

## “THE WAY”

John 14:1-14

*A Zoad in the Road*, by Dr. Seuss

Did I ever tell you about the young Zoad  
 Who came to two sides in the fork in the road?  
 He looked one way then the other way, too.  
 So the Zoad had to make up his mind what to do.  
 Well the Zoad scratched his head, his chin, and his pants,  
 And he said to himself, 'Now, I'll be taking a chance.  
 If I go to place one, that place may be hot.  
 So how will I know if I like it or not?  
 On the other hand though, I'll feel such a fool,  
 If I go to place two and find it's too cool.  
 In that case I may catch a chill and turn blue.  
 So place one may be best and not place two.  
 On the other hand though, if place one is too high,  
 I might get a terrible earache and die.  
 On the other hand though, if place two is too low,  
 I might get some terrible pain in my toe.  
 So place one may be the best,' and he started to go.  
 And he stopped and he said, 'On the other hand though. . .  
 On the other hand, other hand, other hand though, and. . .  
 For thirty-six hours and one half that Zoad made starts and made stops  
 At the fork in the road, saying 'No, don't take a chance, you may not be right.'  
 Then he got an idea that was wonderfully bright.  
 'Play safe,' cried the Zoad, 'I'm no dunce.  
 I'll simply start off to both places at once.'  
 And that's how the Zoad who would not take a chance  
 Got no place at all with the split in his pants.

Life is full of choices! Which ones are the right ones and how do we know which way to go? How can we get the guarantee that our choices are right? What kind of knowledge should we have to make sure that we are on the right track? Is being Presbyterian good enough, or should we look into other faith traditions? Maybe the Baptists have it right and we have it wrong! What about the Catholics, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Jews, the Muslims? Which way would get us faster and safest to God? Which form of prayer? What beliefs do we need in order to be closer to God? What life decisions do we need to make to have an intimate relationship with God? What choices would give us the best results in life so that we can avoid suffering as much as possible for ourselves and for others?

I wish there was a simple answer/formula to these questions that I can pull out of the Bible and give to all of us so that we can all live happily ever after. But the fact is normally direct answers and doctrines often don't allow for us to grow in our spirits/faith. One of Emily Dickinson's poems is called "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." Parker Palmer, a Quaker teacher, uses this poem to help people understand that soul space cannot be created with facts and direct teachings. The soul is shy and needs space to be allowed to show up. Sacred space is not something that can be forced on us or even given to us. It is a journey where we discover the truth when it comes to us at a slant. It is an invitation to a sacred journey.

In our Gospel lesson today from John we hear about Jesus issuing an invitation to the disciples to this sacred journey. He does not invite them to a set of beliefs and doctrines. His invitation was to a journey. This is a popular scripture in funerals because of the comfort it gives us when our hearts are troubled, but outside of memorial services, this scripture is often misunderstood and misused that we

miss its message entirely. On one side we find the people who use it to exclude others from the love of God. Anytime there is a discussion about God's grace extending to all of humanity regardless of doctrine or belief, you often hear someone quoting "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." On the other side, there are those who use this scripture to say that the image of many mansions in heaven is a proof that there will be different rooms for different faith traditions, one for each group.

What both sides miss is the intention behind these words which we take out of context with 2000 years of separation as if these words are addressing our modern day issues of pluralism in America. The Gospel was written for a culture where changing your religion was not a common thing. It was not even a good thing. For Middle Easterners, religion is part of family identity and no one dares to change it because they would be rejecting their families.

The Gospel of John was written around the year 90 C.E. which was after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem as part of the Jewish war with Rome in 66-73 CE. There was a growing sense of mutual alienation between the Jewish community and the Christian Jewish community. These early Christians saw themselves as part of the Jewish community but they were not accepted by the Jewish leaders. The Gospel writer was trying to explain the stories of the faith and Jesus Christ in light of that conflict to defend the followers of Christ. That is why we see the emphasis of the Gospel on the person of Christ and not just on the teachings. The Gospel writer was trying to help his people understand that the message of faith that Jesus taught was about a relationship, a way of life and not just the teachings or beliefs. Jesus in that way was completely aligned with all of God's earlier revelations.

Another important piece for us to remember is that chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel are a combination of sayings that were put together as Jesus' "farewell address" before his death and that these were meant to be addressed to the believers and the disciples. These words were not teachings given to outsiders so that they would believe in Jesus Christ.

Christians were once simply known as those who belonged to "the way" (Acts 9.2). This was the earliest term describing Jesus' followers. Later on, they became "the Church". It was then that things began to go belly-up. Somewhere, back along the line, some would say with the Constantinian settlement, we "lost the way". Ever since then, we have been trying to find it again. A way is not a set of doctrines to memorize. It is a path, a roadmap to a lifelong journey toward God, and at the same time with God.

