

## THE WAY

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Nagley on May 14, 2017 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Bethesda, Maryland



Some twenty plus years ago I attended the wedding of my seminarian friend John to Janice. It was at a large established Episcopal church in Richmond and Frank Wade, who was then the rector of St. Alban's, officiated. I've taken liberty over the years to steal much of what Frank told them at that wedding in his homily. One of the things he told them was that what they were asked to do was simple. Love each other. It is simple, he said, but not easy. That, in a nutshell, is the whole of what is for us to follow the way, the truth and the life of Jesus.

We are asked to love but loving in the expansive way of Jesus is not easy. Loving that way will take us down roads we didn't plan to be on and it will expand our hearts in ways we couldn't imagine. The writer and poet Maya Angelou remarked that whenever she heard someone say they are a Christian she thinks to herself "already" because she also knew that what we're asked to do is not easy and is the practice of a lifetime.

I am the way, said Jesus. He didn't say I am a way, an interpretation that makes some of us more comfortable because it doesn't interfere with the place we place on inclusion and welcome. To say that Jesus is the way sounds exclusionary and binary. The writer of John's gospel is clear. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It's undeniable. And so what are we to think? What are we to believe? Are we to think there is no other option? Are we to worry that our Jewish grandchildren or Muslim neighbors will be left out, even condemned?

It could very well be that when this gospel was written the interpreters of Jesus' words thought just that, that Jesus was the only way to God. In fact, it would have been desirable if they could convince people that the only way to God was by believing in Jesus. They were part of a movement trying to convince others to join them. It may also be that people then heard it differently than we hear it now. It could be that Jesus as the way was heard as an invitation not a threat, the deliverance from a harsh and brutal world that offered no hope.

Over the years and too often those words “I am the Way and the Truth and Life” have been used and not heard as an invitation but as a threat. Too often those words have been used to intimidate not invite, to extort rather than explain. Intimidation, fear, and extortion are tools used to get people in line but those tactics have a way of backfiring.

When I was in my twenty something doubting period I decided that I didn’t need a God if that God employed spiritual blackmail to get me in line. Looking back, I realize that I was rebelling against the way people had interpreted words like those in John’s gospel, “I am the way...”. So I simply said that I believed there was a God but I didn’t need that kind of God. And you know what happened – nothing. The earth didn’t crack open and swallow me up. I didn’t fall into an abyss. Lightning didn’t strike.

One important thing did happen. By letting go I opened up. When I returned to a community of faith, because I needed a community and flying solo wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, I experienced God in a new way. When I went back to church what I heard was about a God of love, a love that didn’t need me to toe the line, or be perfect. I heard about a God who simply loved me.

Embracing Jesus as the Way isn’t about toeing the line or following a prescribed dogma and doctrine. Jesus never pointed to himself. He was never the hero of his story. He was always pointing to God. To say Jesus is the way points us toward an experience, a way of living, that ultimately bring us to an encounter with God.

Some people think that being a Christian is like checking off beliefs like there’s a punch list for Christianity. Check – Jesus is the Son of God. Mary, his mother, was a virgin –check. Jesus descended to the dead, rose and ascended to God – check, check, and check. If it were that easy we could long ago have dispensed with this whole religious enterprise, we call church.

In truth, being a Christian is a lot like falling in love and giving your life to that love. It’s as easy as promising to go down a certain path no matter what, forever and always. And as hard as staying on that path when it gets rocky and you aren’t at all sure where you’re going. It’s hard living what we say we believe when our beliefs are not a to-do list but giving our hearts to a way of being. That’s what belief really means. It’s to give our heart to something, not always knowing how our hearts will end up.

Believing is trusting that all will be well even when nothing is well. Believing is trusting that the Spirit of God is with us even when God seems to have fallen silent or disappeared altogether. Believing is trusting so much that the Spirit of God is with us that we dare to rage at God, scream at God to show up and do something. Believing is being lost and still trusting that the way will be known. Believing is letting mercy, peace, wisdom, love and the promise of new life be the rulers of our hearts.

Jesus said I am the way. He didn’t say this institution is the way, or this doctrine is the way. The way is a movement of the spirit that moves us. It is an energy that infuses us. It is a realization that opens us up and helps us.

Jesus said I am the way, which means allowing ourselves to participate, get caught up in and embody this living, breathing fullness of God. The way is our embrace of a love that is justice in action, a love that changes the world in which we live.

You've heard it said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. That arc doesn't bend on its own. It bends with the weight of people who give themselves to the way, the truth and the life. It bends with the weight of people who insist on a moral universe.

It is quite possible to follow that way, that truth, that life without having a clue about Jesus. That's the beauty of it. The way is there for anyone willing to surrender the ego, to surrender personal gain for the sake of mercy, justice, freedom, and peace for all people. The way is wisdom and fierce, defiant love that is justice in action and allows us to navigate this crazy world.

I was quite taken the other day with a scene from the movie "Silence". "Silence" takes place in mid-seventeenth Japan when two young Jesuit priests leave Portugal for Japan to locate their missing mentor and spread Roman Catholicism.

The shogun ruler and his followers didn't welcome the missionaries. And the success of the missionaries was slim but a few, despite the danger, did covert. When their allegiance to the church was discovered the shogunate leaders would force those who converted deny the church by stepping on a wood block icon carved with the image of Christ. That was all. Just step on the picture.

One of the young priests, Rodriquez, was captured, and taken to his mentor, Ferreira, who was now living in a Japanese temple, with a Japanese name, and a Japanese family. He was no longer a Jesuit priest. He long ago had denied the church by stepping on the wood block icon carved with the image of Christ.

Along with Rodriquez, the Japanese had capture five Japanese convert. They wanted Rodriquez to eventually step on that wood block and so they tortured the five converts. Rodriquez heard the cries of the five in the night.

In an amazing exchange between Ferreira and Rodriquez, Ferreira tells Rodriquez that Jesus, for the sake of those being tortured, would have stepped on his own face. Jesus, he said, for the sake of love, would have given everything. So what Rodriquez was asked to sacrifice was his adherence to the doctrine and dogma of the Church and give everything, as Jesus did, for the sake of love.

I still go over that scene. I still wonder what I hang on to that gets in my way of the way. I wonder what we need to let go of and what we need to move toward. I wonder.

That's the thing about the Way. We've never quite master the path. Just when we think we've figured it all out something pops up to make us wonder and recalibrate our steps. The best recalibration isn't as calculated as one might think. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The best recalibration is a letting go, and simply fall into the mercy of God.

That is the ultimate Way - falling into God's mercy in order to take the next step. When we fall into God's mercy we give away all of ourselves to the love of God. When we fall into God's mercy we step on a wooden carved icon of God and see God face to face.