

Knowing the Way

In the name of him who has prepared for us a place in his Father's home, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We get a lot of people who are lost showing up in Yorktown. And for some reason – maybe it's because the parsonage sits right at the intersection of the roads that lead in and out of town – they often end up asking me for directions. That, or I'll look out the window and see them sitting there in their cars all confused and flustered, trying to figure out which way to go, and I'll step out and offer to help. They're usually trying to find Coin or College Springs, or maybe Polesley or Summit cemetery. If they're really lost, they might be looking for Council Bluffs. None of them is ever looking for Yorktown. It seems that unless you live in or around it, nobody goes there on purpose. So if strangers end up there, it's a pretty safe bet that they're lost. But once they know the way to go, they're fine.

Me? I can't do that: head out somewhere with only a vague idea of where it is that I was going. I need a map. I want to study it before setting out so that I have in mind a mental image of my destination and where things are in relation to it. And I'll keep the map handy and refer to it often so that I'm sure I'm where I want to be. Other people like those GPS systems they're putting in cars these days – the ones that give directions and tell you exactly when to turn left or right; but I'm not ready to entrust myself that much to a computer. For me there's no substitute for a good map when it comes to figuring out how to get from point A to point B. I want to make sure that I know the way.

But historically speaking both GPS and even reliable maps are relative newcomers on the scene. Think about how this country was settled in the 1800s. Then there were no accurate maps, no roads, and at least early on, there weren't even any well established trails. And yet people gathered their families and loaded all the possessions they could carry in wagons and headed out west to California or the Oregon Territory. These were places they'd never seen – only heard described in glowing terms. And other than "keep heading west" they had no idea how to get there. And it's not like anyone could give them directions. Even if they met an experienced traveler – say a trapper or something who knew the ground – such instructions would be far too difficult to remember and to follow. And the results of getting off track even a little bit could be disastrous. You might find yourself missing an important ford and crossing a river at a dangerous point, or climbing into an impossible mountain pass, or encountering a hostile Indian tribe you should have steered clear of. You might even end up lost and without water in a desert that could easily have been avoided if only you knew the way.

So how did they do it – cross this vast country and make it safely to the west coast? They had guides, of course. They followed someone who'd already been there and back and who knew the way. Without good maps and clearly marked trails there was no substitute for a knowledgeable and well seasoned guide. And you had to be careful. You didn't want to get stuck with a novice because then you might end up like the Donner Party or so many other groups that no one's ever heard of because there weren't any survivors. And you had to make sure your guide was reliable too, someone you could trust who wouldn't bail out on and you leave you stranded some place half way there. Only the guide knew the way. Without him, you were lost. So, in a sense, having the right guide was knowing the way. And choosing the right guide was literally a matter of life and death.

All of which brings me to this morning's Gospel reading. Jesus is talking to his disciples in the upper room where they have just celebrated the Passover together. It's the meal we call the Last Supper. In a few hours Jesus will be arrested and his passion will begin. And with this in mind, Jesus has told his disciples that he's going away. He's further told them that where he is going they cannot follow. *Later* they will follow, he tells them; but for the present they must remain and that for some time they will be without him. Naturally this upsets them. They want to be with Jesus. They even protest that they'll follow him wherever he goes – that they'll stick with him through thick and thin and that they're ready to die for him if need be. Peter is especially insistent in this. But Jesus bursts their bubble of bravado. They will all abandon him, he says, and before the cock crows Peter will deny knowing him three times. These are hard words to hear. And they add to the disciples' deepening sense of fear and gloom.

It's in this context, then, that Jesus tells them what we heard a few moments ago. "Don't let your hearts be terrified. Trust in God. Trust also in me." He's telling them that this is all part of the Lord's plan; that as upsetting as these things are, there's a reason they must take place. And as bad as things are going to be for a relatively short period of time, all things remain in the Lord's hands. There's no reason to give in to fear or despair. In the end, it will all turn out for the best.

He goes on to tell them, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places. I am going in order to prepare a place for you." Many people misinterpret this passage. They think Jesus is referring to his Ascension into heaven, and that he's going to be busy up there building and furnishing elaborate palaces for his followers. Feeding this notion is the way the King James Version of the Bible translated the word for *room* or *dwelling place* as *mansion*, which we think of today as a grand and stylish home; but when that translation was done the word *mansion* simply meant any house or humble cottage. But what Jesus is actually saying here is that the dwelling places in his Father's home already exist. They are ready to be occupied. At issue is whether there is a place there for his followers. The question has to do with *who* may live in the Father's house. The answer is only the righteous, which disqualifies all of them. Sinners cannot live in the presence of the all holy God. Sinners deserve only death and hell – eternal separation from the light of God's glory.

That's what's got to change. Something has to happen so that sinners can be counted righteous. So Jesus isn't talking about going into heaven to work on some kind of divine construction project. He's talking about going to the cross. He's talking about bearing the sins of the world. He's talking about dying in the place of sinners, and suffering death and hell and infinite separation from the love and mercy of God himself, so that there will be a place for sinners made righteous by faith to dwell in the Father's house.

This, then, is *the way* Jesus speaks of that his disciples already know: it's the way of death. It's the way of humiliation and suffering and the cross. It's the way all the followers of Jesus will eventually go. And the thing about it is that there aren't any good and accurate maps. We're all heading that way. We all have a cross to bear. The mouth of the grave will open for all of us. And it's dark in there. We can't see where we're going. But we know what we want our final destination to be. The trouble is that it's so very easy to get lost along the way. There are countless hazards and false trails and temptations that can lead you astray. To be sure, most people are led astray, as Jesus said, "Broad is the path and wide the way that leads to destruction, and many are they who go in it. But the way to life is narrow, and few are those that find it." It's like everybody's going to Council Bluffs. They think they're on the right road, following all the signs; but most of them end up lost in Yorktown.

