

John 14:1-14

Prayer: Eternal God, whose Word silences the shouts of the mighty: quiet within us every voice but your own. Speak to us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may receive grace to show Christ's love in lives given to your service. Amen.

When we moved to Drayton back in 2016 we could not go anywhere without putting the address into our GPS. Every route was unfamiliar, all the streets out by us had confusingly similar names that made no sense to us foreigners – what's the difference between side road 8, wellington road 8, and the 8th line we had no idea, but they were all different than highway 8. We were completely dependent on turn-by-turn directions from our GPS to help us navigate this strange new place. I came across an article in the New York Times that talks about this study that was done on the brains of the famous Hackney Carriage cab drivers of London, England.¹ These cab drivers go through a rigorous testing process before they can be licenced to drive these famous black cabs. It's called the "The Knowledge." In order to prepare for this test, one man, Matt McCabe, studied for three years by hopping onto his motor scooter every day, plotting routes from point a to point b, memorizing landmarks and street names in rain and snow and sun. He logged more than 50,000 miles on his motor scooter and on foot studying for the infamous "Knowledge", the equivalent of two times around the earth. An interesting thing happens in the brain of a cab driver – after years of experience these folks can map out the best route between any two points in the city, always taking things like traffic and construction into consideration – they have a real sense of the dynamics of navigation and all the different factors. Unlike many Uber or Lyft drivers, you'll almost never see a Hackney Carriage cab driver in London pull out a GPS or Google maps. There was a study done on the brains of cab drivers like this that showed the longer they were cab drivers, the part of the brain that is responsible for navigation also grew. Their intimate experience with the city and all of its rhythms actually changed their brains – as if this dynamic city were imprinting itself onto them.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/t-magazine/london-taxi-test-knowledge.html>

In our Bible text this morning the disciples are asking Jesus for a map – they’re asking Jesus to show them the way. But we need to back up a little bit to see how they got here. As we catch up with Jesus and the disciples this week we see them in Jerusalem, probably gathered around a table. This is John’s account of that famous Last Supper scene. But earlier that week Jesus had come into Jerusalem on a donkey, and people took palm branches out to meet him and waving their palm branches and laying cloaks on the ground for a royal entry into the royal city they sang that old psalm, that old hymn of praise to God for delivering them their enemies, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (John 12:13, see Ps 118). Ever since that day, though, Jesus had been acting kind of glum, even more cryptic than usual. He’d been talking in cryptic ways about leaving them, how his time had come to go back to the Father.

As they lounge around the table for a meal before Passover John doesn’t give us the details of the meal itself like some of the other gospel writers. What John wants us to see is the growing tension in the room. John wants us to see that Jesus is troubled. So instead of giving us the details of the meal itself, John shows us Jesus locking eyes with Judas, dipping a piece of bread, handing it to him, and telling him “What you are about to do, do quickly.” The thing Judas was about to do, of course, was to betray Jesus.

John wants us to see the growing tension in the room. “My children, Jesus tells them, I will only be with you a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.” Then John shows us Simon Peter tripping over himself to make sure Jesus knows just how committed he is, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later. That’s not really cutting it for Peter. “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” “Lay down your life for me? No, Peter, you’ll disown me.” Jesus hasn’t been the same since coming into Jerusalem on that donkey. Now the tension is at an all-time high. Jesus has been talking about how he was going to leave them – they’d given up everything to follow him, they believed he was the one God sent, the Son of God. And now his time had come to leave? They’d followed him to this point. Where was he going? Why couldn’t they go too?

Jesus attempts to calm their anxieties, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” But his reassurance only seems to raise more questions. “You know the way to the place where I am going,” he tell them. Thomas, with an edge of exasperation even a quiver in his voice, says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” See when Jesus talked about his Father’s house with the many rooms, well that could really only refer to one place in the mind of these Jewish men. Jesus had to be talking about the Temple – with its many rooms, these way-stations, temporary resting places for travelers coming to the Temple. And they knew where that was, they could go there if they wanted, so why had Jesus just insisted that where he was going they could not come? This whole exchange is incredibly confusing for the disciples. Like Jesus must talking about some place that’s not on the map, someplace they’d never been before. “Just tell us how to get there, and we’re gonna need turn-by-turn instructions because this is all unfamiliar!”

