

## ***You Know the Way***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on the Third Sunday of Epiphany  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 22, 2017

Texts: John 14:1-7

Have you ever had the experience of asking someone for directions to someplace and then had no clue of what the person was saying to you? I realize this is almost a forgotten possibility in these days of Siri and GPS, but occasionally you still do have those moments when you need to ask for directions. No cell service, a detour not yet picked up on MapQuest or GPS. Or, the GPS is just plain wrong. I remember the story several years ago of some poor guy in Foxboro who had the misfortune of having the GPS directions to Gillette Stadium routing all the stadium traffic to his nearby cul-de-sac home. It was the “alternate route” directions that brought people to his small neighborhood and it got so bad that he and his neighbors actually ended up putting up “GPS Wrong!” signage all along the route, all the way out to 95! Apparently it took GPS awhile to correct the error. Geesh.

Peter and I had an interesting experience with directions this past summer when we shared a lakeside cottage with Amanda and Jenny in very rural upstate New York, right at the border with Vermont. We followed the directions and made it to the small town near the cottage, and then proceeded to get lost repeatedly. We asked at the grocery store and got great directions, but to the

wrong lake. We asked at the State Police Barracks and were a little concerned when they had never heard of the lake or the road leading to it. We finally connected with Jenny who had the original directions from the folks who were renting us the cabin and finally, we found the road we needed to turn on. We had driven past it about six times because it had no sign post and no route number on the side of the road we needed to turn on to. Once we were finally on that road, it became a question of making the next turn onto the *dirt* road which would take us back into what ended up being a private lakeside community, explaining why the State Police had never heard of it. Only about 10 homes ringed the small lake. No pavement. No streetlights. No signposts. Very few people. Probably all sorts of critters watching our every move. Yikes! Finally we found the cottage and enjoyed a truly lovely family weekend. And we didn't get lost coming home, thank goodness.

So, I totally get where Thomas was coming from in what he said to Jesus in the text we read this morning from the Gospel of John. This is a very well known text, often read at funerals. In fact, I read it at a funeral just yesterday for an avowedly non-religious man being mourned by his non-religious family. Yet when I showed them the collection of possible readings for the funeral, both Christian and non-religious, they picked this text

from John as one of them. Why? Undoubtedly because of what it says, or what we think it says.

At this point in the Gospel of John, Jesus has been talking with the disciples about the fact that he will be going away soon to someplace where they cannot come. Understandably they are confused by this and start asking questions. Today's reading is one of his responses to those questions. He tells them not to be afraid but to trust and believe in what he is telling them. He describes going to his Father's house which has many dwelling places and he is going there to prepare a place for them. If anything else were the case, Jesus promises he would tell them. Then he says he will come again and take them, but even if that doesn't happen, it's okay because they already know the way. This is where Thomas starts to lose it. "Lord, we do not where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus gives what sounds like a very cryptic answer, but is in fact the key to understanding the whole thing. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," Jesus says. "No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also."

I've always imagined that at this point, Thomas looks at Jesus and thinks, "Huh?" Of course, that's not in the text. But it could be. John's Gospel is often like this. Rather than stories about Jesus, it is really a collection of long and short speeches by Jesus. The important thing to realize here is that John's Gospel

was written at least 60 years after Jesus' earthly life had ended. Since we know they didn't have tape recorders playing every time Jesus spoke, John's summaries of Jesus' teachings and sermons are a collection of people's memories. Sort of like a collection of everyone's memories of a particular event, like a family reunion. Someone might remember the wonderful picnic supper and Aunt Edna's chocolate cake. Someone else might remember Cousin Bill's off-color jokes and yet another person will remember Grandpa's stories about the war. Everyone remembers something different because everyone finds meaning, makes meaning of the experience, in different ways. In other words, the people remember what most connected with them. And that collection of memories about Jesus is what John recorded in his Gospel, because by this time the people who had been there to experience Jesus firsthand were starting to die off. He realized these stories needed to be recorded while they still could be. And the result is the Gospel of John.

