

The Jesus way

Jesus is the Way. He said so in our Gospel lesson this morning: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This is among Jesus’ most memorable and frequently quoted statements. It is also among the most frequently dismissed today. And I don’t just mean by those who aren’t Christians. Their derision is expected, as such claims as “Jesus is the way” are automatically seen as narrow-minded, intolerant, not-inclusive. But what is astonishing and distressing is how many men and women who profess faith in Jesus nevertheless fail to follow him as the way. For many believers, Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. But as we heard in this morning’s lesson, it is the *Jesus way* wedded to the *Jesus truth* that brings about the *Jesus life*. We cannot skip the way of Jesus in our hurry to get the truth of Jesus. The “way” of Jesus comes first.

At the root of this neglect, I think, is confusion about the word itself, “way,” or *hodos* in Greek. From which we get the word odometer, the dashboard gauge that tells you how far you’ve driven. As this connection suggests, the way Jesus offers is typically taken to mean a route, a road that leads to a destination. What’s the best *way* to the park or the fastest *way* to get to the store? But as a metaphor, “way” branches out to include many and various meanings — a “way” is not only the way we go, as in the route we take, but also the way we go *on the way*, that is, the means by which we travel, whether by foot or bike or automobile. It opens up further, encompassing not just the way we go somewhere, but the way we go about our lives: the way we talk, the way we use our influence, the way we treat one another, the way we raise our children, the way we read, the way we worship, the way we disagree, the way we vote, the way we garden, the way we feel, the way we eat... and on and on.

That we tend to prioritize one meaning, way-as-route, has the effect of limiting, narrowing how we understand Jesus as the way. In the way-as-route understanding, the way of Jesus is reduced to a line on a map, a line that we can use to find our way to eternal life. If you want to get to heaven, Jesus is the way. He’s the route. I do not dispute that claim at all. Jesus makes it plain that this is true: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” And yet, I don’t think that that was all that Jesus was saying when he said he is “the way, the truth and the life.” I don’t think it exhausts the meaning of Jesus’ “way.”

Indeed, the metaphor of Jesus as the way should inspire us to think not only of a road, a route, as in the roads that Jesus walked in Galilee and to Jerusalem, but also of the way Jesus walked on those roads, the way he lived, the way he taught, the way he loved, the way he gave his life, the way he appeared to his disciples after he was resurrected, the way in all these ways he revealed God to us.

This way, “the Jesus way,” is distinctive, at odds with the other ways advanced in the world, the ways practiced by the high-profile men and women who lead large corporations, congregations, nations, and causes, people who show us how to make money, win wars, manage people, sell products, manipulate emotions, and who then write books or give lectures telling us how we can do what they are doing, how we can get ahead in whatever field of work we find ourselves.

And the best thing we can say about these ways is that they work, sometimes magnificently. Wars are fought and won, wealth is accumulated, elections are won, victories posted. But the means by which those ends are achieved leaves a lot to be desired. The ways of the world work wonderfully as long as we are working in a field in which getting *things* done is the “end.” But when it comes to *persons* and *communities*, these ways are terribly destructive. In the process of getting ahead, getting things done, and achieving goals, a lot of people are killed, a lot of people impoverished, a lot of marriages destroyed, a lot of children abandoned, a lot of congregations defrauded.

And yet we Christians, particularly those in America, often uncritically embrace these ways, going along with whatever the culture decides is attractive, successful, and influential — whatever gets things done, whatever can gather a crowd of followers, whatever raises the most money — hardly noticing that these ways are at odds with the way Jesus gave us to follow.

This is especially true when we are given a job to do or a mission to accomplish, when we are supposed to get something done “in Jesus’ name.” “Whatever works” is hardly a good ethical rule for Christian ministry. That’s how you get scandals in the church, when shysters, thieves, and abusers are given positions of authority, and leave a trail of spiritual casualties behind them. They have this authority and high profile, are given them, because they are able to do great things, to get things done “in Jesus’ name.” Yet their ambitions and values and strategies are not in line with “the Jesus way,” a way that is very different from the ways of the world.

You’d think we’d know better. I mean, Jesus early on set himself apart, defined his way over and against those other ways right from the start of his ministry, when he was tempted by the Devil. You remember how the Devil came to Jesus in the wilderness, alone and hungry and tired, and tried to get him to turn stones into bread, to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, to take control of all the world’s governments. Each of these temptations had to do with the way that Jesus is the way, the way he will go about his work. And each of them was wrapped around something good: feed a lot of people, use public spectacles to attract crowds, rule the world justly. But Jesus rejected them all, rejected the ways of power and influence, domination and success. In declining them, Jesus declined to do good things in the wrong way. He showed that the good you hope to achieve cannot be separated from the way you go about achieving it. Instead of “the end justifies the means,” Jesus insisted that the end determines the means.

