

DISCIPLES OF THE WAY

(09/30/18)

Scripture Lessons: John 14:1-7
Acts 9:1-2

[Jesus said] "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 said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
(John 14:4-6)

This past Tuesday in our Spiritual Study and Growth Group we read from the section of C. G. Jung's autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that describes his early religious experiences. In our discussion we noted the limitations of our human senses, our brain capacity, our language systems, and our conceptual frameworks when it comes to understanding and describing God.

Jung believed that the Great Mystery behind the manifest phenomena that comprise our conscious experience does, however, find expression in symbols. He believed that religious symbols are the best possible expression of something that cannot be fully described or expressed conceptually. These symbols can have a transporting power; they help us to experience or enter into that other world: the world from which we came before we were born, to which we return after we die, and which we carry with us and within us throughout this life.

The discussion reminded me of two of my favorite quotes from the *Tao Te Ching*, the collection of eighty-one poems by the ancient Chinese mystic Lao Tzu. In poem #1 Lao Tzu says,

*The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.*

When we name God or try to talk about God, we reduce God to the status of a thing among other things in the universe; hence we are not really talking about God. In poem #56 Lao Tzu says,

*Those who know don't talk.
Those who talk don't know.*

I should have this last quote printed up and taped to the pulpit. It would serve to keep me humble. The minute I start to preach I am admitting to you and also to myself that I really don't know what I am talking about. However, if I don't say anything, hoping that you would take my

silence as evidence that I do know what I'm not talking about, we wouldn't have a sermon. In the last analysis I guess I have to duly note my limitations and the limitations of our words, conceptual frameworks, etc., and preach a sermon!

As much as I agree with Lao Tzu, we do have to talk about that which is important to us, that which is the object of our ultimate concern. Communication, the use of the spoken and the written word, is an important part of Christian apologetics and an important part of worship.

The early Christians tried to communicate their experience of Jesus to people of their time and to future generations through their preaching and through the composition of the Bible. The apostles wrote letters to individuals and to churches. In fact, biblical scholars can determine who wrote which letters through the use of textual criticism--an analysis of the words that appear in the document, how often a particular word appears and how this word is used.

Certain theological words or terms have been in vogue at various times in the history of the church. This is because at different times in history people have tried to describe their relationship with God in different ways. A current example would be the debate about the rewording of hymns and liturgical language to make this language more inclusive, whether the change in theology that accompanies the change in wording is a contribution to a growing, evolving faith or a loss of important traditional elements of our theology and our worship.

If we look back in history, we can find times when our hymns and preaching focused on God's transcendence, God's distance from us. At other times our theology focused on God's immanence, God's closeness or presence within us. Peace and justice or liberation theology describe the Kingdom of God as the realization of peace on earth, an end to war, racism, poverty, and exploitation. A theology that focuses on the spiritual journey emphasizes the importance of individual religious experience and the process of finding God within.

All these different ways of expressing our faith have been and continue to be important, for each contains an important part of the Christian experience. In using these terms, in preaching or singing hymns that reflect these emphases, however, we should remember that the Christian faith is much more than the language we use. We should also beware of making an idol of our current terminology.

The purpose of the church is to continually rediscover the central meaning of the Gospel and to make it relevant for our lives as individuals, as a church and as a world. The church is

supposed to help us discover how God is speaking to us *today*. It is charged with the task of helping us to evolve and deepen spiritually, to help us build the world that God would have us build. The church is called to bring a healing, comforting, challenging, reconciling word and presence to our time.

In our scripture lessons this morning, a single word stands out: the word “way.” This word occurs numerous times in the New Testament, often in the sense of “the way to Jerusalem,” “the way to live.” In other passages it seems to be used in a special way. When it is used in this special way it is capitalized. An example of the more general use of the term is when John the Baptist says he has come to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

We heard an example of the second, the special use of the term in our scripture reading this morning from the Book of Acts. In this passage, the word “Way” is capitalized.

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

In Acts 10:09 we once again find the word capitalized by Luke when he tells us that Paul

. . . entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God, but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them taking his disciples with him.

In Acts 22, Paul confesses his earlier sins by using this term, once again capitalized. He says, “I persecuted the Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.” In Acts 24, Felix is described as “having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way.”

From these passages and many others in the pastoral letters, especially where it is used as a proper noun, we see that this word had a special significance for the early church. What, then, is the meaning or special significance of the term “Way?”