An important key to understanding the focus of this passage is the Greek word *meno* (stay/abide) in verse 2 (dwelling places). The verb *meno* is a key word in the Johannine tradition, appearing 69 times out of 120 total in the NT. The noun form *mone* occurs only twice in the NT: John 14:2, 23. The first words spoken to Jesus, for example, are from two disciples who ask, "where are you staying?" (Jn 1:38) Jesus' response, "Come and see" (Jn 1:38), is loaded in light of all that Jesus says about "abiding" later in the Gospel, especially in the Farewell Discourse. Jesus' mission might be described as one of revealing the source of his glory, which is to abide in the Father and the Father in him, and to invite his followers to abide in him and he in them. Being a Jewish Christian the writer of John would have known the significance of God's dwelling. Whenever this word is used in the Bible, it signifies to the people of God that God is up to something and that all that we have and all that we are is dependent on this abiding and dwelling in God. So the relationship, the dwelling, the way of the Spirit is what matters here. That is the focus of our faith: A living/intimate relationship with God as our way of being and our way of life. This changes everything for us. The decisions and choices we make in life become based in this relationship.

A few years ago, the epic trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, was made into movies which captured the imagination of many people. In this trilogy, Frodo, a hobbit, has to take on a very important mission to save Middle Earth/the world from falling into the hands of the evil one. Frodo, as a hobbit was a simple young man who didn't know much about travel and danger. He lived in a protected community and did simple things. He was not sure that he had what it took to help with the mission of getting the ring to where it can be destroyed. It was quite the journey for Frodo. But the most exciting part was how Frodo was guided and protected along the way. Even in the face of the worst danger,

Frodo seemed to get just the right help. Every time he felt that he was close to losing and giving up, someone intervened and helped him. He was first helped by his friend Sam, then by Aragorn and then by Arwen. The journey was a challenge for him, but all he had to do was trust that help was always present. The journey transformed Frodo and helped his faith to grow. In a way, Frodo's journey is like our journey of faith. There are lots of challenges along the way, but the foundation for our journey is God's presence. God is there accompanying us. Our journey does not start with ourselves. It starts with God. It does not depend on us knowing all the facts, it is about the relationship we have with God. The journey itself transforms us.

But this kind of trust is hard. This journey is not always easy because we would like to have control. We may believe in our heads that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, but do we allow his Spirit to be our way, our guide and our help? Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ." Today we are invited by Christ through the words of the Gospel of John to reclaim our lives as a journey with God. This is not a journey about ideas of God, it is a daily relationship of trust and surrender. It is a journey that will take us to the heart of the pain in our world, both our own and that of the world. It is a journey where we are not in control. But it is a journey that will give us eternal life as a present reality that begins when Christ dwells in us and we dwell in him. Following "the way" is about dwelling in the Spirit through prayer and action. It is not about our doctrines. It is about the one who walks with us. Greg Anderson, a former celebrity personal trainer once said, "Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it!" May your journey always be blessed. Amen!

Faith In Action attached: 4-20-08

## FAITH IN ACTION

As we consider our faith as a journey, a way and a relationship with and towards God, we are invited to let go of our certainties, securities and control to trust the Holy Spirit, our guide and companion on this amazing adventure we call life.

### Old Maps No Longer Work - Joyce Rupp OSM

I keep pulling it out -  
the old map of my inner path.  
I squint closely at it,  
trying to see some hidden road  
that maybe I've missed,  
but there's nothing there now  
except some well-travelled paths.  
they have seen my footsteps often,  
held my laughter, caught my tears.

I keep going over the old map  
but now the roads lead nowhere,  
a meaningless wilderness  
where life is dull and futile.

"toss away the old map," she says  
"you must be kidding!" I reply.  
she looks at me with Sarah eyes  
and repeats, "toss it away.  
it's of no use where you're going."

"I have to have a map!" I cry,  
"even if it takes me nowhere.  
I can't be without direction."  
"but you are without direction,"  
she says, "so why not let go, be free?"

so there I am - tossing away the old map,  
sadly fearfully, putting it behind me.  
"whatever will I do?" wails my security  
"trust me" says my midlife soul.

no map, no specific directions,  
no "this way ahead" or "take a left".  
how will I know where to go?

how will I find my way? no map!  
but then my midlife soul whispers:  
"there was a time before maps  
when pilgrims travelled by the stars."

it is time for the pilgrim in me  
to travel in the dark,  
to learn to read the stars  
that shine in my soul.  
I will walk deeper  
into the dark of my night.  
I will wait for the stars.  
trust their guidance.  
and let their light be enough for me.