

-A friend of mine, who is a pastor at what we would term a more “non denominational” church came to me with a quandary. A son of an active family in his church was not making the right choices. He was 28 years old, had his first girlfriend, and they had decided to move in together without getting married. The worst part about it, my friend indicated to me, was that this young man was strong willed and wouldn’t listen to even his pastor telling him that if he wanted to live with this girl, they need to tie the knot. So now my friend was faced with a difficult dilemma. He had preached and taught in his church constantly about the commitment and mission of marriage. The look on his face as he was talking to me narrowed. “Now,” he said, “ if I can’t get his family to change this young man’s mind, I will have to take disciplinary action.” This disciplinary action included banning this son from worshiping in their community and taking him off the membership rolls until he either changed his way or married this young woman. It was required, my friend indicated to me, in order not to tarnish or pollute the ways of other church members. What struck me was seeing my friend in such despair. Here was a pastor who was at the end of the road theologically and couldn’t find anyway to reconcile his church with this young man, so his seminary training told him he had to cut ties. This was visibly devastating to him.

-When Jesus says “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”, what does he mean? For centuries, our church has interpreted and put more weight behind the second sentence of this verse “no one gets to the Father except through me.” This verse has been used countless times to isolate other people who are not following the “right religion”, or the “right sexual orientation”, or the “right way of living”. Certainly my friend probably had this passage in the back of his mind when he (last I heard) went ahead and removed this young man from his church membership. He was not following the “right” way and thus either needed to be corrected or disciplined.

-Is this really what Jesus was getting at in this text? I am not so sure.

-It’s easy to forget the context that this verse was written in. John’s community, we don’t know exactly where: maybe in Antioch or maybe in Alexandria, was facing huge uncertainty and challenges. The first challenge was that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith and where God was believed to dwell, was utterly destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 AD. Why? Because of some Jewish political Zealots revolted against Rome and tried to take back the holy city of Jerusalem. This revolt failed and the institutional Judaism was in shambles. Followers of Jesus, who still considered themselves very much Jewish, were accused by other Jews as being cowards because most of them were what we would call today pacifists and did not fight against Rome as other Jewish sects did. Now that they lost, the vestige of Jewish leadership found them as great scapegoats for blaming and kicked them out of all places of Jewish worship. On top of this, the Christians became a handy target of persecution for Rome, too, as Christians refused loyalty to the emperor in the name of

Jesus Christ. You see, John's community was now barraged from multiple sides, Jesus had not come yet, the Temple (God's house) was gone, and now they had to ask: where is God in all of this? Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

-I don't think this passage is meant to be read as a mantra of a dominant religion of the world, but read as comfort to a small minority group that is struggling to know who they are. Jesus hits the nail on the head right at the beginning in verse 1: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" Let me do a bible geek tweak of our NSRV translation of this verse because the word that is translated here as "believe" (*pistos*) I think more accurately should be translated as "trust." TRUST in God, TRUST also in me. To a community that was pushed to the very edge of existence, I think that's what they needed to hear. That is what "the way" meant.

-Maybe that's also what we need to hear, too.

-Last week, Pastor John Lund told our colleague group of Lutheran pastors about his attending a conference at the U of M on "Native American Resiliency" in Montana. There is a long history of churches in this state such as the Methodists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and yes, the Lutherans, who settled on native land that was only available to them because of broken treaties. These churches then took away the tribes' hunting way of life and tried to separate them from their Native American spirituality and identity in the name of Jesus, of course. These churches were a dominant force in the forceful removal of native american children and placing them in "proper Christian boarding schools" where there was well documented sexual and physical abuse (St. Ignatius Mission in the Mission Valley being one of the major ones). This practice was still done up to even the 1970's. Pastor John said there were native american college kids whose parents had been taken to these boarding schools and were now struggling constantly with drugs, alcohol, and suicide. "It was really hard being the Christian in that room," John recalled to us. "For most of those folks, he said, Christianity was "a way" of stripping their humanity." Is this "the way" that Jesus is talking about? I don't think so. This is "a way" that closes in and closes off, that twists western modernity into being the absolute goal of life, and robs an entire people of their culture and their humanity. Everything I know and believe about Jesus is the complete opposite of this. Trusting in God's radical openness and embrace of an imperfect world. Trusting in Jesus' giving of new life for all people, whether they pray to Jesus or to Buddha, to Allah or to the Divine Woman Spirit. Jesus' path isn't a closed off, buttoned up, ivory tower theology, but a way of life. That's what it comes down to in the end, I think. I am a follower of "the way", of Jesus Christ as my Savior, not because I can recite the Nicene Creed, or Lord's Prayer, or perfectly recite the order of argument from the Augsburg Confession. I am a follower of the way because I have faith in the way opening me and the world up radically to new life. I can be a follower of the way *and* ask for forgiveness as well as work to dismantle my church's harmful history of abusing of Native Americans. I can be

a follower of the way *and* still reach out to those who don't share my views or maybe are even doing harm to themselves and others. The way of Jesus for early Christians was always more of a practice, not a principle. Maybe that's exactly what our heated and divisive, abused and separated world needs right now. Amen.