

How Can We Know the Way?

John 14:1-14

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, May 10, 2020 – Mother's Day

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ²My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” ⁹Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ ¹⁰Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Jackie Stockton celebrated her 90th birthday with her family in New Jersey in early March.¹ She went to church a few days later and the next thing she remembers is waking up in the hospital. She had contracted COVID 19, perhaps at her own party before the days of physical distancing. Nine members of her family, five church members and her best friend from childhood have since died from the virus. Jackie had lived a long life and seen wars end but said that this experience would not go away. There is such deep sadness over such tragic losses. No sense in casting blame. When her daughter Alice asked her during a Story Corps interview what Jackie wanted to say to others at this time, Jackie said (paraphrased from dialogue): “You have to have faith that this pain and suffering will get better. You have to have faith that people will come together to support each other and not tear each other down. My elders taught me that you have to do what you have to do in hard times. You take it one day at a time, one minute at a time. You just have to keep going.”

I was very touched when I heard mother and daughter reflect together. How do we stay present amidst such tragic loss and such uncertainties? We do know that the USA is still seeing about

¹ https://storycorps.org/stories/after-surviving-covid-19-a-mom-and-daughter-mourn-loved-ones/?utm_source=stewardship&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=sotw_200508

25000 new cases a day and the highest number of deaths in the world so far. Unemployment numbers are still on the rise and so many in our own state are at risk of losing the vital seasonal income summer usually promises. Health and economic security are often pitted against each other while we also await greater testing capacity to produce adequate and secure medical data for the discernment process. There are regional differences and complexities, of course, and behind the numbers are always real stories, real lives – like Jackie and her family. We as a faith community are also now discerning how to use our resources to help address the suffering and when we can begin to meet or worship in person again. What is our way forward? These are all major questions we have begun to engage and will have more discussion about soon.

In our Gospel passage from John, Jesus and his followers are also having a unique conversation about finding and knowing the way while they are actually journeying to what awaits them in Jerusalem, to the cross and resurrection. Jesus is trying to offer some assurance to his unwitting disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me (Jn 14:1).” Jesus is pointing toward his own suffering and death on the cross which will soon leave them feeling overwhelmed and bereft. He goes on to tell that that he is going to prepare a place for all of them - to care for each of them - and that he will take them to himself. In other words, they will also suffer in times to come but nothing will separate them from him and, therefore, from God. Jesus trusts that they will find their way forward.

His friends and followers are largely naïve at this point. They don’t know what he is talking about and are at first taking his comments very literally. Thomas, who is always the brave one to be honest about his doubts and confusions says, “Lord, we cannot know where you are going. How can we know the way?” This prompts Jesus’ enigmatic response: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is another passage which is often quoted to claim the primacy of Christ and Christian faith. I don’t find this helpful. Let me try to paraphrase what I hear Jesus saying: “In my loving, living, dying, and rising you will see modeled that organic and dynamic path into deeper interconnection with the ground of our being! Live how I live and you will find life. Live how I live and you will find yourself participating in a ‘holy unity’ (as someone called it in our *lectio divina* this week) of interconnectivity.” It may help to

remember that the word truth is not simply about facts (though they can be useful in discernment) but the word truth stems from the Greek word “aletheia.” *Aletheia* denotes the experience of having a veil removed from our illusions so that we enter into more real and present living. It is first and foremost a dynamic experience.

We may even dare to say that God is first and foremost a dynamic reality of which we are a part purely by gift and grace. Jesus is so connected to this holy unity that he can say that he is in the Father/Mother and the Father/Mother in him (Jn 14:10). It is the larger reality that is working through him. Such interconnectivity is the hallmark of Christ-like living and it is offered to all. However, the pathway is often one of working through suffering while keeping faith in the underlying goodness of God, come what may. This also echoes Jackie from our initial story. If we can allow ourselves to rest in this trust, incredible things can become possible. This is why Jesus as the Christ dares to say, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it (John 14:14).” I believe that to ask in Christ’s name is to join in his vulnerable, trusting and daring way, especially in times of uncertainty, fear, pain or sense of separateness.

On this Mother’s Day, I would like to venture beyond COVID 19 now to share another story about how a daughter learned to overcome her own sense of disconnection from her mother. The way forward was marked by vulnerably staying present to her own pain and that of her mother. Let’s call her Cecilia. Cecilia felt extremely reactive after her mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness.² She did not wish her mother any harm but she could not stand the thought of becoming her mother’s primary caregiver. Cecilia harbored a lot of resentment from her own childhood because she felt that her mother was fundamentally narcissistic and manipulative. Now she had to spend hours every day caring for someone she had been trying to avoid for years.

