

“Going and Getting in the Way”
(10May2020) John14:1-14; Acts7:55-60

I want to work backward through this reading, since the first verse seems maybe most helpful, and the last least helpful, with other pauses inbetween.

To start with the ending, Jesus wraps up by saying, “I’ll do whatever you ask me to.” He even repeats it. But that doesn’t feel helpful to me. It doesn’t feel true.

Dear Jesus, I’d like to go fishing and I ask for it to be warm and sunny but no sunburn. Thankyouplease! You might say Jesus was aiming more about asking for things that have to do with him, just as we wouldn’t ask a plumber for sewing advice. But he probably shouldn’t be limited in our lives, and he himself doesn’t give qualifications. He says *whatever* we ask in his name.

So...I dunno. I mean, I probably won’t spend much time in prayer about fishing or the weather. I am going to keep praying that coronavirus goes away. Or at least that we respond to it faithfully, and for your lives.

Backing up, the next verse that catches my attention is Jesus saying, “if you have faith in me you will do the same things that I am doing. You will do even greater things.” It’s less dubious than the last bit, but I’m not going to claim I’m bigger than the Beatles, much less doing bigger things than Jesus. He’d been welcoming outsiders and healing the blind and raising the dead. I’d settle for changing water to Leinenkugels. Heck, even to coffee.

What helps me with this saying, whether it intends to or not, is our 1st reading. I even thought of rearranging so we heard it after the Gospel. Stephen had been serving the hungry. That’s a pretty good Jesus-y activity, following the one who fed 5000. Also for being Christ-like, Stephen preached an amazing sermon, with what we might call less-than-fortunate results. (The reaction to *his* sermon is at least one reason I’m glad you’re socially distanced at home; the worst you can do might be to turn me off.)

But even as the hearers are preparing to stone Stephen, he extends what Jesus did—asking for forgiveness and grace, seeing life to come, and

commending himself again to God. Some of it is word-for-word of Jesus on the cross. I’d take that as a pretty huge example of doing what Jesus did. Such a death will hopefully not be your experience, but maybe that forgiveness and graciousness can be, as you continue to commend your spirit into God’s hands.

The section on Jesus revealing the Father may leave some discomfort, but I think you probably overall agree with it. That our closest glimpse of God is in Jesus is something I reiterate to you over and over. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

More, I think you appreciate the notion that the works he does do reveal God, just like our works do, or at least ought to. Of course we frequently fall short of that standard. But we *want* to be loving like God is loving. We want our actions and demeanors to be judged as godly. We generally hope “they will know we are Christians by our love.” In these days that require so much of us and are so challenging as we seek to adapt in sharing and helping in needs and caring for each other at home and across society, we’re trying hard to do what’s right. At our best moments, especially which involve the most self-sacrifice, we trust it isn’t because we’re so inherently benevolent but God is working that goodness in us.

Backing up further in the reading, we get to Jesus’ statement, “I AM the way, the truth, and the life.”

It’s one of the great I AM statements that filter through the Gospel of John. Last week we had one: I AM the gate. He also says I AM the good shepherd, the light of the world, the bread of life, the vine and you are the branches. Maybe we all just like bread and wine, but this one seems to cause more consternation. The others don’t bear as much concern as this does, to carry the risk of exclusion that rules out other people, or whole other religions.

Certainly it gets used along those lines. Like if you don’t accept Jesus, you can’t go to heaven. On the other hand, we’d clearly not claim special treatment, like privilege against the virus. Being a

follower of Jesus doesn't spare you or give you a free pass. We know life doesn't work that way.

Rather than reading it as a bonus reward for finding Jesus, we can read it the other direction, which is more natural and, actually, more obvious, particularly if we look to Jesus for a clear image of God. I find it's often helpful to read from Jesus as descriptive instead of imperative. It's not about something you have to do, but about how he is for you.

So Jesus is the way. Just as we'd heard of him on the road with confused and grieving disciples, he is with you as you journey through this. He's not some special secret treasure map. Thomas's question may well be ours during these strange, confusing, hard days: How can we know the way ahead, how to go, what to do? But there isn't a mysterious restricted answer to be discovered on how we get through it; instead there is assurance: Whatever your way is, it is not apart from Jesus. God is with you as you go (or as you mostly stay put), and there is no part of your pathway that could be separate from God's presence.

Jesus is the truth. He's not different from other truths. The rest isn't fake news. It's not that he's a religious answer to be believed in, distinct from a scientific one. As we consider the truth of science, of medical wisdom, and reality around us, that is where Jesus is. He is exactly not opposed to it.

Jesus is the life. In these days as we strive so heartily on behalf of life, this is the struggle of Jesus, and this is the gift. As God is life, it's far beyond bits of health we care for. It is every breath and heartbeat from the beginning. On this Mothers' Day, we look to God as the Mother of all life, nursing our existence (1Peter2:2). For a huge expansion, the Greek word Jesus here uses for Life is Zoo. God gives all life, animals we'd see at the zoo, all creatures, like the pets worshipping with some of you on the couch right now or the cats that walk in front of Pastor Sonja's screen during Hope worship, the birds singing so exuberantly, bright rhododendrons and asparagus from the garden to nourish other life at the Lussier pantry, the fish I'm not catching and cells that deal with infections and microbes in the soil and honeybees and all life. Where we see life, there is Jesus, God is there, birthing and sustaining.

When Jesus said we know the place he's going, it's not into life. This is the night of his arrest. He's going to die. And he goes to that place to prepare more beyond it for you, for life, in pursuit and preservation, in establishment of more to come, for the spread of that goodness. This work continues far beyond what we can manage, then. With Stephen, we say Alleluia! Christ is risen! In the face of death, we know life still wins. So we're able to give more of ourselves, not scraping and squeezing and hoarding life as if we have a scarce, finite amount. We live abundantly, graciously in huge community of creation.

That enormous abundance also is shown in the Gospel's second verse "there are many rooms in my Father's house."

I'd say it's restrictive to imagine Jesus preparing a place as a fold-down service in a heavenly mansion, though again it often gets read that way.

Part of the reason we used this translation today was for its spaciousness: "there's lots of room!" It calls to mind the hymn "There's a wideness in God's mercy" with lines like "There is welcome for the sinner, and a promised grace made good. There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this; there is room for fresh creations in that upper home of bliss. For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind; and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind. But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own." This extravagant love that is always with you on behalf of life is the point. It's what God in Jesus is doing.

That brings us back to the beginning, to an assurance for right now. Jesus said, "Don't be worried!" There is much fearful in these days. But this works against that, so that you may rest in the promise and have confidence.

Partly with Mother's Day in mind, I want to close with a passage that is filled with assurance. It was used for devotions in one of my online meetings this week, from Henri Nouwen, with the way, the truth, and the life in it for you. He wrote:

Aren't you, like me, hoping that some person, thing, or event will come along to give you that final feeling

of inner well-being you desire? Don't you often hope: "May this book, idea, course, trip, job, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire." But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied. You know that this is the compulsiveness that keeps us going and busy, but at the same time makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn-out. This is the way to spiritual death.

Well, you and I don't have to kill ourselves. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, "You are my Beloved. I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will not hide my face from you. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, and your spouse...yes, even your child...wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."*

Hymn: "Loving Spirit" (ELW 397)

* *Life of the Beloved*, p30-31