

Show Me the Father  
John 14:1-14  
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I was once at a ministers' gathering with another clergy who was about midway through his three-month sabbatical. You could tell he was different from the rest of us because he was smiling and looked like he was getting a good night's sleep. He passed around a picture that showed his gift to the congregation during his time away: a life-size cardboard cutout of himself in his robe. He said his associate put it in the pulpit during the sermon time, and it took three weeks for anyone in the congregation to notice he was gone.

That got me thinking about the things we leave behind to help people remember us. A life-size cardboard cut-out may be a bit extreme, but we leave pictures, letters, tokens of familiarity. What do we leave behind when we go away so that the people who love us can keep on loving us, even when we're not there?

That's exactly what Jesus' disciples are struggling with in today's passage. It takes place in the Upper Room on the night when Jesus is arrested. He'll be crucified the next day. He's told his disciples several times that he is about to leave them, but now they realize he wasn't kidding and they are beginning to panic. What will they do when their leader is gone? How will they remember him? Who will be their guide?

Jesus tries to comfort them by reminding them that they will not be forgotten, that he will come and show them the way to God. He tells them, "You know the way to the place I am going." Thomas, always the skeptic, asks, "Lord, we don't know where we're going. How can we know the way?" Jesus' answer to this question may be the single most misused and destructive passage in the whole Bible. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

How could such an uplifting, comforting passage be so damaging? Because the church has contorted it to mean if you don't believe in Jesus, you're going to Hell. Faithful Jew? Going to Hell. Devout Muslim? No heaven for you. Questioning agnostic? Your elevator is going down. You see, we Christians got it right and all you other people got it wrong. Of course, that's said with compassion and humility. Gosh, I'm really sorry you're going to spend eternity in damnation. Such a pity. But, you know, John 14...

Here's where I think interpreters of this passage went off the rails. Jesus is not setting a universal policy here. He's not laying down an ultimatum: "Believe in me or else!" He's not saying that God is so limited that God can only work within a confining set of boundaries. He's not drawing a line and saying who's in and who's out. The disciples were concerned that they would lose their connection to God, so Jesus reassures them that they already know God because they know him. I don't believe Jesus is demanding allegiance; I believe he is inviting them to follow his example, to walk his path, to live out his lessons. The way to God for those who believe in Christ is to be Christ-like. That's how we can know God. Those who misuse this passage would be better served worrying less about who's in and who's out and more about whether or not they are following the inclusive hospitable, accepting example set by Jesus.

Philip follows up Jesus' statement with a simple request: "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." In other words, "Jesus, if you can just prove to us

that God is with us, if you can prove to us God is real, then we'll be OK. Nothing to worry about." How often do we make these kinds of statements: "Just show me a sign, God! A lightning bolt, a rainbow, a bag of money dropped on my head, anything!"

But is it ever really enough? Philip says, "If you show me God, then I'll be satisfied." But would the demand for proof end there? If God showed up at your door one day and say, "Hi, it's me, there ya go," would that be enough for us? Or would we then want to have a conversation, or request a miracle? Jesus tells Philip that he's already seen God. He says, "Don't you know me, Philip? If you've seen me, you've seen God." But Philip wasn't looking for him. God comes to us in a million different ways, but we have to have the eyes to see him.

One of my favorite memories of Boy Scout Camp was lying out in a field one night looking up at the cloudless sky. When I first looked up, all I saw was a random scattering of stars. But then our leader pointed out Orion, and the Big Dipper, and Cassiopeia. And suddenly, this random scattering of stars became patterns and images. I needed someone to help me see what was all around me. That's what Jesus does for the disciples and for us.

We can only see what we are trained to see. An astronomer will see far more in the sky than an untrained eye. I look at a plant and I see something to be mowed over; a botanist looks at a plant and sees an intricate lifeform. Someone might look at a child's paintings and see a mess of lines and colors. A parent looks at it and sees fine art, worthy of a prominent place in the Louvre, or at least on the refrigerator.

The point is we can only see what we're looking to see. Philip wasn't looking for God when he looked at Jesus, and yet there he was, right in front of his face. Is God right in front of our face? Are we looking for something else instead of looking for God? Could those coincidences, those lucky breaks, those unexplainable things be more than just a random scattering?

This divine eyesight was crucial for the disciples, because they were about to be on their own. The only way the disciples would be able to be transformed from a rag-tag bunch of wishy-washy followers into confident, bold leaders was if Jesus isn't there. As long as Jesus is there, there's no reason for them to step up. But once he's gone, it's up to them.

That reminds me of one of my favorite movies, "Hoosiers." If you were born in Indiana like I was, they hand you the DVD along with your birth certificate. Gene Hackman is Norman Dale, the controversial coach of an Indiana high school basketball team, and his assistant is Shooter, an alcoholic good-for-nothing played by Dennis Hopper. Coach Dale knows Shooter is a basketball mastermind, but he's gotten lost in his addiction. So, during a game, the coach conspires with the referee to get thrown out, meaning that Shooter has to take over the team. He does, and using the ol' Picket Fence play, leads the team to victory. The coach had to leave in order for Shooter to find himself.

"Show us the Father." Wouldn't that be great? We all want that. "God, where are you?" But maybe that's not the right question. First, who are we to put such demands on God? Jesus says, "What am I, chopped liver? Whoever has seen me has seen God." Second, to even make such a demand means our focus is in the wrong place. We demand some kind of proof before we are willing to fully commit to our faith, and yet it is through committing to our faith that we discover the way of Jesus.

About the best thing in the world right now is “Some Good News,” an internet news show hosted by actor Jon Krasinski. Each week, Krasinski mixes humor and pathos to show that, even during these trying times, there is good in the world. On the last episode, he paired up four graduating seniors with four famous people for a conversation. The celebrities included Steven Spielberg, Malala, Oprah, and Jon Stewart. The senior paired with Stewart had a profound question for him: “Now what?” I’ve been asking that question a lot myself lately. Now what?

I thought Stewart’s answer was one of the most profound things I’ve ever heard. To paraphrase, Stewart said that this student had been focused for four years on completing assignments, writing papers, reading textbooks. That’s all done now. Then Stewart said this: “Stop completing things. Start living them.”

The disciples are so focused on getting answers to their questions, on doing things by the book, on make sure they know every turn on the road ahead. They wanted to know the future, what was going to happen, what they were supposed to do to be faithful. They wanted to complete things. Instead, Jesus says, “Hey folks, here’s what you need to do. Stop worrying about what you need to complete. Instead, starting living the way I have shown you.” Stop completing things and start living them.

Those words are helpful to me as we face an unknown future. I want to “complete” quarantine so I can get on with my life. I want to get back to normal. I want tangible proof that everything is going to be OK. But what I hear Jesus say is, “Don’t worry about that stuff. It will work out how it works out, and you have no control over that. What you can control is how you live your life now, how you imitate my example, how you follow my way. Because my way is truth and it brings life.”

How were you like Christ yesterday? I bet you have some great examples. How were you unlike Christ yesterday? Don’t worry, you don’t have to say it out loud. But remember, if you want to see God, look at Jesus. Look at how he cared for those who were most vulnerable. Look at how he touched those that others discarded. Look at how he stood up to oppressive power structures that operated on greed and selfishness. Look at how me was present in the moment with those who most needed to know they weren’t forgotten by God. He didn’t worry about completing things; he lived them. What can you do to be a little more Christ-like today than you were yesterday? Jesus says, “You know the way.” Let’s start living it.