

How Can We Know the Way?

Psalm 148

John 13:33-14:6

Let's pray:

Lord, we have so many questions. Where? When? Why? and How? questions. We want to know. But most of all, we want to know you. So meet us here. Show us yourself. Show us the Way. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, My Rock and My Redeemer. Amen.

The word of God comes to us today from the Gospel of John, chapter 13:33 – 14:6. Just before his arrest, Jesus and his disciples gathered in an upper room to share the Passover meal. Tensions have been building between Jesus and the keepers of religion, and Judas has just left the room to sell Jesus to the temple officials. Jesus knows his time is short and so he says:

“Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, but as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you are cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so must you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Simon Peter said to him “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now. But you will follow afterward.” Peter said to him “Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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, then I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This is the Word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God!***

It was one of the most incredible nights of my life. I don't know how to describe it to you, because so much of what happened that night is still being worked out in my head and my heart. It was the kind of night that throws into chaos everything you think you know or understand or even believe. It was the kind of night that changes who you are.

We'd been following Jesus for about three years by then, and every day brought new discoveries and surprises and, for me, new questions too. I think that's why I followed him. I was always someone who wanted the answers, defined, manageable and orderly. Logical. But Jesus would always just smile that secret smile of his and shake his head and laugh ... and that would infuriate me! and so I kept scrambling down the road after him saying "Wait! Wait! What about...?"

Anyway, there was this night. This final night in Jerusalem. We'd gone there for the Passover, and had shared the Seder dinner. And in the middle of it all, Jesus embarrassed every one of us by getting up from the table to wash our feet. It made me feel ... so...stunned!—to realize that Jesus was willing to kneel down and do this servant's task. At first, I'll confess I was thinking, here he goes again—I wonder what he's up to this time. But in this act of Jesus, there was so much more going on. There was something happening that touched me so deeply in my spirit ... something that began to crack open my buttoned-down preconceptions, my notions of righteousness, my certainties about the way things are.

I guess that's when it first began to dawn on me that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah I thought I was looking for. In fact, he's really not the kind of Messiah most people are looking for.

Come to think of it, this must have been the deciding moment for Judas, too, because I remember that's when he pushed himself back from the table and left the room. I don't think he could bear the notion of Jesus as servant, someone who lived in such radical humility, Jesus as someone who cared more about grace and love than law and authority and power. When people live as Jesus did, so deep centered God, well, they always disturb the rest of us.

He definitely knew what Judas was up to, and he must have known his time was incredibly short, because he was filled with a new urgency when he spoke again. He gave us a new commandment. The Jesus commandment. You know, he had a way of making everything so strange and mysterious and yet so crystal clear all at the same time. He simply told us: Love each other. The way I love you. Love each other like that.

A new commandment. I knew it was important. It seemed like maybe it was the ultimate core of everything Jesus had ever taught us, but I wasn't sure I really understood what he meant. Love each other how? Love each other enough to wash each other's feet? Really? What difference would that make in the world? And how was this commandment related to the rest of the commandments? Did it come first? Or was it last? Or did it replace them all together? As I was thinking about this, thinking about what we'd just seen Jesus do, and beginning to collect all my questions and doubts as I always did—while I was still thinking about this new commandment, Peter pipes up.

Now, I love Peter, but man, he is always off on some tangent, and usually it's about himself. I mean, God bless him, but there are times when he really should keep his mouth shut! But true to form, he spouts off. And it's as though he never even heard what Jesus said.

He never paid any attention at all to the fact that Jesus had just given us a brand new commandment. Peter's still focused on the fact that Jesus said "I'm going away." And Peter, who always was running to get to the front of the line, says "Where are you going?" Of course, Jesus doesn't answer him, except to say, "You can't come." And poor old Peter, never very aware of his own limitations, asks "Why can't I come? I should be allowed to come with you! I'll lay down my life for you!" Yeah, right! We're all grinning at each other around the room. Sure. We knew that Peter was all bluster and bravado—always claiming too much, speaking too fast, wanting to be the hero. Hothead. But I was sorry for my judgment of him a second later, when Jesus looked at him with such sorrow on his face. "Really, Peter? You'll lay down your life for me?" He sighed and shook his head, "The truth of it is, before the rooster crows, you'll disown me. You'll deny you ever knew me. Three times."

