

## **Finding Our Way**

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14: 1-14

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### *1 Peter 2-10*

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

### *John 14:1-14*

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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.

And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

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Question- "Christian, what did you do at school today?"

Answer-"At both recesses I tried to start a fire but nothing happened."

Momentary panic hit us as we heard the nonchalant words of a failed first grade pyromaniac. Then a wave of relief in realizing if there was even a hint of a seven year old attempted arsonist on the playground, there would have been an urgent phone call home. Startling emotions aside, we asked what he meant.

“I tried rubbing two sticks together to make a fire and be warm.”

Ahh relief, and a stifled smile and snicker.

“But you had a jacket.”

“But I didn’t want to wear it.”

As the old saying goes, ‘context is everything.’ How we hear and interpret what is said comes through so many of our own filters and lenses of experience, expectations, and perspective. If in our initial panic we took Christian’s words literally and responded and reacted to them in that way, that entire evening would have been very, very different. By putting aside our immediate perceptions we could step back and see how what he said factually is not what was meant literally.

Now this may seem to be just a questions of semantics, but how we see the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and how we can fully understand it makes a world of difference. Context colors how we hear and comprehend everything, including Scripture.

Our gospel lesson from John is one such passage where the context is absolutely critical. There is a verse here that is frequently stated but yanked out from its context so its true meaning is lost, is twisted from its intent. It’s words are wielded as a weapon slicing and dividing as to who is in and who is out, who is loved and valued in the eyes of God, and who is not; who is heaven bound and who is not.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

In inter-religious dialogue this is called a ‘clobber text,’ the scripture passages that are most often wielded as weapons in theological debates. The citing of these verses are meant to signal, “BAM, Discussion over. Case closed. End of discussion.”

These words have caused religious wars, have been used as weapons against non-Christians as well as progressive, liberal Christians, and have been misused as permission for bigotry, violence, hatred and anti-semitism. The all-too-often bypassed, discarded, context is that Jesus has just described God’s house as a house with many rooms, plenty of room for everyone, for a whole variety of people. This is the recognition of the faithfulness of other paths, other ways, which also lead people to an experience of God. Jesus’ words, spoken the night before his crucifixion, are not intended to negate everything else he had to say about inclusion and love. We truly can affirm the validity of other religious traditions without abandoning Christianity.

When something is taken out of context, it starts a fire not for warmth, but for division and dominance.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

UCC minister and God Is Still Speaking Writer Matt Laney<sup>1</sup> spoke to this in a daily devotional when he said, “For inclusive, interfaith-minded, UCC folk, this verse can be like fingernails on our theological chalkboard. I mean, who hasn’t heard these beautiful words of Jesus twisted into a pitchfork by hell-bent Christians to skewer people of other faiths or no faith?

Hear me: this verse does not mean only Christians go to heaven because the gospel of John makes little or no difference between this life and the afterlife. When John talks about eternal life he's not envisioning an ultimate post-mortem retirement in the clouds. For John, eternal life begins now by living the Jesus way of nonviolence, doing justice, telling the truth, defending children, forgiving one and all; in other words revealing peace, love and heaven with every step.

You have heard it said, "Life is not about the destination, it's about the journey," but that's not what the Gospel of John would say. For John, the destination, eternal life, is the journey. In other words, what you aim for must be present in every step along the way.

According to the book of Acts, the first followers of Jesus were called "people of the way." Later the term "Christian" or "little Christ" became the main descriptor for Jesus way-farers. We are Christ's body on earth today."

As 'little Christ' we walk in the ways that Jesus did, as we are able, to love radically, to pray deeply, to welcome extravagantly, to obey consistently, to feed those hungry body and soul, to heal spiritual wounds, to be sacrificially generous, and to not lose sight that the way of Christ is to be a people of the resurrection, to remember that we have been called a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Following the way of Christ leads us from darkness to light, from hopeless to hope, from despair to peace, from alone to belonging, by loving God and loving our neighbors.

The way anchors and centers us, it guides and challenges us.<sup>ii</sup> The way makes the bridging of blessed distinctiveness and difference a space for joy, celebration, and thanksgiving rather than a reason for fear, demonization, and retreat. The way is the embodiment of living life abundantly. And, when our way seems unclear, we can turn toward Jesus to find "The Way" prepared for us. Do not let your hearts be troubled; let them embrace and rest in "The Way." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily\\_devotional\\_i\\_am\\_the\\_way/](https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily_devotional_i_am_the_way/) May 14, 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Cheryl Lindsay, <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-the-way/>