This brings us back to this particular text which is so familiar in so many ways. It is usually understood as Jesus explaining to the disciples about heaven. After all when John wrote this, he already knew how the story ended. He knew Jesus died on the cross, was buried in a tomb and then was resurrected. And so did John's readers. So, when he writes down this part of the story, everyone hears Jesus' words and immediately makes the leap to

Jesus telling everyone what heaven is like and how he is going to help them get there. That's why this text is so popular at funerals. "In my Father's house are many dwelling places ... and I go and prepare a place for you." Someday, you will be with me again in heaven, Jesus tells them. I'm going on ahead to make sure everything is ready for you when you get there. No wonder this scripture text is so comforting! No wonder folks long to hear these words at the funerals of loved ones, whether they are entirely sure about what they hear or not. Your loved ones aren't gone, this text says. They are just waiting for you with Jesus in his Father's house. My, but that is comforting, isn't it. And Jesus intended it to be, I am sure. But he also had another intention with this text and it is very often completely overlooked.

To understand this other meaning – an obscured, perhaps even subversive meaning – of these beautiful words from John, we have to look again at certain key words and phrases for what they really mean. Take the word "house" as "in my Father's house." We hear those words "my Father's house" and immediately conjure up some sort of image in our minds, like the spectacular maze-like castle imagined by Theresa of Avila. But what if Jesus meant something else? What if instead of a physical building of some sort, whether on earth or in heaven, "house" refers instead to a household as in a household of relationships – a family? That changes the whole nature of this text, doesn't it.

Because if we think of the “Father’s house” not as a place but as a way of being in relationship with God, then it makes sense that we would already know the way, as Jesus says we do. Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Of course that’s true because it is Jesus and only Jesus who reveals this new relationship possible with God. Jesus and only Jesus teaches us what it means and how to achieve it. We are to live as Jesus lived. We are to see in him all that is possible for us, now and in the life to come, whatever that might be. And here’s the key difference between this way of understanding this passage and the traditional way.

If we see this passage talking not about heaven as a physical place but instead as a way of being in relationship with God that changes us for all time, then we realize that God needs us to worry about the world around us here and now, not just focusing on getting into heaven when this life is over. In this way of reading this passage, Jesus is not just talking about life after death. Jesus is talking about right here and right now. This life matters just as much as whatever life comes next. This life is where that transformed way of being in relationship with God changes everything about the way you live your life here and now. You know the way, Jesus says, because you are already here. You already know what you need to know because I’ve taught you that. We’ve experienced that. You’ve come to know God as you’ve come

to know me. Trust that. Believe that. Allow yourself to be transformed by that.

This text from John is the basis for a favorite Shaker Hymn of mine. I've been listening to my CD of Shaker hymns a lot in the last few months on my drive home. Their simple music touches a part of my soul that's been unsettled lately. I think this is because I know the Shakers were a religious sect which came into being shortly after the War of 1812 and reached their heyday just before and during the Civil War. They knew what it was to live through frightening, unpredictable times, relying solely on their faith as they understood it. This particular hymn speaks directly to this sense of God's ever present grace and unfailing love, especially in times of uncertainty. Here are the words and they get right at what I'm talking about: *In my Father's house there are many mansions prepared for those who truly follow me. They will shine like stars in the firmament of glory; they shall forever abide with me. Then be ye comforted my chosen people though dark seems the day and the vision tarry long; For low in the east a golden light is beaming and with songs of rejoicing sweet praise prolong."*

Dear friends, we may feel like we don't know where we're heading as individuals, as a country or even as a planet. The day may seem dark and the vision of the future unclear. But Jesus assures us we do know the way to be who God needs us to be, the

Way He needs us to follow. We do know the relationship he offers us with God through him, and enlivened in us by the Holy Spirit. We do know that the God we meet through Jesus is the same God of the Old Testament who says over and over again that we are to care about the widow and the orphan, about the least of these, about those living at the margins. Micah is just one of the voices reminding us that we are to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. The thing is, what that looks like will be as different as we are. For some it means rallying and marching in cities all around the world. For others it means celebrating the start of a new day for our government. For still others it means treating everyone with kindness and compassion, making the effort to find and celebrate the good in everyone whether we agree on everything or not. Such is the human condition and has always been. Such is our challenge as the people of God making our way through life each day, stumbling into God's future one step at a time. Jesus assures us over and over again, "you know the way." Let us strive always to live up to the confidence Jesus has in us. Together, I know we can figure out the way and then follow it together. Amen.