

July 11, 2021

John 14:1-7

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as Way

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Sermon and Scripture (John 14:1-7)

Labyrinths are ancient, dating back 4,000 years or more. They are tools for spiritual transformation and have been used to perceive and connect with God's presence for centuries. Labyrinths serve as metaphor, sacred geometry, spiritual pilgrimage, religious practice, mindfulness, environmental art, and ways to build community.

The first historical record of Christians using a labyrinth is from 324 C.E. in a church in Algiers, although it is likely labyrinths have been part of Christianity for longer than that. While stories of God's people using labyrinths are not found in the Bible, the themes of following God's path, journeying in faith, and enjoying God's presence, all central to labyrinth experiences, are found throughout scripture. So it makes sense, then that contemporary authors link Christian concepts of pilgrimage, resurrection, and Jesus as the Way with labyrinth experience. One of those authors is Diana Butler Bass, whose book, *Freeing Jesus* was the impetus for this sermon series. Throughout the series, we have used the book as a jumping off point to talk and think about the different ways we understand and encounter Jesus, individually and in various seasons of life.

In the chapter on "Jesus as Way," Bass uses the labyrinth as a metaphor to explain the Jesus she encountered in graduate school and beyond. She wrote, "The way of Jesus is the way of love. It is also a labyrinth, a 'meandering, but purposeful path from the edge to the center and back again'" (Lauren Atrous, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*, New York: Riverhead, 1995, xii). A

typical labyrinth experience involves preparing oneself at the threshold, following the single path to the center, spending time at the center, following the same pathway out from the center back to the threshold, and responding to the experience. The abbreviated experience we had together a few minutes ago is not typical but hopefully gave you an idea of what it might be like to use a labyrinth as a spiritual practice. Did you know there is a labyrinth on the church property? It is at the very back of our property and really needs some TLC, but it is definitely still there, waiting for us to find it again and maybe to use it to find ourselves.

“Faith is about being found”, Bass wrote. Her words resonated deeply with me this week. I’ve never actually said that out loud before, but I’ve realized in the last few days that I have felt them for a long time. When I’ve felt lost, it has been love that has made me feel found. Like when you do the thing you and your partner agreed you wouldn’t do. And you get home expecting an argument and, instead, you get a hug and a quiet listener who helps you sort it all out. Or when what you start questioning what you were taught about God as a child and your friend, instead of calling you a heretic, commits to reading, listening and learning with you as you explore what you believe now. Moments and seasons of lostness come to all of us. My experience has been that what makes me feel found again is when someone shows up to listen and really see me for who I am. “Faith is about being found.”

In *Freeing Jesus*, Bass writes about her own season of lostness, “The little girl in the woods, who had known Jesus as a friend, had been domesticated by rules and dogma imposed from outside, reinforced by her own fears.” I wonder how many of us have experienced a sense of lostness because of a disconnection between what we believe at our core and what we have been taught. Maybe it goes like this: You believe in the God as revealed through Jesus’s life; a God of love, peace, compassion, and justice, but the Church or other Christians have fed

you a God of fear, violence, judgment, and arbitrary rules. And there is a lot of fear associated with turning from what you've been taught. For most people, I think, the fear is less about hell than it is about being ostracized from and rejected by family and friends.

Recently, a friend told me that when she was young, she had a series of scary dreams about making mistakes and unsuccessfully trying to earn God's forgiveness. She went to her pastor and told him about the dreams. He told her she was possessed by a demon. Just what you'd expect from a good spiritual leader, right? She was terrified to tell anyone what the pastor had said because she was certain everyone would believe him. Another friend told me that when she was young she experienced a good deal of anxiety around doing everything perfectly because she had been told over and over again that she could die any time and she be better be right with God when she did. How do you believe in a god who wants children to be afraid?