First, it seems that the word “Way” denotes what has been referred to as the spiritual journey. The “Way” is the way of salvation. It is the direction, the method, or the approach we must take in working out our relationship with God.

Jesus tells us that all ways to God are not equal. There may be different paths up the same mountain, but some paths do not lead up the mountain. There are many examples of this in the history of religions—and many current examples. I recall the dream of a woman many years

ago who reported that after leaving her church on a Sunday morning, she vomited up junk food-- Twinkies, Devil Dogs and Yankee Doodles. I wonder what she was being “fed” in that church!

This is why I pray at the beginning of every sermon that “the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts” will be acceptable in God’s sight. Although I am not a big fan of orthodoxy, and I am always trying to understand our religious faith from different perspectives, including the perspectives of science, psychology, and Eastern religions, I hope and pray that I am not feeding you junk food or leading you up a path that ends somewhere other than the top of the mountain.

As we noted last week in our reflections on the parable of the two houses, Jesus tells us that what we believe makes a difference. He tells us that what we place in the center of our lives, that which becomes the foundation of our house, makes a big difference, especially when we encounter or are encountered by the storms of life.

In Christian scriptures the word “Way” is inextricably tied to Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is the Way, the truth, and the life. As Christians, Jesus is a bridge between God and us, a path we can take that leads to God. This means that worship, prayer, reading and understanding the Bible are important ways of developing our personal relationship with the living Christ who dwells both within and among us.

The Way, as the term is used in scripture, describes the essentials of our spiritual journey, the journey that shapes our soul as individuals and then, through us, shapes the world. Jesus tells us that the Way is not easy. For Jesus and his followers, it involved suffering, persecution, and for many a painful execution. Perhaps this is why the cross, a symbol of sacrifice and death, is the central symbol of our faith.

Finally, for the early church, the Way was also a way of life. In the days of the early church, a Christian was identifiable by the high moral character of his/her life. Not everyone was attracted to the Christian life, for it was a challenging life. It was a life marked by prayer and worship, by compassionate outreach to others and by the love of one’s enemies. In biblical times you didn’t need a certificate of church membership to know if someone were a Christian. You could see it by the way that person lived.

Throughout history, the followers of the Way tried to live a life worthy of those who claimed to be disciples of Jesus. They were unwilling to compromise their high moral principles.

They displayed courage in the face of hardship, offered forgiveness to those who offended, and showed forth a love that encompassed even people who were different. Their lives were marked by resiliency, a hope that could not be quenched, and an inner strength that enabled them to do whatever they believed ought to be done. They held a deep-seated conviction that there was nothing more important than following Jesus on this journey, and that if they could do this, they would experience the peace and wholeness of salvation.

Just as the way the Christian lived set off him/her from the general population, so also it marked the early Christian community--the church. The church was different from every other institution because this was where the followers of the Way gathered. This was where they came to worship, to learn, to help one another, to draw strength for the tasks that lay ahead. This is where they came in common witness to Jesus Christ who had shown them the Way.

This is also where they came to accomplish what none of them could hope to accomplish as individuals, to change, to create the world in accordance with God's will. The early church was not financially or politically powerful. It drew its power from the power of the Holy Spirit, the power that comes to and which arises from a caring, loving, challenging, healing Christian community.

Throughout history, the Christian, the Disciple of the Way has never stood alone. The Christian is always an integral part of a Christian community. As Disciples of the Way, we have an important ministry to each other and to our children. As Disciples of the Way, we need to reach out to this community and to the world. Throughout history, this has been an essential calling for those who are followers of the Way.

Later this fall we will welcome those who wish to enter into full membership, into full fellowship with our church. We invite all who have discovered our little church and who find it helpful to them in their life and in their spiritual journey to become a more integral part of this special community. You will be hearing more about this invitation in the weeks to come.

Just as he did with his original disciples, Jesus invites us to become disciples of the Way. We are invited to walk with the one who is "the Way, the truth, and the life." We are invited to open our hearts and minds to the guidance he offers for our journey through the twisted maze of this earthly life. He offers us resources for the struggles we face in our daily life, the healing power that flows from him into those parts of our lives and our relationships that are broken. He

offers us the fruits of this spiritual journey, the experience of comfort, that deep inner peace that comes to us when we live our life as God would have us live it.

As we meet here this morning as the gathered church, as a pilgrim community, as a community of faith, and in the days to come as our relationship with this church unfolds and evolves, let us rediscover what it means to be “Disciples of the Way.”

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