about the works that his followers *will do*, about the importance of believing that he and the Father are one. We are clearly an important part of the equation!

But like my example of the Zoom call, it's so important that we get things in their proper order. God first, then us.

It is good news that the good news is first and foremost about God and not us.

We're not nearly as reliable as God. Perhaps you've noticed this. There is so much that we don't know, so much that we can't see, so much that we struggle to understand, so much that we fail to live out consistently.

Thomas could well be speaking for all of us when he says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way" (John 14:5).

You can almost hear the sadness and the longing in Thomas's voice, can't you?

Jesus had just finished saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." But their hearts *were* troubled. They were in a fog, trying desperately to make sense out of what was to come and what it meant.

These words that Jesus speaks—words that we have often turned into grand statements about theological purity in the context of religious pluralism—were initially spoken as words of comfort and promise to fearful disciples on the verge of a very frightening and disorienting time.

It is so easy to abstract these three words from their original context and make them words about the validity of other religions or about any of the other things that concern *us*.

But we must remember that these words that Jesus speaks are in response to a group of frightened, confused disciples who are asking him, "Where are you going? What's going to happen to you? We don't understand what you are saying. Why are you talking about suffering and dying? We know that you are from God and that somehow God is uniquely present in you, but we don't know how."

Don't leave us. We don't know the way to the Father. Show us! Tell us!

To these people at this time and for these reasons, Jesus says... You *do* know the way. Because I am the way, the truth, the life...

You don't need to be afraid about what you don't understand about how God works and where this is all going to end, because I—the one you see right in front of you, the one you have eaten with, traveled with, laughed and cried with, the one who has been your friend and teacher all these days—this one, me!—I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Don't let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus is not giving his disciples a theological weapon to use against other religions.

He was reassuring them that because they knew him, because they had, to borrow Martin Luther's phrase, "hung their hearts upon him," that they knew the way to the Father's house.

They knew the way to the Father because in Jesus the Father had come near to them.

This passage has less to do with defining the boundaries of who gets to God than it does with convincing a bunch of confused disciples on the verge of catastrophe that this Jesus who was right in front of them was the way that God got to them.

This is good news for all times. It seems like really good news at this time.

Like the disciples, we are perhaps feeling disoriented, uncertain, afraid during these days of pandemic. The way forward looks far from clear.

The longer this goes on, the more we are becoming acquainted with confusion, restlessness, and grief.

Last week, like you, I watched our worship service on Sunday morning. Shortly after it ended, I got a call from Jackie indicating that her mother had died that morning in Rhode Island.

She had found out on Monday that she had COVID-19. She rebounded a bit during the week, but then on Friday night—the night that we were recording the worship service—her fever spiked. And then on Sunday, she died.

In speaking with Jackie, I was just struck in a new way about the tragedy of this moment. After all the words and opinions and predictions and critiques are spoken, in the end this affects real people, real families who cannot grieve together or offer physical comfort.

Our hearts, too, are troubled by what we see, what we hear, by what we don't know and can't know about the future.

Like Thomas, there are times where we say, "Lord, how can we know the way?"

And Jesus comes to us, again and again... as many times as necessary... and says, "You know the way. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life."

I've invited us to locate our experience at this moment in Thomas's words this morning. I want to end by also inviting us to hear Jesus' words to his disciples as addressed to us.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, **I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.**

I go, I prepare, I will come again, I will take you to myself.

Jesus comforts his disciples in the midst of crisis by reminding them of the sufficiency of God.

It's not about what we have to do to figure out the way or recommend the way or maintain the way. It's about what God has done, in Christ, for the world.

And I was comforted this week by the simple reminder that even as we stretch out our eyes to an uncertain horizon, even as we are kind of daily marinating in uncertainty about the future, even amidst all that seems frightening in the world...

That we have a hope that extends beyond this crisis, beyond any other trials that will come our way in this life, beyond anything that we can endure, beyond even death.

It is the hope of being where Jesus is. Of being in the place that he has prepared for us. Of being welcomed into the Father's house with joy.

It is the hope of finally being united with the One whose way we have tried to follow, whose character we have sought to emulate, whose forgiveness has restored our souls, whose love has found, who has been our shepherd and the guardian of our souls (as our text from 1 Peter said last week).

I want to close with the words of Debie Thomas who wrote a beautiful essay on this week's lectionary readings (the link is available in my sermon manuscript):

Maybe it feels like a tall order right now, to "not let your heart be troubled." To trust that you do in fact know the way—the quiet, unglamorous, risky, but ultimately life-giving way of Jesus. But you do. Like Thomas, like Philip, like Peter, like the others, you

know Jesus. You know his life. You know his love. You know his death. You know his resurrection. You know what it is to hunger for him, to seek him, to listen for him, to hope in him. You know the way.

No, the way isn't what we thought it was going to be. The way is demanding. The way is precarious. The way takes time. But the invitation of this Gospel is still an invitation to confidence. **Not because we're experts at finding God, but because God has always and already found us.**¹

Thanks be to God.



¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2632>