

“How can we know the way?”  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 31:1-5  
Reading from the Gospels: John 14:1-11

My father possessed many gifts; a sense of direction was not among them. Back when Rand McNally was a must have and GPS was limited to NASA, we, i.e., he, decided that we could save time driving straight through the night to get to Dallas where my sister was attending grad school. We took turns at the wheel, grabbing junk food at the truck stops, and in taking uncomfortable naps in the back seat as we cruised down I-35 through Oklahoma and into Texas.

At dawn, Dad was hanging onto the wheel with one hand, holding open an eyelid with the other, and trusting his Mercury's cruise control as if it was a self-driving car, only without the self-driving part. Mom, the undisputed world champion car napper, was asleep in the back, and I was riding shotgun wiping the slobber off my cheek and the car door as a pothole woke me up. Now, folks familiar with big D will verify that I-35 takes you right into the heart of the city. Yet, as my sleep fog cleared, I noticed that we were driving past the old Texas Stadium, which was west of Dallas in Irving, Texas; and we were heading further west toward Fort Worth.

He missed Dallas! How do you miss Dallas? Wouldn't the skyscrapers, now faintly visible in the rearview mirror be sort of a clue that something was amiss? It certainly wasn't Lubbock we had passed back there.

And don't you know he was not stopping to ask for directions, proving that sometimes male stereotypes are true. However, in all fairness, getting directions from a local is often less than helpful. *Take a left up at the second light and head down that road for about three miles to the Piggly Wiggly (only that's not a Piggly Wiggly anymore. It's some snooty Italian name, somethin' like the Bolognese Market.) Anyway, turn right there, and go about four, maybe seven blocks to where the Lone Star Bank used to be. Veer to the left at the fork past the bank and you'll be on your way.*

*Thanks. Now tell me again, which way to turn out of the parking lot?* Some of you have lived here long enough that even without GPS, you know at least three routes to uptown that you can follow with one eye closed and select according to the day's traffic. However, finding your way in unfamiliar territory with few clues about the destination can be quite stressful, even terrifying.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled ... 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.”

Now, if the disciples shared a typical group dynamic, there was probably one saint up front who actually did know the way, nodding in agreement, probably already looking up Zillow listings on his phone, appraising heaven’s real estate market, checking on neighborhoods and school rankings. There were probably three or four disciples nodding in agreement while not possessing a clue as to what Jesus was referring. There might have been another five of them, also clueless, but staring at the ground and shuffling their feet, hoping Jesus wouldn’t notice their confusion.

And, as always, there were a couple of jokers in the back, say, like Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson, who never being capable of masking any emotion, were looking at each other, all hand gestures and some serious silent lip shouting. *Shoulders shrugging, hands gesticulating; “What is he talking about?” “I don’t know.” “Ask him.” “No, you ask him.” “You’re such a wimp.” “Who you calling a wimp? Just ask him.”* Finally, Thomas timidly

raises his hand: “*Uh Jesus, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*”

That has to be one of the most honest, most human, most authentic, and most-like-us statements in all of scripture. Ironically, Thomas here is making the confession our Lord actually desires each of us to make, admitting we fall far short of omniscience, professing that we don't know nearly as much as the persona we portray before others. I find myself regularly returning to the prayer of the wise contemplative monk, Thomas Merton. He prayed what I feel: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing...”

It is the opposite of the claim a young George Bailey made in *It's a Wonderful Life*: “I know what I'm gonna do tomorrow, and the next day, and the next year, and the year after that.” Things didn't go according to George's plan, and that's a good thing.

I think Thomas Merton was onto, not just something, but **the** thing, a faithful posture in life. Returning to his prayer, he prays, “But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

We hear the allusion to the 23rd Psalm in this prayer, but don't you wonder if Thomas Merton was also contemplating his namesake in our text as he knelt to pray? 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.”

Now, we cannot read these words without addressing the elephant in the room. There is a sharp division in the Christian community over how we are to read this text: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” One camp points to this text as sort of a litmus test, your signature on the Jesus contract judging whether you

are in or out of God's good favor and can pass through heaven's gate. Such a reading may provide sort of an insurance policy for some, but it leaves a whole lot of people on the outside looking in. It's the theology of the car dealer. *Don't be left out! Only two models left. Sale ends at midnight.*

However, does such a reading actually reflect Christ's intention here? Look at the context. Jesus, seeking to comfort the anxious and confused folks around him says, "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."

Knowing our fears and insecurities, isn't Jesus seeking to head off the perennial human fear? That there is not enough room for everybody, so I'm going to sign up early, get my spot, and close the gate. We're all vulnerable to that paranoia. It's part of the fabric of suburbia. We see new neighborhoods popping up and complain about crowding and traffic and all those "new people". Yet, guess what? Ten to twenty years ago, when you were moving into your forever home, there was a whole host of other folks complaining about you and your impact on traffic, schools, and

neighborhoods. And ten to twenty years before that there was another multitude complaining about them.

So, we tend to just carry that thinking forward, fearing heaven's real estate market is going to get too tight. Fortify the gates, build a wall, keep 'em out. I've got my spot ... But that's not how grace works, is it? What did John say back in chapter 3? "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Who is the actor here? It's about God's intention; not about your achievement, or your genius in signing up early.

Faith is not the possession of a limited love we have grasped and fear there's not enough to share. Faith is about gratitude for an expansive love that is always expanding, never contracting, the Yes of God always reaching farther than our imagination. We should not fret over heaven's boundary lines, we should be in awe of its endless horizons. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

Consider this image. In the book of Revelation, which has historically been associated with John's Gospel, the author conveys this image of God's eternal kingdom, the new Jerusalem. It is not meant to be read as an

architect's drawing to be taken literally, but is to be seen for the meaning it conveys. Rev. 21:16 says, "The city [New Jerusalem] lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles."

That's a big city: 1500 miles from north to south; 1500 miles from east to west. To put it in perspective, from Charlotte's southernmost tip to its northernmost tip is a distance of about 25 miles. 1500 miles. That's a lot of room. Of course, John isn't speaking about actual dimensions, rather he is conveying an image of immensity. Remember, in John's time, the world seemed a much smaller place. His entire world didn't encompass 1500 miles.

Like Jesus in our text, John is saying that in God's kingdom, space is not a problem. There is plenty of room. There is no end to the scope of God's love and intention. We must stop treating faith like some punch card with which we hope to earn a free sandwich, or a locker requiring a combination we have to memorize. Faith is a gift to be received with gratitude and wonder. Ephesians 2 says it plainly, "For by grace you have



been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So, when Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” That’s good news, because Jesus is the reality of God’s yes to creation. God will not abandon what God has made and that includes you along with a world of people whose diversity will endlessly surprise you. Jesus is tirelessly working to draw us in, never concerned over whether there is enough space. That is the way grace works. Read the text — Jesus says, I go ... I prepare a place for you ... I will come again ... I will take you to myself ... Where I am, there you will also be.

This is not a God who blocks out. This is a God who draws in ... reaching farther and farther so that no lost lamb will remain lost. Amen.