

“Asking for Directions”
May 7, 2023

Isaiah 30:18-21
John 14:1-8

It’s difficult for some people to ask for directions. I’m not confessing or pointing any fingers here, but it’s difficult for some people to ask for directions—maybe with good reason.

The story is told of Mark Twain entering an unknown town, looking for a particular building at which he was to give a lecture. Walking up to a boy who was sitting along the street, Twain asked if he knew where the building was.

“Nope,” the boy replied.

“Well, then,” Twain asked, “Do you know where such and such a street is?”

“Nope,” came the reply again.

Getting a little angry, Twain said, “You certainly don’t know much, do you?”

“Nope,” the boy said once more. “But then again,” he added, “I’m not lost.”

Most of us are more like Twain, and we lack that boy’s unknowing certainty. One time or another most of us experience that sinking sense not only that we *are* lost but also that no one around us has directions.

Sometimes this occurs at points of change in our lives: graduation from school, the prospect of a new job, a marriage, a divorce.

And there’s that feeling that can come at any age, that the path you are on isn’t taking you where you want to go—even if the destination itself is kind of fuzzy. We wonder: “Am I pointed in the right direction? Am I really finding life as I live?”

It was Thomas Merton who once prayed: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.”

That’s kind of like what the novelist E. L. Doctorow was getting at when he said that “Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” Now, far be it from me to tell members of *this* congregation how to write a novel—or any kind of book. But those words also suggest what *life* is like for us. We don’t see the entire road. We move forward as best as we know how—depending always on the grace and forgiveness we find in God and in others—depending on the grace and forgiveness we find even in ourselves at our best and most compassionate.

We're living in a time when many feel we have lost our direction not just as individuals but as a society. In recent weeks I've had several conversations with people who are concerned that our state has lost its way. Native Iowans, as well as people who, like me, came to this state and found it a beacon of the liberties we prize and the rights we still seek to maintain—we've all listened to the news coming out of the Capitol and the Governor's Office and think: "This is not the Iowa I have known." We seem to have lost our way.

At times like these, many are willing to point out the way for us.

On the left and the right, many suggest an unquestioning allegiance to their point of view as the direction to follow. People at both ends of our polarized nation allow for little if any disagreement. Simply believe and go along with them and you will arrive at the right place.

Religious certainty is a special form of this attitude that calls for our special awareness. It is a unique assurance that we are right and everyone else is wrong that comes with a blessing from God. This is a temptation for many who have listened only superficially when they hear Jesus saying "No one comes to the Father but by me." Those words can so easily become a justification for intolerance, bigotry, and antisemitism. Christian exclusivity seems to put God on our side and to offer us life both here and hereafter.

When Jesus says "no one comes to the Father except through me," he means "none of you disciples."

These words are not exclusionary, but particular. In them, one early Christian community announces, "This is who we are, people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ."

These words are not the sweeping absolute claim of a major world religion. They are, instead, the growing conviction of a tiny group of a minority religion in the ancient world. We can, however, hear these words as the joyous, world-changing affirmation of those very people.

Marcu Borg tells of a Hindu professor who preached a sermon at a Christian seminary. His text was the one from John that we heard this morning. And he said, "This verse is absolutely true—Jesus is the only way." Then he continued, "And that way—of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being—is known to all the religions of the world."

Like the boy on the street corner talking with Mark Twain the way of absolute certainty does not offer us the direction we seek. And like that boy, none of those pointing in these directions think they are lost.

So where do we turn when we feel lost?

To whom do we go when we need direction?

That is the question Thomas asks as he listens to Jesus.

You can imagine how he might feel.

The disciples gather with Jesus to share a meal. The religious authorities are getting angrier. The Romans had just about had enough.

After eating, Jesus talks with the disciples about leaving them. He speaks about going to prepare a place for them in God's house. The words are hard to understand. And then Jesus adds that the disciples know the way he is going.

At this point, Thomas, in a burst of honesty, speaks up: "Look, I'm lost. I don't know where you are going. So I don't know how I can possibly follow. I need some help."

To clear things up, Jesus says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." In doing so he uses images that not only draw from his own Jewish culture but also could be found in a number of other religions in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Jesus tells his followers that he is the *way*, that is, he gives access to life with God. And at the same time, he is the *truth* and the *life*, that is the very *embodiment* of the type of relationship with God that we seek even today.

Please understand. This is not the way of simply accepting ideas or doctrines about Jesus. The way of Jesus is not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That people ever thought it was strange when we think about it—as if we entered new life by believing certain things to be true. And so, the Congregational tradition has always emphasized covenant over creed—how we live with one another as followers of the way of Jesus over what we say we believe.

Jesus shows a way of entering fully into life in the same way that he did—giving of yourself, loving others, sharing in the goodness of creation.

Asking for directions, Thomas hears—and we today hear as well—that the Way that we seek, even now, is found in the One who says: "Follow me. Come, draw near. Walk along for a while. Watch what I do."

When we follow Jesus, then, we find ourselves going to the places where he goes. With him we meet the people he meets. Those places, those people often turn out to be nothing like what we have known or what we would expect. As we follow along, we start to see that Jesus is the One most "unlike" our understanding and expectations.

We follow Jesus to the place of prayer, a place apart from the noise of the world, apart from the quickly changing demands of our quickly changing lives. How hard it is to follow to such a place! But we watch as Jesus pulls back and invites active souls to slow down for a time.

We follow Jesus to places where healing is brought to our world. The ministry of Jesus was one of healing and restoration, of saying "No" to the powers of destruction—and more

importantly, of saying “Yes” to all that gives life. Where there is brokenness, there those who are following Christ will be found.

We follow Jesus and encounter all sorts of people. He eats with sinners and outcasts—is there no one that he will not love? He speaks a message of the nearness of the reign of God to the poor *and* to the rich. No person, no group is excluded from the love that approaches.

We follow, not just along familiar paths but most of the time down ways still to be made known.

Jesus was not the end, but the beginning. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus was the start of God’s involvement with creation in a new way. The light of God is still dawning on this world, showing life in a new way. That is our hope, our faith, even when the path is hard to see, especially when the path is hard to see.

We don’t see the end. We don’t see very far down the road.

We ask for directions from the One who knows we are lost.

We are given directions by One who not only knows the way but by the One who is indeed the Way.

Listen, then, as the poet, W. H. Auden encourages us:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Please join with me in a spirit of prayer, offering a prayer of Thomas Merton:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.