

How Can We Know the Way?
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 21, 2023 Seventh Sunday of Easter
Matthew 5; John 14:15-21, 25-27

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, the last Sunday before Pentecost. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

The great commandment says we are to love our neighbor as our own self—neighbor meaning everyone. We are to love one another as Jesus loves. This is the most essential calling for humanity if we are to create a world that is sustainable and just and nonviolent, but loving our neighbor as our self is impossible if we focus on all the ways we are different, or ask whether our neighbor is worthy of friendship.

If we are going to love one another as Christ loves, then we need to learn to see one another as Christ sees, looking with compassion, and seeing our oneness, seeing the Spirit in all. We practice oneness vision in this church. If we can learn to do it in here, we can become instruments of peace out there.

So please linger after the service again today to extend your care and support especially to those you do not know well and those who seem most different from you, that we may all be one.

Call to Worship: Many religions have located a spiritual heart within us where we know things in a completely different way from thinking rationally with just our head.

When Jesus said “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” he was talking about the spiritual heart that experiences the presence of the Spirit within and all around us. This heart is the source of our intuition and creativity and sense of all creation being one.

To have a pure heart is to remove what distracts us or holds us back from knowing in that spiritual and creative way.

Let us open our heart to the presence of the Spirit and the vision of God in all things, all things in God. Let us worship together.

Children’s Time— Jesus promises that if we love and follow his way we will find in us the same Spirit that was in him, and it will comfort, guide and empower us.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, when that Spirit came upon the first church in a big way, in part because they were prepared for it. We can prepare for it, too.

One way to prepare is to have an idea of what the Spirit is. I find it helpful to think about the earth on a certain day over three billion years ago. When that day began, there had never-ever been a living thing on earth, but by the time that day was done, a single cell had suddenly sparked to life, and that was the Spirit at work. More complex communities of living cells kept evolving until human brains came into being with 100 billion nerve cells creating one quadrillion synapse connections. That’s a lot. And that was the same Spirit of love and life and light at work, always creating more love and life and light.

Today that Spirit wants to heal and restore the habitats and conditions necessary for life to thrive, it wants us to love and care for one another, especially for the most vulnerable and oppressed of humans and least of creatures. The Spirit wants to create God’s realm of justice, peace and compassion on earth, so it leads people to think and see and act more like Jesus.

We can prepare ourselves to find that Spirit in us by believing in its existence, and deciding we are on its side and seeking to be guided by it and serve it.

On that first Day of Pentecost when the first church sparked to life, the followers of Jesus remembered that the Prophet Joel said, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

So another way we can prepare is to listen to one another, especially to the young, and heed our visions and dreams. If we listen, we may hear what words or actions the Spirit is moving us to offer the world, and who knows what that will spark to life.

have a tool that can turn our listening heart to the Spirit and open it wide.... Prayer, especially when we listen more than talk, so let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

How Can We Know the Way?

There is nothing like facing death to clarify our vision of life. Today's gospel passage is part of "The Farewell Discourse" of Jesus, spoken when Jesus knew that he did not have long to live. This is the essential wisdom he urgently wanted to convey. He is telling us that we have a calling, purpose and right path for our life, and we need to find and follow it for the sake of the world as well as our own sake.

The language Jesus uses is the language of a wisdom teacher, the language of the spiritual heart rather than the material head. Jesus is telling us from his near-death perspective to let our life be guided by our heart so that we will have truly lived.

The question for us each is, what guides our life's direction, what informs the way we think or speak or act every moment of the day? If we want to follow the way of the heart and Spirit to our deepest calling and a purpose that transcends death, how can we find it?

Just before today's passage in John, Thomas asked, "How can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." He said that the Spirit of God worked through his words and actions.

Gandhi said, "My message is my life." Jesus is saying, the Spirit's message is my life. My life is the map of the way. If you want to know the way, know me. If you want to follow the way, follow me.

Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." His great commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor as our self, but notice the first part of what he says: "If you love me." In order to find and follow the way, the first step is simply to love the way, or to love the person who embodies the way.

Augustine said, "Love God and do what you will." Jesus is saying that if we love him, whatever we do, we will do it in love.

This whole emphasis on love places us in the heart, a physical location deep in our core, which is our spiritual, creative and intuitive center, the place in us where we experience our oneness with the Spirit and all creation.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5:8) The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "Purity of heart

is to will one thing.” The sacred way is to let go of clinging and craving and redirect all our will to loving God and God’s creation.

Jesus says that the world cannot receive the Spirit because it neither sees nor knows it. This is mystical language. By world Jesus means people who choose to live guided by their materialistic brain. The materialist head cannot see or know the way. It requires the spiritual heart. It requires to see God.

Jesus is looking at his own imminent death, and he is looking at the mortal humans and nations around him and feeling great compassion. Jesus knows the way through death to life, and he wants humanity to know that way so they and the earth will live.

Through loving the way we come to see that every step of the way we are already in its destination, in eternal life, the life of God that never dies that is within every living being in every moment.

We become calmer if we trust in that. Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

We do not have to worry about anything, as long as we know the way to peace that Jesus is offering us. If we know and love the way, we will look for it everywhere, and we will find signs for it everywhere.

I knew a Sufi woman who loved and followed the way. Her name was Zahira, which means someone who sees the divine and manifests the divine, and she did that. She loved trying to trace the sacred way through life and she loved discovering the Spirit’s manifestations or epiphanies.

Looking back on her life now I see that it was not the individual signs she found and followed that made her who she was. It was the process of looking for them. It was her daily practice of looking at the world through a lens of love, the lens of the heart’s creative, intuitive, spiritual form of knowing that made the difference in her life.

It filled her with light and it filled her with peace, even as cancer moved from her liver to her lungs to her brain and began taking away her eyesight at age 60. The doctors in the hospital where she spent much of her last month of life said that they had never seen anyone face death with such a “Zen-like” serenity. She knew how to find and trust the way even through the valley of the shadow of death.

If we decide to change our life according to the guidance of the Spirit that we find in our heart, and if we learn the spiritual tools we need in order to practice living from that place every day, we will reshape our lives to become increasingly full of love and peace.

We will get to a place where our hearts are no longer troubled for long when we confront our death or the less extreme changes and challenges that come along the way.

We may feel natural sadness or get lost in a dark night of grief or depression, we may feel fear or even panic attacks, but sooner or later the daily practice of following the way of love will lead us back toward the lasting, deep and true peace of a trusting heart.

We find the help we need along the way, communities of support or providers of therapies or angels or signs in nature. In the end we arrive at the peace of knowing that we have lived the life we were called to live to the best of our ability, following the silent stirrings of the Spirit within us, translating the signs we saw around us, following the way of Christ-like love, in life and in death.

How can we know the way? It is as Jesus said. “You know the way.” You know through the ever expanding vision of the heart. You know through love, not love *of* anything, but love as a way of seeing and knowing and being.

So let us pray in silence, listening for a sense of the Spirit’s presence in our deepest heart, leading us to our next step on the sacred way, and to peace...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The lawn is blossoming
with dandelions and violets.
Let wild bees sip. No mow May.