That wiped the grins off our faces, I can tell you. We knew that for all Peter's faults, he really was the most passionate one of us. And he was definitely sincere. Jesus' words seemed so harsh. Of course, none of us knew then that he was right. That Peter would disown him, as certainly as Judas would betray him, as definitely as I would doubt him, as inevitably as we all would desert him. Oh we did, you know. Just as you have. You've denied, disowned, betrayed, doubted, and deserted Jesus too, haven't you?

So listen to what Jesus said next. "Don't let your heart be troubled. Don't be distressed. Don't let the pain of this take root in your soul. Don't worry." It wasn't as though Jesus was politely dismissing the major ways we all will fail him. He wasn't simply waving a condescending hand over us to say "there, there, it doesn't matter."

He looked Peter in the eye, in the same way he looks every one of us in the eye, and he said the most amazing thing: "Don't let that disturb you. There's still room for you. There is room for you—deniers, doubters, deserters." (Can we dare to hope—betrayers too?) "My father's house is big enough to hold you all."

I still ponder what Jesus meant when he said there are plenty of dwelling places in his Father's house. He called them abodes. That's not a word you use very often any more. It means a place where you dwell, more than that—it's where you live, where you're at home. It's interesting because Jesus was hardly ever at home and yet he talked a lot about dwelling, abiding, being at home—but not in a building made with human hands. Remember? He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me" (John 15:5). "As my Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love" (John 15:9), he said. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56), he said. I'm not sure, but it seems this abode—it's not a place, it's a relationship. It's not a physical house with a picket fence, not a religious temple with laws and rituals, not a cloud in heaven where we will go when we die—but immeasurable, unmappable space, resident in heart of God. There's room for you, he said... Because I'm going to my Father, because I'm going to my death, because I *am* willing to lay down *my* life for *you*, there is plenty of room for all of you.

I was just dizzy with questions. I wanted to know how big is this house and is there really enough room for everybody? And if there's room in this house for deniers and doubters and deserters, then what about other people? What about people who never have met Jesus? What about people of other faiths? What about those *Gentiles*? Wait! Wait!

What about ... ? But Jesus wasn't about to answer my questions. He added: "You already know the way to the place where I am going." What? I'm still busy figuring out the destination, and he tells us we already know the way there. Well, I couldn't let that slide. "Jesus, we don't have the slightest clue where you're going. How can we possibly know the way?"

I'm not exactly sure what I was hoping for. Maybe a map, directions at least. I t would have been nice to have—I don't know—seven habits, nine steps, ten rules to follow. A Book of Order maybe, doctrines to believe in, creeds to know, things I could do to make sure I was on the right track. But no. Jesus turned to me with that pure open expression he always wore, and those clear bright eyes that bore like into my soul like twin stars. "I AM the Way... and the Truth... and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

It took my breath away. I AM... he said: I AM... he pronounced the unpronounceable name of God. YHWH... I AM the Way. The way of God in the World—sent into the world not just to tell us about God, but to show us God, and to live the way only one who knows himself to be a son of God can live. The Way to I AM. The Way to God.

I didn't really get it then. I'm not sure I get it now. I stared at him while all the gears clicked away in my brain. I knew that what he was saying was beyond anything I was asking, anything that I could ever comprehend. I suddenly realized that following Jesus wasn't about finding answers to satisfy my questions, or certainties to appease my doubts. But it was only later, after the travesty of a trial, after his innocent death on the cross, after he broke out of the grave, after he serenely met my doubtful stare, gently put my hesitant hands in his wounded side—only then did I fully understand. Love each other that much. The same way I have loved you, love each other like that. That's the Way... and the Truth... and The Life.