

## ***Jesus: Way***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 27, 2022 – Lent 4

Texts: John 14:1-7

During this Lenten sermon series on the book *Freeing Jesus* by Diana Butler Bass, I have tried to add a little richness to our Sunday morning reflections by including an art image here on the altar to illustrate the Scripture text in particular. You will notice no such image is here this morning. That's because I couldn't find one. Oh, if you type "I am the way, the truth and the life" into Google or any search engine you will quickly be led to hundreds of images. But, they are all surprisingly uniform in their visual interpretations of this text. Every single image I looked at was basically the same – the words "I am the way, the truth and the life" superimposed over a roadway or a bridge or even a dock or a mountain hiking trail. And several even had the words superimposed over top of a one way sign. None of these capture what I believe Jesus is trying to get at here. In fact, most of them were taking this text in the opposite direction of where I think Jesus intended to go as we delve into its possibilities.

But, not to worry! I did find an image that I think is just perfect. I don't have it mounted up here this week but instead something much more accessible. It's this image [*point to photo on Worship Resource*]. It's delightfully reminiscent of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, the last stanza of which captures at least part of the possibility today's text from John's Gospel offers for us:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

This morning we will be trying to unpack this much loved Scripture passage from John – a favorite at funerals for sure – and explore what it might mean to look at it as holding a deeper, richer meaning than what might appear on the surface. We will do this by exploring just what Jesus was getting at when he said to his disciples, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” What did it mean then and what does it mean now to see Jesus as “the way?” Is it referring to Jesus as exclusively the conductor on the train or the bus driver or even the solitary hiker on a mountain road leading to heaven? Is this text about who is in and who is out on this way Jesus reveals? Or is more going on here? This is our task today.

As Butler Bass explores in this chapter in her book, she notes that this text is often one which conservative evangelical Christians – the John 3:16 Christians we talked about last week -- insist has only one possible meaning, and it is an exclusionary one. This is visible in the emphasis placed not on the first half of the text – “I am the way, the truth and the life” – but rather on the next sentence, always considered essential to understand the first part, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Butler Bass explains that in the clobber (clobber because the intent is to beat any disagreements on meaning into submission) interpretation of this verse, the emphasis is on this second sentence “where the weight falls on ‘no one’ and ‘except through me.’ The way is no way at all. Rather, it is a circumscribed sheep pen with fences of razor wire. There is one way: in. The other way – out – means hell.”<sup>2</sup> She notes that conservative Christians are emphatic that this verse is proof positive that the only way to know God, to be accepted and loved by God AND ultimately admitted into God’s dwelling place in heaven is to accept Jesus as

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, ©2021, Harper One, p. 166

the only WAY to get there. After all, God's not just going to let anyone into heaven. What's the point of that?

What is the point of that, other than to create a circle of insiders and outsiders, of people who are right and people who are wrong, and ultimately of people who are more than and people who are less than. This is the inevitable outcome of Gospel interpretations which emphasize one understanding of a text as correct or "orthodox." This reduces the power of the Gospel to a single very human perspective which is just as likely to be wrong as any other interpretation is. The only authority giving these particular religious and scholarly experts the power to make such broad, sweeping and exclusionary pronouncements is themselves. It's not that these folks who believe this way about a text don't have the right to interpret it for themselves. Of course they do. The problem arises when they take it one step further and declare that theirs is the ONLY correct interpretation of the text in question, meaning everyone else is not only wrong, they are sinning just by thinking as they do about the text. Butler Bass observes, "There is a line, often a very thin one, between knowledge and dogmatism, between clarity and certainty – and far too many people fail to distinguish between be able to share the Good News of Jesus and zealous preoccupation with correct doctrine." <sup>3</sup> She notes that biblical scholar Peter Enns calls this the "sin of certainty."<sup>4</sup>

I confess that thinking of this kind of zealous pursuit of right belief and right doctrine and narrow scripture interpretations as sin feels right to me. It feels right because this kind of narrow thinking, this constant striving to limit God to a theological box carved by human minds and filled with narrow, self-serving human opinions is sinful. It drives people away from Jesus and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 194