The only solution is to have right guide. And that's exactly what Jesus says: "If I go and prepare a place for you [that is, if I die], I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." We need someone who's been there, death, and who has also returned to show us the way – indeed, to be the Way. It has to be someone can trust; that is, who is the Truth. And it has to be someone reliable, who will never leave or forsake us – whom not even death can take from us; that is, someone who is the Life. *That's* who Jesus says he is. And his resurrection from the dead proves it.

And the thing to see is that he is the *only* Way. It was said in the ancient world that all roads lead to Rome. The idea was that Rome was in the center, and that all roads radiated out from it. So if you got on any road, eventually you'd end up in the City of Rome. It wasn't true, of course. I mean there were all kinds of roads and trails that didn't lead to Rome, like the one from Jerusalem to Damascus. The expression had to do mostly with Rome's importance and its domination of the civilized world around the Mediterranean. Just the same, there are a lot of people out there today who say something very similar about our eternal destination. They say it doesn't matter which path you're on, which faith you follow, who your guide is; none of it makes any difference. As long as you're sincere in what you believe, as long as you try to do your best, all roads lead to the Father's house. What always astonishes me is how the people who say this and things like it do so with such conviction and authority – as if they were experts on the subject and that you're some kind of idiot if you don't agree with them. But what do they know about it? Have they actually proven their theory by trying different paths and showing that they all end up in the Father's house? No. Not one of them. And until one of them rises from the dead after three days, proves that they're alive, and then ascends into heaven, their dearly held belief about all paths leading to the Father deserves zero credibility. I'll put my trust in the One who proved that he is the Way to the Father and to life by defeating death.

And we can do this with absolute confidence because, as Jesus said, it's in himself that the Father is revealed. When Philip asks to see the Father, Jesus says to him, "Philip, you've been with me all this time and you still don't know who I am? The Father is in me and I am in my Father. The words I speak to you are *his* words. The things I do are *his* works. If you've seen me, you have seen the Father." This may be a little hard to understand. Jesus is not saying that he is the Father – they are two distinct persons of the Godhead. What he's saying is that the Father is an infinite spiritual being. Strictly speaking, no one can see him. It's the mission of the Son, however, to make him known. The Son is the person of the Godhead that enters the created order – who unites himself with that which is physical, and thus makes God seeable in the person of Jesus, and hearable in his Holy Word, and touchable in the Sacraments to created, physical beings such as ourselves. Therefore whatever we rightly perceive of God the Father through our senses is only that which is revealed through the Son. And in him too we see the Father's love and gracious disposition toward us in his giving the Son to be the sacrifice for our sin – as well as the resurrected Savior to lead us and be our guide through this life, through the valley of death, and to the place he has prepared for us in the Father's home above. Jesus is the only way to the Father because only through Jesus can we know anything about him. And what Jesus shows us about the Father is wonderful indeed – better than anything we could have imagined.

And then Jesus makes this amazing statement: "Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater than these will he do because I am going to Father." That's quite a mouthful. After all, Jesus did some pretty astonishing things during his ministry; you know, like stilling storms and feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread. Is that what he's talking about? Will his followers do greater miracles than those? Properly understood, the answer is yes; but it's important for us to understand what Jesus considers a great work. The

physical miracles he did, like stilling the storm and feeding the 5000 and even all those healings—he never put much stock in them. They were signs that helped verify who he was: the Son of God. But the 5000 all got hungry again. The Sea of Galilee still has storms. And all those people who got healed eventually got sick again and died. In the grand scheme of things, such miracles aren't that important. And very often they got in the way of the teaching ministry that Jesus wanted to do. People came flocking to see miracles rather than to hear the Word of God. No, the works that Jesus considers great are the ones that last – the ones that get people who are lost to know the Way of life that leads to the Father and that keep and sustain them on that Way. These are the greater works to which Jesus refers.

And think about it: during his ministry, the number of faithful followers Jesus had was always relatively small. Even at the time of his Ascension, there were probably less than 1000 faithful Christians in the whole world. But because he did ascend to the Father to assume all authority in heaven and earth, and because he has empowered his followers with the Holy Spirit to equip them for the ministry, they are performing greater works than Jesus did. Why, Peter alone preached the Gospel to a crowd on the Day of Pentecost and 3000 souls believed and were baptized. Who knows how many the Apostle Paul led to know the Way in his missionary travels throughout Asia Minor and Greece. And consider this: Jesus initiated the Sacrament of Holy Communion and distributed his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins just once to the handful of disciples with him in the upper room. What could be a greater work than that? And yet it's what the typical pastor in one of our churches does for many more people on any given week. It's still the work of Jesus, of course, but the point is that he does it through the ministry of others – specifically through those who know and trust the Way.

And that includes you. Because you know the Way the Truth and the Life, you can help lead others to know him as well. And no, it doesn't mean you have to knock on doors or stand on a soapbox and preach or walk around wearing a sandwich sign. It means that when someone asks for directions, or when you see them confused and frustrated – that is, when they know they're lost and you have an opening – that you introduce them to the Guide who is leading you so that they too will know the Way. May our gracious God and Father grant us many such opportunities to do these great works for him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!