

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 7, 2023

ACTS 7:55-60 | PSALM 31:1-5, 15-16 | 1 PETER 2:2-10 | JOHN 14:1-14

We have this great kids book in the back of the sanctuary called *Picturing God*. It's meant to teach kids about the diverse images we have for God beyond just old white man with beard. And it does that through these beautiful collages and mosaics paired with brief descriptions. So, for example, "God's love pours over us and never stops." Or, "God is our sunshine, and we sprout like seeds." And one of the cool things about this book if you're a theology nerd like me, is it has an index in the back that gives you the scripture reference for each passage.

And one of my favorite collages from the book is an imagining of today's gospel reading where Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." And the collage in the book has some trees, it has some people walking on a path, and it has a star with a cross, and it reads, "Jesus himself is the Way we walk to God—who is our home."

The Way is a really beautiful image that Jesus uses to describe himself. And it has a sort of double meaning to it. One is how the book imagines it. A way is a road or a path. If you need to get somewhere in town, you might take Buena Vista Way or Victor Way. The way makes it possible for us to travel somewhere. It's similar to the door image we talked about last week. Jesus is the path, the road that we walk to God.

But you also might use "way" to talk about a process. If you're struggling to make a cake or play a chord, you might say, "Could you show me the right way to do this?" Or we talk about a certain way of life. In this case, the way is about a set of actions and practices that we do.¹

The images are slightly different, but what they have in common is that they're both about invitation and accompaniment. Because Jesus is the way, he invites us to a journey of discipleship, of following him out in the world. And because Jesus is the way, the Holy Spirit conforms our lives to his pattern of life. So the image isn't static. It's dynamic. It's always inviting us into a transformed way of living.

We heard an example of that transformative invitation in today's first reading from Acts, which is about the death of Stephen. But it's about more than his death. If Stephen died in his sleep at age 100, it would not have made it into the book of Acts. And I would wager that if it was just about Stephen being stoned, it probably wouldn't have been included, either. St. Luke wants us to know this story because of the *way* in which Stephen dies. What is the last thing he does? He asks God to not to hold his persecutors' sins against them. Stephen's way of life, of forgiveness, of mercy, of charity—which sounds an awful lot like Jesus's way of life—is present even when he's being persecuted. The way Stephen dies communicates something about God's mercy. In his death, Stephen invites his persecutors—including Saul!—into a transformed way of life.

It's not a coincidence that in the years after Jesus's resurrection, the earliest believers like Stephen weren't called "Christians" or members of "The Church." They were called followers of the Way. The emphasis isn't about how people identify as individuals ("I identify as Christian.") or their status in a group ("I'm a card-carrying member."), but about being people being formed by

¹ Those of you who have done adult ed with me may remember this guy named Benedict who was the founder of Christian monasticism. And he wrote this little book called that outlined how monks would live in community together. And that book is called either *The Rule of St. Benedict* or *The Way of St. Benedict*. Emphasis on *way* here.

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Jesus (“I’m a follower of the Way.”)² And that invitation that we receive from Jesus is shared with others. It’s not *I’m a Christian. What are you? Or I’m a member? Are you one of us? It’s I’m on the way. Come and join me.*

So invitation always leads us toward accompaniment. This is the one I think is more useful to us. Because so often, the way we imagine our relationship with God is that we need to do something to get to God. You need to do these steps, say these prayers, do this ritual, make this confession, etc., etc. And if you do all that, then you can be in relationship with God the right way. Sometimes we call this “up religion.” You do something to get to God.

But when Jesus says that he is the way, he flips this around on its head. And instead of saying that maybe you can be in relationship with God if you do all these steps, Jesus says that you are in relationship with God the whole way through. Jesus meets us where we are and walks toward God’s promised future with us. God isn’t just the goal of the journey but the source.

One of the best examples of this comes from a very famous book by St. Augustine called *Confessions*, which is part auto-biography, part-spiritual reflection.³ Sometimes people think that the *Confessions* is going to be boring because it was written by a fifth century monk, but it almost feels like a reality show you’d see on Bravo. The premise of the book is that Augustine spends the first part of his life trying to get away from God. His mother Monica is a Christian⁴, and he thinks Christianity’s dumb, so he rebels by hanging out with some heretics. There’s a very funny and profound scene where he steals a bunch of pears and then realizes that he doesn’t even like pears. He gets mad when his mother tries to set him up with a Christian girl to marry. But eventually, he reads one of St. Paul’s letters, understands God’s love, gets baptized, and becomes a bishop.

You would think that he would get to the end and say, “I made some really bad choices when I wandered away from God, but with a lot of discipline and hard work, I was able to get back on track and find my way back to God.” That’s not how he describes it. He says—this is modern English—“You were within and I was without, and I sought you out there... You were with me, but I was not with you.” When he looks back on his life, he expects see a story about how he wandered off the path. But instead, he realizes that there’s never been a moment when God wasn’t present with him. And so even when he thought he was running away from God, God was still with him. Even when he was running away from God, Jesus was still accompanying him on the way.

That’s a really powerful image. Because Jesus is the way, there are no people who wander too far off, there are no experiences which are beyond the reach of God’s compassion, and there are no times when we journey through life alone. Because Jesus is the way, we don’t walk to God, but God walks with us.

We haven’t reached the fullness of God’s truth or God’s life yet. But because of God’s great love in Jesus, we’re always on the way.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² This is obviously a tangent, but it’s remarkable how Christianity in the US has increasingly become about how people identify as individuals and not about their beliefs or participation in a liturgical community. Unfortunately, this has allowed “Christian” to become a synonym whiteness in much of our political discourse in ways that are corrosive to both a multiracial American democracy and faithful liturgical practice.

³ We borrow an image from Augustine’s *Confessions* in our intercessory prayers every Sunday: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

⁴ Incidentally, this past Thursday was Monica’s feast day on our liturgical calendar.

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