

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

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Year A

The Way to God – Step by Step

For some people, today's Gospel is treasured as a favorite, one which can bring them comfort in the hardest of times. It is very often chosen as the Gospel to be read at Burial services. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, many places to stay.*

Through the whole of Chapter 14 in John's Gospel Jesus is consoling the apostles about his ever-nearing departure, when they absolutely did not want to let him go and absolutely had to comprehend the necessity of his leaving them. They didn't seem to be able to grasp much of what he was saying at the time, but it stayed with them well enough to refresh them with new consolation as time went on, particularly in John's community.

But for other people, and in far greater numbers - I am sorry to say - this passage has been interpreted through the centuries as license for intolerance and prejudice, for "Christian" communities to exclude, terrorize, shun, enslave, imprison, and outright murder in the cause of "holy wars." *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* When I look out into the faces of congregations at Requiems and Burial services, I can see people literally flinch when they hear these words, their eyes quivering with fear, their body language taut and ready for flight. All of Christendom has much to answer for the willful destruction that has come from our literal response to these words, words that were meant to be poetry and metaphor.

How good it is that today we have the chance to look into these words as truly and deeply as we can, to heal some wounds, to listen again to Jesus talk about the Way - the road to God.

As the followers of Jesus grew in number in the decades after the first Easter morning, they continued to worship within their Jewish congregations as they always had, as their parents always had, as their longest remembered ancestors and prophets always had. It was what they knew and it felt right to them. But by the time the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed about 30 years later, and the devastated Jewish congregations were struggling to return and re-gather into synagogue communities without the Temple that was so much the heart of their worship, the Pharisee party became more and more uncomfortable with the beliefs of Jesus' followers. In places where the Pharisees were the faith leaders, the people of The Way – the Jesus people - began to be barred from what had been their own congregations. John's community of disciples was one of those. When John was writing to them, they felt isolated, scorned, excluded, and pretty desperate without that anchor of their history. They were afraid they might lose their way by themselves and never be able to get to God. This is when John reminds them of what Jesus said just before he died. *Don't let your hearts be disturbed. If you've known me, you'll know the father, too; and from now on you do know him and you've seen him. You'll be ok without the synagogue.*

Don't worry. Come with me, Jesus said. Abide in me. I can get you where you want to go, where we've been heading together all this time. Just be with me. I have to go away now so that I can always be with every one of you and you can always be with me, wherever you are,

when you abide in me. Just be with me, he said. There is nothing else to worry about. Unshutter your heart. Uncover your ears. I will be all the road, all the truth, all the life that you will need - all the road, all the truth, all the life there is. You can stop worrying about this right now. You can stop worrying about anything. Give all your attention to me instead of to what is disturbing your heart. Believe me, in my father's house, there is plenty of room, plenty for you, plenty for everyone. I – God's Word made flesh - am offering you a whole new way for all humanity to be in face-to-face relationship with the father. I do have the road for you, step by step.¹ Just keep walking in my company, abide with me, and you will see the way to go, you will see the way to God, you will see the truth, you will see life. There won't be anything you can't do if you are living in my love.

*It's all about being truly alive, **being** in relationship with God. Abide in me, Jesus says, stay in my love. On this road, on the way to God, you will find a truth and a life that open your heart and your mind to a way of life all the way from A to Z. Now you are afraid because the alphabet of your truth and your life only goes from about M to N. Living in me, the whole alphabet can be yours, too, along with me, he says.*

I think that's what made the crowd so furious with Stephen in today's story from Acts. Stephen was so in love with Jesus he was bursting with visions and love and forgiveness and wisdom. His faith had no limits. He was living with Jesus from A to Z. He was on fire with the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Luke says that the people who heard Stephen that day *could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.*² They could not stand it. They had to plug their ears against his wisdom and passion because they were not so in love with God and they were afraid. Please, please, please, Jesus begs, do not cover your ears with the fury of that scared crowd when you hear voices like Stephen's in your midst. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You can live the Way, the Truth, and the Life from A to Z, too. Just stay with me, he says. You can let go of everything else but my love. If it were not so, would I have told you so?*

Peter wrote, If you have tasted that the Lord is good, let yourself be built into a spiritual house, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you.

The Way to God, step by step, is about relationship. *Be with me, Jesus pleads. Just be with me. There is nothing else to worry about. Unshutter your heart. Uncover your ears. I will be all the road, all the truth, all the life that you will need - all the road, all the truth, all the life there is. Give all your attention to me instead of to what is disturbing your heart. That has been the way to God, step by step, from the very beginning.*³

Don't let your hearts be disturbed. Just keep walking in my company, he says. Abide with me, and you will see the way to go. You will see the way to God, you will see the truth, you will see life. There won't be anything you can't do if you are living in my love.

¹ L. William Countryman, *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel*, 101.

² Acts 6:10

³ Some studies of the smallest particles have suggested that relationship itself may be the basis of all reality. It is well known that on the quantum level, in the search for the smallest components of matter, what we actually end up with is not material “stuff” as much as probability and relationship.... (Catherine H. Crouch, “The Strangely Relational World of Quantum Mechanics,” *Regeneration* quarterly, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2000.)