

The Way

I think I can find rock and roll lyrics for every sermon topic. My mind is a storage vault of rock and roll lyrics, etched onto my brain cells during endless hours of listening to the radio under my pillow, or putting money in a juke box, or playing those little 45's. Yes. I am that old. One of the many rock and roll songs stored in my brain is "Searchin' by the Coasters. Is there anyone else here who actually remembers that song? The song offers the throbbing beat, the repetition, and the adolescent truth that you expect from early rock. "I've been searching (do wop do wop). I've been a-searchin' (do wop). I've been a searchin' every night and and day..." This guy spends his life seeking, looking, searching. He is focused; he is determined. He compares himself to a Northwest Mountie; he sings: "you know I'll bring her in someday." Aha. The object of his search is, of course, a girl—a girl who will make everything ok. That is the heart of the appeal—the belief that the one finally found will make everything ok. Think of the line in *Jerry Maguire*. "You complete me." And then remember that this is the prequel. It is 50's rock and roll.

If you got that, you get the essence of the lyrics. Yet, although they surely would not qualify as great lyrics or literature, they, as so many rock lyrics, can be the starting point for theological reflection. For life, it seems, has a lot to do with searching. Searching for the tangible things: a house, a new car, a fulfilling career, the perfect dress, the ideal mate. Searching for the even more elusive intangibles. Searching for answers. Searching for self. Searching for signs. Searching for truth. Searching for peace of mind and peace on earth. "I've been a searchin' every night and day" (do wop), and, although rock and roll has become much more sophisticated in the sixty years since the Coasters do-wopped, Bono and U2 are

still climbing the highest mountains and diving into the deepest seas. They are searching. U2 and so many others.

Life as search is at the heart of great, and not-so-great, art, music, and literature. As we listen to a composition by Brahms, or contemplate a sculpture by Michelangelo, or read a poem by Emily Dickinson, we search. As we listen to Springsteen, or look in the mirror, or read graffiti, we search. Think about what goes on inside of you when you search. Think about what you are searching for right now, what you long for, what you want desperately to find, what you feel, somehow, what will make you complete, what will provide an answer, what will make everything sane and clear and simply OK. And, when you are in touch with that feeling within you, you are in touch with a truth shared universally. For to live meaningfully is to search for meaning.

Think, too, of how prominent a theme searching is in Biblical texts. Think of all the searching that goes on before Jesus comes, when Jesus comes, while Jesus is here and after his crucifixion and resurrection. Think of all of those who came before him in Hebrew Scripture, those who are searching for a way—a way out of slavery, a way out of the wilderness, a way out of some dark night of the soul, a way into the Promised Land. Think of how often the children of Israel turn away or go the wrong way. Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah: “In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3 NRSV) Remember John the Baptist and how he echoes Isaiah’s words: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth.” (Luke 3:4b-5 NRSV) Think of wise men and shepherds, of the baby-killer Herod violently searching for that perceived threat to his power, of Mary and

Joseph frantically searching for the adolescent Jesus as he stays behind to hang out in the Temple. Searching every night and day.

Reflect on all who search for Jesus—the sick, the possessed, the curious, the hostile. Remember all who search for a way in the Gospels—a way to escape oppressive, Roman rule, a way to be healed, a way to be fed, a way to sanity, a way to social acceptance, a way to eternal life, a way to salvation, a way to peace, a way out of mess and misery, and a way to God. Think about how many stories in Scripture are about those trying to find a way, trying to find their way, and you will realize that you are in good company. The rock singer, the artist, the prophet, the Baptizer, and you: you may all say it differently, but you are giving expression to one of the most fundamental human experiences. You are searching. And is all searching not, in some way, a search for an answer, a search for some undeniable truth, a search for meaning, a search for a way to make sense out of it all, a search for the Divine?

Because of these things, searching for a way can make you just plain tired. It wears you out. When the search becomes too exhausting, when confronting the truth is too painful, when the problems seem insurmountable and the answers too elusive and obscure, we feel there is no way out. None. It is then that the words of the prophets, and even the words of Jesus himself, seem hollow, that promises seem empty. It is then that we are likely to take the road more traveled, more likely to turn to popular culture, to embrace the way du jour. Check out the self-help books, the You Tube spots, the self-appointed gurus. Go on the newest food craze. Try celebrity worship. Excessive exercise. Alcohol. Pills. More pills. Food. More food. Work. More work, Something. Anything.. Some way. Any way. There must be a way. Show me the way.

We have all had those moments—many of them--moments when we have thought that there is no way out. It is a lonely and helpless place to be. It is a four o'clock in the morning place to be. It is a pull the covers up to your chin, curl the pillow around your ears, hit the snooze alarm permanently place to be. It is a drive-you-to-drink place to be. Listen to the language we use to describe that place. I don't know which way to turn. I don't know which way to go. I feel like there is just no way out of this.