I’ve had this experience, too, of going to God looking for directions – just show me the right path, turn-by-turn directions would be great. After highschool, God show me the right university to go to, show me the right friends to make, show me the right career path, the right person to marry, the right time to have kids, the right way to raise kids, the right school for the kids. Turn-by-turn directions would be great. We’ve probably all had that before, and for so many different things.

It’s interesting to observe how this passage from the Bible has been kind of co-opted by Christian apologists, people who want to defend Christian belief and show that Jesus is the exclusive way to God and that no other religion can give salvation. I’m not arguing against that claim, but I want us to see that this passage is not, in the first place, directed outwards to other religions. Jesus is talking to his disciples. His disciples are the ones asking for directions, not people from other religions. This passage is first of all about discipleship, not apologetics. The questions and struggles of the disciples are *our* struggles. Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Just show us the right path and turn-by-turn directions would be a great help.

We are so hungry for practical, turn-by-turn directions. Let’s get the GPS all ready to go and set up on the dashboard and we’ll be set! Show us the way to God-honoring finances. Show

us the way to have a healthy, Christian marriage. Show us the way to raise good Christian kids well. Show us the way to a fulfilling vocation, or to the right school, or the right career. Give us turn-by-turn instructions on how to be a good neighbor, how to navigate politics. Give us turn-by-turn instructions on how to navigate issues around gender and sexuality in our own lives, in our families, in our church. We are every bit as anxious as Jesus' first disciples were for turn-by-turn instructions on how to get where Jesus wants us to go. "Show us the way" is a request that does not only concern future eternal life, but it's a request that we find in our hearts in the present moment.

For all those disciples anxiously looking for a map, wondering how they will navigate their way to the Father once Jesus is gone, Jesus offers comfort and peace. Thomas had said to Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The commentator Elisabeth Johnson laments how this text has been taken from its context and warped to be used as a trump card or a threat, to tell people "they better get with the program and [hurry up and] 'accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior' in order to be saved. To interpret the verse this way," she claims, "is to rip it from its context and do violence to the spirit of Jesus' words. This statement by Jesus is a promise, a word of comfort to his disciples. Jesus himself is all they need; there is no need to panic, no need to search desperately for a secret map" (*Working Preacher*, 2017 commentary). This goes to my point earlier that we need to hear this, first of all, in the context of discipleship. Jesus is the map they're looking for, he is the way, the truth and the life. The only way to get where you want to go, Jesus tells Thomas, is through me. "If you know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:7).

The misunderstandings don't stop there, though. Philip, maybe thinking that he was giving an "amen" to Jesus' little speech, says, "Yes, Lord show us the Father and that will be enough for us." But Philip is only thinking in future terms, and that's his problem. As if Jesus showing them the Father is something that would happen in the future when they'd arrived at the dwelling place of God. Get us to the destination safely, so that we can see the Father, that's all we want, Jesus. It is a good and heartfelt desire, but Philip has not understood what Jesus is

saying. See Philip is still looking for turn-by-turn directions to bring them to the Father, and Jesus is trying to tell them that they've been in the presence of the Father all along. "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me as seen the Father!" Jesus is telling them that they're already on the way. They're already in the presence of the Father. Jesus has been revealing the Father to them all along. They think they're gonna get GPS coordinates or turn-by-turn directions to where they need to go; Jesus is saying, we've been running these routes all along! If you see me, if you know me, if you have journeyed with me all these years then we've already been plotting the routes, we've been by the landmarks, you know the street names, we've walked them on foot through rain and storms. We've logged the miles, and if you know me then the Father has been imprinted on you as well. See discipleship was never about getting the map to hold in your hands or getting the coordinates to plug into a GPS to get you to eternity – following the way, the truth, and the life is about the shaping of one's mind in the present tense so that the character and love of Jesus Christ, and so the character and love of God, is imprinted on your life.