The distinction between the two approaches can be seen in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Among black Civil Rights leaders, we can distinguish two camps. The first was led by the Black Panthers and Malcolm X, who famously claimed that ending racial injustice was so important, so critical that it needed to be pursued “by any means necessary,” by protest if possible, by violence if necessary. Now, this was in contrast to the party led by Martin Luther King Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King recognized that the goal they sought had everything to do with how they worked to get there. In one of his first published articles, King stated that the purpose of the Montgomery bus boycott “is reconciliation, . . . redemption, the creation of the beloved community.” If the goal is reconciliation, redemption, the beloved community, then, they figured, it makes no sense to fight for it by fighting, through violence. If the goal is racial harmony, it makes no sense to foment racial division. So they

resolved to use only “non-violent means,” protests, sit-ins, boycotts and the like. It was this approach, the approach taken by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, that ultimately proved the most successful, as they won over the hearts and minds of the country through televised displays of their voluntary acceptance of abuse at the hands of segregationists.

King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were of course Christian, and they looked to Jesus as their model and example. They saw how Jesus’ methods aligned with his mission, how his way furthered his goal.

Christians who champion the truth of Jesus but think we do it any old way they like misunderstand this, they misunderstand Jesus and what he came for. You see, Jesus’ goal, the reason for God’s incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, is not simply to bring us to heaven, to allow us to escape this world and its sufferings. It is instead to bring heaven to us, which is what salvation means, God restoring the world and us to wholeness, with us and God finally dwelling together.

That is the goal, and Jesus is the means, the way God is going about achieving his goal, his purposes. We couldn’t make a way to God so, in Jesus, God graciously made a way to us. Jesus is the way, God’s way.

God comes to us in Jesus speaking the words of salvation, healing our infirmities, breathing the Spirit into us, teaching us how to live in the kingdom of God. And it is in and through this same Jesus that *we* come to God, as we love and believe, hear and obey, pray to and praise God. So, you see, the way we come to God is the same way that God comes to us—the Jesus way. The way up and the way down is the same way.

Jesus is the way God comes to us. Jesus is the way we come to God. And not first one and then the other but both at the same time. Not God’s way to us on Sundays and our way to God on weekdays. It is a two-lane road. Much mischief has been perpetrated in the Christian community by not keeping both lanes open. The road up and the road down are the same road, a great highway between heaven and earth.

You and I know something about highways and we know what happens when there’s an accident on the highway. I drive I-95 just about every day, and I see an accident on the highway at least every other day, especially going north. When that happens, all lanes going in one direction are stopped. There’s not much to do. You sit in traffic, stuck, while the cars on the other side of the road are free to drive home, or to work, or to the mountains to hike, or to the ocean to surf and swim. It is not enough to have a road going in one direction. We require a highway with the traffic going both ways. That’s how Jesus is, the way Jesus is the way. Our way to God. And God’s way to us.

And Jesus is the way because he is one with the Father. As Paul writes to the Colossians, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself” (Col. 1:19-20). That means that when we look at Jesus and see his boundary-breaking love, his far-flung compassion for the downtrodden and the sick, his gracious

way with sinners, we are seeing God. We're not looking at an imitation of God, or even some mirror image of God. We are seeing God.

And when we follow Jesus' way, when we practice the way of life He exhibited and taught—the way of righteousness and faith, of holiness and humility, of sacrifice and witness, of repentance and forgiveness—when we do that, we draw near to God, and at the same time, God draws near to us, and we experience in the present the life with God that is promised in the future. That is to say, when we follow the Jesus way, we get a taste of how it will be when we've reached our destination, when we enjoy eternal life with God, when God dwells with us and all is as God's willed it to be, on earth as it is in heaven. It's not as though we have to hold out, white-knuckling it, enduring life's punishments now, so as to be able to enjoy heaven later. We get to enjoy God with us now. As St. Catherine of Sienna insisted, "All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus said, 'I am the way.'"

To be sure, the Jesus Way, the way of Jesus, cannot be imposed or mapped — it requires our active participation in following Jesus as he leads us. It involves not just learning how to think right about God, nor how to behave right before Him. Rather, it means practicing *how to be Christian*, how to be Christian together at this time in this place, acquiring insights and developing habits of obedience in our homes and neighborhoods and workplaces, learning to be led, as we follow his way. This is what it means to follow Jesus, to know him as the way...and the truth and the life.

It's not for nothing that, in the book of Acts, the first followers of Jesus were known not as "Christians" but as followers of "the Way." May God grant us the grace that we at Good Shepherd might be called so today. Amen.