

Show Me the Father  
John 14:1-14  
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Jeanne had been battling cancer for years and was just tired. She'd lived a long life, got to see her kids and grandkids reach important milestones, and now she was ready to go home to her creator. We'd talked a lot about her death and I knew she was at peace. As I sat by her hospital bed in her living room, I held her hand and asked her a question. "Jeanne, when you get to Heaven, if there's anyway possible, can you send me back a message so I'll know you made it?" She smiled. "I sure will." That was 2006 and I still haven't heard from her. Of course, I wasn't concerned about Jeanne making it to Heaven. I knew she would. I really wanted her to send me a message so I would know Heaven actually existed.

You may think my request was rude, out of order, insensitive to the situation. But it was no worse than what the disciples say when Jesus tells them he's going away. Thomas, ever the skeptic, says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Philip echoes my words when he says, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

This scene takes place in the Upper Room on the night Jesus will be arrested. Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die, but that was months ago. I knew Jeanne was going to die someday, but that day always felt far off...until it wasn't. Now, the reality of Jesus's death was smacking the disciples in the face. Jesus, the miraculous man they have been following around for three years, is about to leave them. And they didn't want to be left alone. Like me, they want to know what comes next.

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's one of the fears surrounding death, isn't it? That we'll forget. I keep voicemails on my phone from people who've died so I don't forget what their voice sounds like. What do people leave behind to help us remember them? A life-size cardboard cut-out may be a bit extreme, but we leave pictures, letters, tokens of familiarity. My dad's bible has a central place on my bookshelf at home. 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? Jeanne never came back, but I still have my memories of her. What would the disciples have of Jesus?

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 asks his question, and Jesus's 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, even some of you other Christians. 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.

For me, the more troubling part of this passage is Philip's desperate plea. "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." Put another way, "Jeanne, just come back and give me a sign and then I'll know for sure. A lightning bolt, a rainbow, a bag of money dropped on my head, anything!"

Jesus responds to Philip, "You want to know the way? I am the way. You want to see God? Look at me." In other words, "You don't have to wonder about God or Heaven or anything I've promised you. I'm right here. Look at me." I sometimes feel like God is saying that to me. I'm fretting about something, doubting God's promise, wondering if this whole faith thing is real, and God says, "Did you see that sunset? Did you hear that baby crying? Do you feel that hug? I'm right here." I believe God comes to us in a million different ways if we have the eyes to see God.

But we can only see what we are conditioned to see. An astronomer will see far more celestial bodies and constellations in the night 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 and delicate 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? I wanted Jeanne to come back and give me a sign, but she left with wonderful memories, words of encouragement, the legacy of a life lived in faith. Who says she's dead? Sure, her body gave out, but she has already shown me the way in how she lived and loved and put her faith into action.

“Show us the way to the Father.” Wouldn’t that be great? Step-by-step directions we could follow. But maybe that’s not what we need. 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 want to know the future, what is going to happen, what they are supposed to do to be faithful. They want to complete things. Instead, Jesus says, “Hey folks, here’s what you need to do. Stop worrying about what you don’t know. Instead, start living the way I have shown you. There’s a lot you don’t control. 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.”

“Show me the Father.” But, like the disciples, we already know God, don’t we? Because we know Jesus. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit. We have a Bible and a conscience and a community of faith around us that shows us God every single day. Maybe what we should be asking is not, “Show me,” but “God, how can I show you to others?”

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 he was present in the moment with those who most needed to know they weren’t forgotten by God.

What does God look like today? He looks like nurses and missionaries and teachers and Little League coaches. He looks like me. He looks like you. Go now to do even greater things than Jesus – not miracles and signs, but deeds of humility, and service, and love. You are the body of Christ. You may never have to face the decision whether or not to die for your faith, but every day you face the decision whether or not to live for it. What can you do to be a little more Christ-like today than you were yesterday? Jesus says, “You know the way.” We do, don’t we? Let’s go live it.