In the book of Acts we see that the early Christian movement was called "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The way was not a roadmap for the end times salvation questions – it was a present reality in the early church. A present reality imprinted with the path that Jesus walked – it was a path marked by self-giving love that did not grasp at power. The way, the truth, and the life entered Jerusalem with palm branches and was met with hope that this would be the victorious messiah God's people had waited for so long. And he would be that, but not in the way that people expected. His way led on a path marked by suffering, persecution, even death. So, too, the Way of the early church – they were met with suffering, persecution, even death. But the one who is the Way and the Truth is also the Life. And so the Way of the early church was imprinted with the route into death, but that route led through death, and finally into life. This promise for life was not just a future hope for the Early Church. It was also a present reality as the Spirit of God equipped Jesus' followers to do "even greater works" than Jesus himself had done.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus tells us again this morning. Not "I was the way" not "I will be the way" but "I AM the way, the truth, and the life." For all of us anxious

disciples, waiting for those turn-by-turn directions, waiting for God to show us the map to get to where we need to go – hear Jesus say, “I am the Way.” That means that for as long as we have been walking with Jesus, God has been imprinting a map of the Kingdom of God on our minds and hearts, showing us the dynamics and the rhythms of the Kingdom.

When I think of people who know the Way, people who have the rhythms and dynamics of the Kingdom of God imprinted on their lives, one very obvious example is Fred Rogers. His biographer, Maxwell King, describes a strong sense of self-discipline that permeated his life. He’d get up every morning between 4:30 and 5:30 to read the Bible before heading off to the Pittsburgh Athletic Association for a swim. If you saw the film about Fred Roger a few years ago then you probably recall all those shots of him going to the pool early in the morning and swimming laps. His biographer says that, “Rogers’s preparation was not so much professional as it was spiritual: He would study passages of interest from the Bible, and then he would visualize who he would be seeing that day, so that he would be prepared to be as caring and giving as he could be. Fred’s prayers in those early morning sessions were not for success or accomplishment, but rather for the goodness of heart to be the best person he could be in each of the encounters he would have that day” (quoted in *A Church Called Tov*, 123). Being the best person he could be is one way to put it. I’d say it a little differently. That what Rogers was doing was visualizing the map of the Kingdom of God that God had imprinted on his life from his walk with Jesus. Every morning he would map out the way, the way to show love like Jesus would, the way to show humility like Jesus did, the way to make each person feel like a cherished creation of God – that was the first and most important truth he was interested in sharing with his captive audience of children.

Fred Rogers is something of a modern-day saint in the informal meaning for the word. His example maybe seems unattainable, but dear people of God he has no secret formula, no secret map. He has been formed and shaped, impressed upon, by the same Jesus who comes to us today. By following Jesus we know that whatever the route is it will take us into the neighborhoods of those who society deems outcasts and lost-causes, we’ll get where we are going by taking the main street which of course must be named “love,” and that street named “love” may be lined with palm branches and a red carpet, but make no mistake it will lead to a

place of self-emptying, a place of sacrifice and humility. But journeying with Jesus means that the map of the Kingdom of God is being imprinted on our minds and hearts so that God shows us the way from death to abundant life in the presence of the Father. In all of our anxieties and questions about where to turn next, which direction to go, how to get to the place where God wants us, the Way, the Truth, and the Life so forms and shapes our minds and hearts that Jesus can say to us, "You know the Way." Thanks be to God, for the Way is his Son.

Prayer: Son of David, you entered Jerusalem with a triumphal procession that led to you being alone and in humiliation on the cross. We thank you for your selfless sacrifice, for showing us the Way of self-emptying love, and for sending your Spirit who guides us and sustains us as we follow your Way. Amen.