And I've shared with you before my own story about my uncle, a self-ordained minister, who said over and over again that people who don't believe certain things about Jesus were condemned to hell. Even as a child this didn't make sense to me, so I asked him about the people who live in remote places and who have never heard about God or Jesus. He told me it was the job of Christians to tell everyone and when we don't get to people, we cost them eternity. We are safe, but they are not. Even as a 12-year-old, I was like...hmmm...there's something about that that doesn't jive with "He's got the whole world in his hands..." and "God loves everyone!" This is the same uncle who, when asked, "How are you?" in casual conversation, instead of saying, "fine," like the rest of us, would say, "blessed." To this day, I have a love/hate relationship with the word blessed.

I've said all of this to make the point: There are a lot of people who feel a little (or a lot) lost, some of them are sitting here this morning, some

are watching online, some are on the golf course, taking a walk, or still in bed. None of these people are lost as far as God is concerned. They feel lost because of what is going on in their lives and in their minds and hearts. So, what is the way home for them and for us when we feel lost? It is not creeds, rules, doctrines, right belief, and judgment. The way is love.

Today's text, which talks about "the way," is John 14:1-7:

14 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and 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. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

This passage is part of Jesus's good-bye to his followers. And because of that, I read it a lot at funerals. The language of departure and preparing a place for the ones that come after, is comforting to families and friends who are grieving loved ones. But the truth is, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places..." is less about a future place in heaven and more about the promise of new opportunities for relationship with God for Jesus's followers then and now. There are many places in our minds and hearts, in the world, in our relationships with each other, in which we can connect with and grow closer to God and Jesus's life revealed them to us.

In the text, Thomas asks how they will know the way to the place Jesus is talking about, misunderstanding what Jesus was saying entirely. "Way" doesn't refer to geography (although the journey language is

helpful and common), but Jesus was referring to access, access to connection with God. Jesus said, "I am the way..." Yet, there is no GPS to God. Bass writes, "This quest is a mapless journey---there is no single road---the only guides in it are nature, saints, poetry, song, and Spirit. When you dare leave the road behind, Jesus emerges as the road itself and the Light that guides." German theologian, Meister Eckhart, also wrote about this journey, "There is a journey you must take. It is a journey without destination. There is no map. Your soul will lead you. And you can take nothing with you."

Here's my question: What if there is no ultimate destination for this journey, just love...the kind of love that finds us over and over again? That kind of thinking is risky, though, isn't it? That isn't what most of us were taught. We were taught not to trust ourselves, to believe what the minister says. We were taught that there are rules, special things to say, confess, and promise. We were taught that there is right belief and everything else is wrong. Gray areas do not exist when it comes to God, we were told.

In his book, *The Sin of Certainty*, biblical scholar, Peter Enns, summed it up when he wrote, "Believing we are right about God helps give us a sense of order in an otherwise messy world." The world is messy, though, because we are messy. And we are messy, therefore, our theology and beliefs and ideas are messy. Messiness happens because life happens. We realize that the rules we were taught don't work for everyone. We change our minds. We see ourselves, other people, and God differently in different seasons of our lives. That's the whole premise of Bass's book and the reason I am preaching this sermon series. Jesus cannot be only my idea of who he is or your idea of who he is. Jesus is more our text day seems to tell us. Jesus is the way...the way of love and love looks different for all of us.

But love is always seeking us. If we will let it, love will find us. And if we share it, love will find our family, friends and neighbors who are feeling lost. Love will find a world that is lost. Faith is not a set of teachings, a book of rules, and creeds to recite. Faith is a way of life. Christian faith reveals God's love to the world. It doesn't have to be any harder than that. Bass writes in her book, "...love is a wildly unpredictable course." And I think she is mostly right. Loving people can be a wild ride. But real love is predictable in that it will always bring us closer to its source: God. Like a labyrinth, the path we are on is "meandering and purposeful, and leads us to the center," to God. We sometimes feel like we are lost, but we aren't. We are still on the path and each step we take, each part of our journey, reveals to us something new about ourselves, the world, or a God who loves us and never leaves us alone.

Today, I am grateful to walk alongside you on this journey. Amen.