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 194

from God instead of inviting them. When our preoccupation in the church, any church, shrinks away from discerning God's call to kindness and justice and instead emphasizing the limited understanding of human beings, we are asking for trouble for ourselves and the world. The truth of this is visible all around us, as a few narrow minded so-called Christians pursue political power to limit what they see as sinful breaches of "correct" Christian belief. They are actively working to take away women's rights to reproductive health care, to limit medical care for transsexual children, to prohibit teaching about racist episodes in our nation's past and the list goes on and on. All of this is bad enough. But when they claim to be doing this in the name of God and Jesus Christ, they have gone to far. When they do this, they steal the name Christian away from all of us. And I, for one, am tired of it. I am tired of having to defend that I am a Christian from so many people who associate "Christian" with being a hypocrite, with being judgmental and unforgiving. Worst of all, I am tired of their "way" of knowing Jesus being seen as the only way to know Jesus when it most assuredly is not.

So how do we understand this particular text? What is Jesus saying here if, as we too often assume, he is not talking about some metaphysical route to heaven for which he has the only road map? Important to know first is that this text was about a conversation Jesus had with his disciples as he was preparing them for his inevitable departure from them. He knew they were frightened and apprehensive because of what he was saying. He knew they needed calm reassurance that even though things were going to change in fundamental ways, he would still be with them. He might be leaving them physically, but he would never really be gone from them because he was part of them. Butler Bass explains what Jesus means in his use of these particular words in this text: "Way' is not a technique or map, 'truth' is not about

philosophy or dogma, and ‘life’ is not about going to heaven.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, she argues, “Jesus uses these terms to explain how he embodies a way of being in this world so close to the heart of God that God can be known in and through Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, we know God because we know Jesus. We see God in Jesus. We experience God’s love because Jesus taught us a whole new way of being in relationship with God as loving parent instead of remote, judgmental sovereign sitting on a heavenly throne. That is not God, Jesus says. If you want to know what God is really like, look at me. Listen to me. Watch what I do – healing and teaching. I am the way to know God because God is in me AND God is in you. This is the truth. This is the way to live your life.

But what of this next sentence which seems to put up a bar, a gate or a barricade? “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Again, Butler Bass offers her insight, “there would be no way *except that* the love of God has made a way.”<sup>7</sup> In this way of understanding this text, the word “except” is not a barrier or a gate. It is instead a lifeline Jesus throws to the disciples who are afraid and unsure of what will happen when Jesus is gone from them. He is reminding them that they cannot be separated from God’s love because it is all around them. *Except* for God’s limitless and abiding love, they would be all alone but they are not because God is with them and nothing can change that. In this reading *except* is a way of emphasizing the limitlessness of God’s love for all. This is the exact opposite of the belief that this phrase is intended to keep God’s love for a chosen few who follow the narrow path of right belief, right thinking and right practice. Put simply, God’s love knows no exceptions and no distinctions. Only humans try to build razor wire fences around God.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 167

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 168

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 170

Butler Bass concludes this chapter with a lovely image of what she sees as the way of Jesus. She says, “the way of Jesus is the way of love. It is also a labyrinth, a ‘meandering but purposeful path, from the edge to the center and back again.’”<sup>8</sup> As you can imagine, when I read this I was thrilled. I have always known labyrinths as a special way to be in the presence of God, a sacred experience of prayer while walking the twists and turns intended to remind us of the twists and turns of life itself as we live it each day. When I’ve seen people from the neighborhood walking the labyrinth, it warms my heart. It reminds me of all that our little church, which I have come to think of as “the little church that could,” has already accomplished as a congregation and as that beacon of hope to the community and the world that we aspire to be. Our labyrinth is an outward and visible symbol of prayer, of hope and of the way this church seeks every day to follow Jesus. There are days when it’s too rainy to walk it, or when it’s buried beneath the snow, but still we know it’s there offering silent testimony to the way of Jesus this church attempts to walk each day. Sometimes it gets weedy and willing, invisible hands go out to pull the weeds, laboring to preserve the way of Jesus in our midst. There is such power in even these simple actions as walking a labyrinth or pulling a weed from its pathways. We are reminded that we are all on the journey through life with Jesus as our guide and the Holy Spirit as the energy we need to make it through and God as the love that illumines every step we take along the way. What more do we need to know? Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 213