Cecilia worked with Tara Brach as a therapist and said early on: “I’m afraid around her a lot. I’m afraid she’ll just trample my adult self as well ... Even though she is so sick, I have a hard time stuffing my anger and forgiving her.” Cecilia did not want to betray her own emotions but also

² This story is taken from Tara Brach’s book *True Refuge* (Bantam Books: New York) 2013 , pp. 196-204. I have changed the name of the daughter to avoid using names present in the congregation.

hated herself for having these feelings. Her recurrent thoughts often left her feeling trapped (hence the bulletin cartoon image of someone driving into the desert reading a sign that says: *You and your own tedious thoughts for the next 200 miles*). With gentle guidance, Cecilia allowed herself to touch base with the pain associated with a key memory. When Cecilia was three years old, her mom called to her to go upstairs to get in the bathtub. When Cecilia got to the bathtub, there were only a few inches of lukewarm water in the tub and no one to help her. She still remembered this moment distinctly as she registered the message: “This is all I’m going to get. No one is taking care of me.” Her mom always seemed preoccupied with her own drama around social relationships, perceived slights, and critique of her husband to the extent that Cecilia did not feel cared for. She felt more like someone who was used when needed and criticized for constantly falling short.

Cecilia was encouraged to allow herself to feel the full depth of her own fear, pain, rage and vulnerability. She could feel it in her own body. She had been suppressing her rage in a way that left her feeling powerless and hopeless. It would take time to let that be real and work it through with compassionate attention. As she ventured into feeling her rage with some guidance, she also noticed how it began to dissipate to the point that she could access the grief that was actually underlying it all. She heard herself saying: “I am all alone. There’s no one who loves me, no one that I love.” Cecilia needed to mourn what had manifested as the loss of love in her life. It was part of the pathway to healing. As the Sufi Master Rumi said: “Be crumbled. So wildflowers come up where you are.” Cecilia opened herself to this crumbling to make room for blossoming.

Cecilia recognized that the part of her that was so sad also needed to show compassion and love toward herself. During a session, she took herself back to that moment years ago: “I’m seeing the little girl in the bath, and feeling how uncared for, telling her: I’m sorry. I love you.” It was not as an apology but an acknowledgment of the hurt. Something shifted in Cecilia then and she finally said: “I’ve been angry for so long that I abandoned her – the inner part of me – just like my mom abandoned that three-year-old...I just have to remember that this part of me needs to be loved.” Such self-compassion paves the way for the possibility of forgiveness and compassion with the suffering of others. In the days following, Cecilia would continually speak these words of love toward herself when she found herself reacting to her mother who was still often acting in

dismissive ways toward her. Cecilia managed to come home to herself without trying to change her mom or get stuck in blame.

This allowed her to stay more present to her mother. Eventually, her heart also opened toward the question: “I wonder what all this is like for my mother. How is she feeling right now?” She could quickly sense her mother’s insecurity and loneliness. Cecilia began offering quiet internal message to her mom: “I’m sorry. I love you.” As she began to feel a growing warmth toward her mother, her mom seemed to open up as well. They began telling some stories and even found moments of humor amidst dealing with the challenges of a terminal illness. Then, one morning, her mother woke up feeling really hot and sweaty. Cecilia found a cloth, dipped it in cool water and gently began to wash her mom so she could cool off a little. “Nobody has ever washed me,” her mom said. Immediately, Cecilia was back in that bathtub with its 3 inches of lukewarm water and realized that she and her mom had both gone through life feeling neglected and as if they did not matter to anyone. They each had developed a different reactivity in response to this experience. As Cecilia continued washing her mother, they actually connected with a depth of intimacy so strangely simple and yet most profound. It was as if she could say, “I know that I am in my mother and my mother is in me...”

Cecilia lived the way, the truth and the life by acknowledging her own suffering and moving through it as though through a kind of death. It was compassion and presence that gradually opened her into an experience of shared resurrection as she discovered and embraced a deeper interrelatedness with her mother’s story. Their shared story is part of God’s story in whom all our lives are held in grace. As we now live through these uncertain times, may all that we do build on a trust that our lives are far more connected and interdependent than we have imagined. May our lives be graced with knowing that the suffering of one is the suffering of all of us and the way toward new life depends on all of us coming together. We are called to live through our fears and pains trusting in God’s grace to guide us through to a more fruitful shared existence. God is always preparing a better place for us and the way to it requires dying to our own confining and often tedious thoughts/narratives. It requires opening to what is real in the moments of showing up for each other, one minute at a time. God is here with us and in us. Thanks be to God.