***WHICH WAY?***

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Texts: John 13:33-14:14 and Psalm 25:4-5

Yesterday the world watched as Great Britain officially transitioned from a queen to her son the king. Even in this nation that long ago rejected any king, there was more than passing interest. It was an event with great pomp and pageantry and more pomp. But not all transitions are so pompous. In coming weeks seniors will celebrate the transition from student to graduate

and then out into the working world for some

and back to school for those who are college bound

and on to grad school or the working world for those leaving college.

Some parents will experience the transition to an empty nest and some siblings to being – horror of horrors – the only child left at home with the parents! Some couples will marry and some will divorce and some will welcome a new baby – or two or three – into their world. There are transitions at the death of a parent or spouse or child or close friend. There are transitions in work from one job to another or one city to another or one position to another or from work into retirement. There are transitions in moving to a new home and at some point in downsizing and at another perhaps entering a retirement community. And then there are transitions our bodies go through – like losing hair – but we will skip those for the time being; the list is too long! Transitions are hard, because they force us to do something different, to find a new *way* forward – and the question is: Which *way* will you choose?

In his farewell discourse in John’s Gospel, Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for a significant transition as he anticipates his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection in the coming days. He has precious little time to prepare them for what lies ahead, but he knows they are not yet ready. So, he speaks to them with a sense of urgency, wanting them to grasp what his ministry among them has been about and to offer them hope and reassurance for the bumpy road ahead. The disciples do not seem to share that same sense of urgency, perhaps because they have not wanted to believe that what he told them about his betrayal and death could be true. They would prefer that things stay the same with Jesus there to guide and teach them day to day as it had been for the three years past.

*How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? None. CHANGE! What do you mean change? My grandmother gave that light bulb!* As some of you have heard me say before, in the Valley CHANGE is a four-letter word, to which a friend added, and they are proud of it! We are no better than those disciples in wanting change or preparing for change even when we have been warned that change is coming. Yet, at the heart of Jesus’ message to the disciples, and to us, is change – a new way of being, a new way of living, a new way of following in the footsteps of Jesus when he is no longer present in person.

The disciples seem flummoxed by the possibility that he will be leaving them to a place they cannot go. Despite what he has told them, they still do not grasp that he is speaking of his imminent death and resurrection, not geography. “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” asks Thomas, perhaps anticipating Yogi Berra’s sage wisdom: “*If you don’t know where you are going, you might not get there*.” They want to get to the place Jesus is going, to that place he says he is preparing for them, but they do not know where that is or how to get there. They want a map, for they do not know which way to go even though Jesus tells them that they do know the way.

“*I am the way and the truth and the life*,” says Jesus. “*No one comes to the Father except through me*.” He does not say, “My teaching is the way” or “Believing in me is the way” or “Doing as I tell you is the way.” He says that HE is the way – the way to God, the way to that divine place where he is going; that way runs through him and through him alone, for he uniquely embodies that Way for the disciples and for the world. It is the way of love that he who is love incarnate commanded his disciples to practice in his absence. “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples*,” he says, “*if you have love for one another.*” Conversely it would seem, if we do not have love for one another, then no one will know we are disciples of Jesus; we cannot follow him if we are unwilling to love one another!

Would anyone know that you are a disciple of Jesus by your love for others – not by the cross around your neck or your presence in the pew this morning or the fish symbol on your bumper or the dusty Bible on your bookshelf – but by your love for others? Would anyone know that you are Jesus’ disciple by that standard? Would anyone know that WE are disciples of Jesus in this Covenant family – not by the cross atop our steeple or the word CHURCH in our name or the cross hanging here at the front of the sanctuary or the hymns that we sing – but by our love for one another? Would anyone know?

In his book, *The Need to Be Whole*, Wendell Berry suggests:

*The prescribed love is not the mere sentiment or the mere instinct to which we have reduced it. As I think the Amish, almost alone among us, have understood, love must be a practice, an economic practice, the basis of what some have called ‘the beloved community.’[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Martin Luther King, Jr. is among those who referred to *the beloved community*, recognizing that our love for God must be reflected in our love for one another and that *one another* includes all the others, some of whom we may be hesitant or even resistant to love. Seventeen years ago, a beloved Amish community embraced the family of the shooter at the schoolhouse in Lancaster County, PA at which ten Amish girls between the ages of 6 and 13 were shot; five of them died. In their grief, the Amish families reached out to comfort the shooter’s wife who was also grieving. “*They will know you are my disciples if you love one another*,” says Jesus.

Jurgen Moltmann is a noted theologian who served in the German army in World War II; he was captured and held in a prisoner-of-war camp in Scotland for three years. Writing of that experience he says:

*The kindness which Scottish miners and English neighbours showed the German prisoners of war who were at that time their enemies shamed us profoundly. We were accepted as people, even though we were only numbers and wore the prisoner’s patch on our backs. But that made it possible for us to live with the guilt of our own people, the catastrophes we had brought about and the long shadows of Auschwitz, without repressing them and without becoming callous. In that Scottish camp I arrived at Christian faith.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

“*They will know you are my disciples if you love one another*,” says Jesus.

Simple acts – kindness, forgiveness, respect for people as people – those are acts of love that embody that Way Jesus showed us and fulfill that new commandment he gave us: *Love one another*. It is not always an easy way, but Jesus never said it would be. Jesus comes to teach us by his words and example so that we may walk in that righteous, loving way. But he also comes to ***be*** the Way so that by his life, death, and resurrection we may be restored to right relationship with God. He is the Way for all people, for by his action the whole world is brought into right relationship with God. “*Making and restoring relationship is in the nature of God*,” writes Samuel Wells.[[3]](#endnote-3) When Jesus says there are many dwelling places in his Father’s house he is saying that there is room for all of us to be in right relationship with God, to have a place with God, to be at home with God. In the words of Martin Luther, “*God is what you hang your heart upon*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The way of Jesus is hanging your heart there upon God. And if we hang our hearts there, then we will love one another.

There is a church in Bothell Washington that describes itself in these terms:

*We think the TRUTH about LIFE may just be LOVE*

*and LOVE may just be the Way*.[[5]](#endnote-5)

That description, if put into action, seems to embrace what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples about that Way they are to follow when he is gone, that Way that leads to life, that Way of love he showed them day after day after day. “*You know the way to that place where I am going*,” says Jesus. “You know the way because **I am the way – and the truth and the life**.” Is his way your way, his truth your truth, his life your life – you who call yourselves disciples of Jesus Christ? The world is watching, and “*they will know you are my disciples if you love one another*,” says Jesus. They will know – and so will he! Amen

1. Wendell Berry, *The Need To Be Whole*, Shoemaker & Co.:2022, p.145 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jurgen Moltmann*, In the End – The Beginning,* Fortress Press:2004, p.35 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.149 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cynthia A. Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word: Year A*, Vol.2, Westminster John Knox Press: 2010, p.467 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. EastLake Community Church in Bothell, Washington, website self-description quoted by Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Convergent: New York, 2016, p52 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)