

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

--This is another of those stories concerning Jesus with the thick-headed disciples. You know the genre? They never do seem quite to grasp the message or the meaning of Jesus when he is with them.

Even when they appear to be at their best, their clearest, their brightest, they still manage to get it wrong. In the storytelling here in John's gospel, this is another of those moments. In the spotlight this time are disciples Thomas and Philip.

Jesus is preparing them for what is coming--he will be taken from them, but they will not be left behind like hopeless orphans. Perhaps giving them too much credit, Jesus says, "You know the way to the place where I am going" (14.4).

Is there not an insinuation here that where he is going, they should go, too? And is that not what it means to follow?

It is then that Thomas--the same Thomas of later "doubting Thomas" infamy--pipes up: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14.5).

If we do not know the way, how can we get there from here?

How can we know the way? If there's a modern-sounding question in all of this detail, it is that one. Is it at all achievable for us to find a way to move from where we are to where Jesus invites us to go? Is it at all possible for us to get from here to there?

--Well, you may ask, not wanting to jump too quickly into just any course of action, where exactly is here? From where are we starting?

Here is where, as individuals--and as the whole of humanity itself--we find ourselves at present.

You know what here looks like: We can be confused, and distractible, and scattered. Even for years, we can wander around in circles, aimless, pointless, clueless, meaningless. We can spend our precious days chasing after all sorts of things that do not satisfy, cursing our fate or our family, blaming our society or some enemy, for not doing more or being better at making us feel good about ourselves or at least safe and secure; the whole while thinking that our personal value depends upon the size of our investments or the number of expensive toys that we have collected along the way.

Here is seeing ourselves as being in continuous competition with others in a "dog eat dog" world of scarcity, and acting out that aggressiveness in a broad range of selfish, hard-hearted, mean-spirited manners, as we make our personal contributions to leaving many others in the world with limited access to the basic needs of clean water or safe food or a quality of medical care that would allow them to live into the ripe old years of, say, their 40's or 50's.

In other words, here is spending too much of our precious time and ingenuity and effort over years and even generations and, in the end, having the gnawing sense that we've failed in something fundamentally important. Clearly, there is something frustrating and empty in just remaining here.

--OK. Point well taken. And where, then, you may ask next, is there? Where exactly are we instead to be

headed?

Well, there is where we “get” it, where the light bulb finally goes on, where we grasp with clarity what is true and valuable and what is not. It is where, given the obvious needs all around us, we focus ourselves on the rich and promising possibilities right in front of our noses, where we apply ourselves in making a positive difference in our neighborhoods, in our communities, in our world. It is where, in connecting to our true selves, we discover the depth of human purposefulness and satisfaction, not in being consumed in all those self-serving pursuits, but in being of meaningful service to others, especially to the neediest and least fortunate among us.

There is where all pettiness and paranoia are set aside, where the hatchet is truly buried, where grudges and grievances are genuinely surrendered and forgotten, where the folly of walling off ourselves from perceived threats or destroying our enemies are seen for the waste of time and resource that they are--giving them up and replacing them with the understanding that we, in fact, are in this human-experiment thing together; that, surely, we can do no better than getting along; and, given the discerning perception that as a human species we shall rise or fall together, caring about one another and caring for one another.

In a word, there is where God is hoping we shall move.

--OK again. Point conceded. But, you may demand to know, just what is the way that we get from the mess of here to the blessing of there? A fair question--in fact, bringing us full circle, the very question that Thomas asks. Most instructively, Jesus answers it with the simple words, “I am the way . . . and the truth, and the life” (14.6).

In other words, Jesus is suggesting, if you are genuinely serious about the way to get from here (the way that things are) to there (the way that things could be), I am that way. If you are hungering, thirsting, seeking, craving a growing from here to there, then you have only to take in my words, you have only to pay attention to my example, and you have only to follow my way--a way that is true, a way that leads you to abundant life.

Understand, Jesus is saying, I cannot walk this way for you. You have to undertake and accomplish that for yourself. But I have walked it before you. In my having come already to you, in having lived the way that I have lived--in befriending the friendless, in touching the untouchable, in pushing back against the tyranny of the established, in touching the hearts of the poor with compassion and hope, in refusing to get caught up in the endless cycle of trading evil for evil--I have demonstrated in my life, I have demonstrated with my life, the way that you must go.

If you truly desire to move from here to there, you have only to follow this way. When you see me, you see the way. I am the flesh-and-blood exemplar of it. What I have done is to show you what exactly the way looks like, but you must choose it and you must walk it for yourselves. If you do not, then, as an individual, as a human race, you never will get there.

--Those disciples ask of Jesus: Can we get there from here? Jesus’ answer is clear and unambiguous: Positively! “Very truly, I tell you,” he declares, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (14.12). (Wow! So set in the here, so resistant to the there, that’s a bit hard to get one’s head around, isn’t it?)

So, here’s the bottom line: We hear Jesus’ confident conviction that we are completely capable of getting from here to there. That’s most encouraging, right?

However, at times ourselves never seeming quite to grasp the message or the meaning of Jesus, a much bigger question persists. Given that we are able to move from here to there, are we willing to do so?

Presumably, as professing Christians, we know the way.
Will we take it?