Often, in our angst and anxiety, not knowing which way or what way, leads us to a multitude of unhealthy ways, some so embedded in our behavior patterns that we do not even realize we are choosing the wrong way. We reach for all kinds of drugs. We seek more approval. We work more. We get quieter, more withdrawn. Or we get bombastic. We are nasty to one we love. We shop. We turn to that which has anesthetized us to the pain of the unfulfilled search, and yet the narcotic of choice always wears off. Always. We all have perfected our ways of avoiding going the Way (capital W) that we are supposed to go. We do whatever it takes to go around and under but not through. It is at those times when we should take a second careful look at the words of Isaiah and the words of John: the way of the Lord is through the wilderness, through the wilderness. John's words get right to the heart of the Gospel. Get ready. Face what you need to face. Deal with things. Rethink. Repeat. For the love of God, turn things around; transform your life; transform yourself. Embrace a way different than all the ways you have tried before. Every valley, every valley—your valley—shall be filled, and the twisted, the distorted, the messed up will be straightened out. It's a new way.

Jesus talks about this when he said: "I am the way, the truth, the life." But, like so many other familiar words, if we are honest in our search, we need to ask: what does he mean? What is he talking about? How is he the way? How is

Jesus the way?

The fourteenth chapter of the Gospel called John contains the words Jesus speaks lovingly to his disciples as he prepares to leave them. The disciples are confused and very frightened; they feel a lot like we do when we confront our dark days and darker nights. Jesus is leaving them, so of course they are desperate and distraught. They don't know which way to turn. Jesus consoles them: "Let not your hearts be troubled." He assures them that, in his Father's house, there is a lot of room. A lot. Picking up on the words of Isaiah and John, Jesus says: "I am going to prepare a place for you." He is going away to prepare for them the universal and permanent possibility of an abiding communion with his Father.¹ He assures them: "You know the way I am going." This prompts Thomas' question, asked on behalf of all of us who have ever felt lost, ever doubted. "Lord, we do not know where you are going: How can we know the way?" How can we know the path, the road, the route?

"Thomas' question reflects an ongoing unwillingness to face all the implications of the end of Jesus' story."² The disciples should know by now where Jesus is going. But when Thomas expresses his doubt, he "...opens up the possibility for Jesus' self-revelation as 'the way.' He is the way to the Father..."³ It is more than self-definition. When he says "I am the way" here he is not telling us who he is, he is telling us what he does. "Jesus is...the unique and saving revelation of God...God is revealed in the life and word of Jesus, and the disciples should know that Jesus' departure to go to the Father will be through a lifting up...The way of Jesus is a loving and total gift of himself unto death..."⁴

¹ Francis J. Moloney, S. D. B. *The Gospel of John* Volume 4 in *Sacra Pagina*, edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 394

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁴ *Ibid.*

That is why it is so hard; that is why we struggle against it. That is why the disciples are so distraught—because the way is right there in front of them. The way of truth and life is staring them right in their confused faces, but acknowledging it and accepting it, giving up all the other ways they have always traveled, is a journey that confounds them, frightens them. What does it mean to follow Jesus? The passage in John makes it clear. The way of Jesus must also become their way, our way. “The passage closes with the reason why the disciples faltering belief in Jesus must hold firm. Belief and trust...are the only ‘way’ to their goal: oneness with the Father.”⁵

Eugene Peterson says it this way: “Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life. But this isn’t easy. It is easier to talk about what Christians believe, the truth of the gospel formulated in creeds and doctrines. We have accumulated a magnificent roster of eloquent and learned theologians who have taught us to think carefully and well about the revelation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is easier to talk about what Christians do, life as performance. The behavior appropriate to followers of Jesus is then codified in moral commandment and formulated vision statements and mission strategies.”⁶

I love his line, so let me say it again: “Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life.” What he says is that the way is about doing, the following is about going, the loving is about acting. What he says is a lot of people talk the talk, but not a lot of people walk the walk. What he says to me is that it is easier to write fancy words than to live them. What he says is that there are a lot of people who think that Christianity is about being the morality police, that we like judging a whole lot more than forgiving. What he says is that the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Transparent Lives in The Christian Century*, November 29, 2003, 21-22.

Pharisees are alive and well and living in Chicago, Baltimore, Des Moines and Washington D. C.

“It has always been more difficult to come to terms with Jesus as the way than with Jesus as the truth, more difficult to realize the ways our thinking and behaving get fused into a life of relational love and adoration with neighbor and God, with God and neighbor.”⁷ It has always been easier to sweetly sing: “Jesus loves me, this I know” than to authentically love someone; it has always been easier to ask the Jesus questions to accept the Jesus answers.

Why? Because it really does demand that we give up our stubborn, selfish ways, that we go the way he leads us. To follow Jesus, to go his way, is to give up the old for the new, the trite for the profound, the temporal for the eternal, the popular for “are you crazy?” To go the Jesus way is to reach out, to risk, to imagine. Things everyone tells us are important aren’t. Things we freak out about don’t matter. Somewhere deep down inside we believe that his way just asks too much of us. Sinatra did it his way, and we all want to do it our way or the highway. Or so we think.

On your Christian journey, especially in these says like no other, as you search, there will be a Jesus moment for you. As you drive or cook or work or play, as you live your very ordinary life, as you are on your everyday way, there will be a Jesus moment. In that moment the one for whom you search will come to you. If you are genuinely searching for him, he will come to you. And deep within you, in the place where the truth resides, you will hear him ask you: “Going my way?”

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. August 16th, 2020

⁷ Ibid., 22.

