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Title: The Way: Help

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Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [John 14:15-20](#)

Text: [John 15:1-8](#)

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The conversation this week sounded a little like a SNL skit. It was about our sermon series which I've titled "The Way." A church member saw me at the store and asked, "You still preaching on the Way." "Yes," I said. "No way!" he said with a big smile. I responded, "Way!" He comes back with another. "You are really going out of the way to

tell about your Way. One of the reason I've titled it the series The Way was a spiritual pilgrimage I took in Spain, the Camino de Santiago. In English, it is "The Way of Saint James." Going out of the way? Really. Okay, I thought, two can play this game. "Sorry, that's the way the cookie crumbles." He smiled and said, "Well, I see this conversation cuts both ways. So, what is actual title this week?" "The Way—Help." He said, "Like help is on the way." "No, not quite. There is no 'is.' Simply help, the help we have on the way."

Before we get to the help we have on the way, let's circle back and talk about the biblical basis for the title. The Greek word for way is "ὁδός." Can you say "hodos?" There you go. You are well on your way to being a Greek scholar. More will follow. The way was a very early term for the Jesus movement, used before the invention of the term Christian. Jesus proclaimed "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) but even before he made this statement, there was a strong sense that Jesus was teaching them about "a way." He teaches about the way a lot. The word *hodos* is used over 100 times in the New Testament, 62 of which are found in the gospels. You don't see that as clearly as you might in our English translations because sometimes the word "*hodos*" is translated path or road. But if you read the gospels in the original Greek, it would jump off the page.

1

In all four of the gospels, John the Baptist prepares "the hodos-way" for Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Elijah. Jesus sums up his Sermon on the Mount saying "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road (*hodos-way*) that leads to destruction, and many enter

through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road (hodos-way) that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14) The way became a word picture about following Jesus. Following was about a way of living, more about a lifestyle than about believing. This is what Jesus offered when he invited people to be his disciples or in Hebrew, to be his "talmidim." The first disciples, first "talmidim," ordered their lives around three goals. Be with Jesus. Become like Jesus. Do the work of Jesus. That's our working definition of discipleship. Discipleship is a lifetime commitment to be with Jesus, become like Jesus and do the work of Jesus.

As simple as it sounds, it doesn't just happen. You need help. Jesus knows this and says, "You've got it." On the last night of Jesus' life, Jesus gives final instruction about "the way" as he tells them he is leaving. He reminds them that after three years, they know the way to the place he is going. Thomas is confused and says so. "...we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth and the life." (John 14:5-6) I'm sure it was confusing for all of them. If the first goal of discipleship is to be with Jesus and Jesus isn't going to be around, how can they possibly be successful? Jesus says, "Don't worry. I'm not going to abandon you. You aren't going to be orphaned." "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever, this is the Spirit..." (John 14:16-17a)

Depending on your translation, Advocate is sometimes Helper or Counselor. But it is actually a tricky passage to translate. "Another Advocate in Greek is "ἄλλος παράκλητος--allos parakletos". There you are; another Greek lesson. By the end of this sermon, you are going to be able to teach Greek. The word "allos" means identical, the same in every way. Jesus is saying, "I'm going to send another one just exactly like me, identical in every way. He'll be for you what I have been to you, your guide on the way. This identical helper is "...the Spirit of truth...You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you." (John 14: 17a, 18)

One last Greek lesson. Abide is the word Μένω- meno. It can be translated remain or stay or abide and may need to be all three at the same time. Jesus says, "This identical person, the Spirit will remain with you, abide in you, stay with you. Just like you've been hanging out with me, he will be hanging out with you, and you with him." To drive home the point that to be with Jesus and to be with the Spirit will be the same, he follows up with this. Count the number of abides as I read it to you. "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." "Whoever does not abide in me is

thrown away like a branch and withers..." "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." (John 15:4-8) Did you count? Eight. Actually, if we were to read on two more verses there are three more "menos" for a total of 11. I think Jesus is trying to make a point, don't you? He is going to remain with them, stay with us, abide with us and we can continue to "be with Jesus." If the first step is to "be with Jesus", Jesus says, "You've got that through the identical one who will abide with you." ²

In the previous weeks, I pointed out that the easiest place for that to happen is in worship, at the way sign, the marker where Jesus as our Way, points the way to grace and eternal life. There is a powerful story in the gospel of Luke that connects this with what Jesus promised. You will remember it. Two of Jesus disciples, his "talmidim" are walking home from Jerusalem on Easter evening. On that Emmaus road, Jesus approaches but for some reason, they didn't recognize him. They invite the stranger to join them on the way and then, when they get to their destination, what do they say? "Abide with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over. So he went in to abide with them." (Luke 24:29)

Any follower of the way in the early Church would have known what that meant. They would know that it is really a prayer to Jesus, "Will you abide with us?" That is to say, will you be with us, remain with us, never leave orphaned? As they sit at a table, and the stranger takes the bread and breaks it, their eyes are opened. The disciples say, "It's the Lord. He has come to abide with us, as he promised."³ If the first step of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus is to be with Jesus, we have help. The Holy Spirit is our helper.

But it's not enough to be with Jesus. We are to become like Jesus, to become so much like Jesus that we are transformed into his image. Paul talks about this transformation as a metamorphosis, like a caterpillar that does the hard work of turning into a pupa and then being transformed into a beautiful butterfly. This transformation takes place over time by living like Jesus, understanding God's word, practicing the spiritual disciplines within a community of faith. But it doesn't happen alone. We have a partner, a helper. Listen to how Paul describes it. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17) That's the "allos parakletos, Jesus identical advocate and where the Spirit of the Lord is—that's abiding. "And all of us...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3: 17-18)

The person, the power and the empowering presence of God, the Holy Spirit, the identical one is transforming us. Transformation is the complete radical overhaul from the inside out and we start becoming like Jesus. All of this is the byproduct of the Holy Spirit. We have help.

It is important to note that there is a process that is taking place. Paul says we are transformed from "one degree of glory to another," that is to say one step at a time. Just like a caterpillars a butterfly, there is a process that takes place. Spiritual formation is a lifetime process where are shaped by story, practice and community. The time-tested prescription for discipleship remains the same, what Nietzsche described as "a long obedience in the same direction." It doesn't happen in one moment but a thousand moments when you study God's Word, practice Jesus ways, live in community, while abiding in the vine. Remember what Jesus said, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." (John 15:5b)

What's that fruit look like? Paul tells us. "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5: 23-24a) This is not a list of behaviors. This is a picture of the inner disposition of a disciple of Jesus who has been transformed into becoming like Jesus. This is what the long road of discipleship brings and the wonderful news is we have help. When we place ourselves in the context where we learn story, practice disciplines, within community, the Holy Spirit will do the deep transformation work within us.

Then, we are sent. It is the third goal of following Jesus. Do the work of Jesus and fortunately, the Holy Spirit is our partner in this venture too. On Easter evening, Jesus shows up to his disciples and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21-22) Just three and a half days earlier, he promised to abide with through the Spirit. Now he blows him into them not just so they won't feel abandoned and alone, not just so they will know his ways, not just to bear the inner fruit of love, joy, peace, patience and the like, but so they will go into the world. They were being sent, to make more disciples, more talmidim, to baptize and teach and he promises to go with them, to go with us. The last thing he says as he ascends into heaven. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28: 20) We have a help.

With that help, the first followers of the way went into the world. Three thousand new "talmidim" were added at Pentecost. Day by day as, people were added to their number and historian after historian of the time and period said that the followers of the way grew because of the quality and character of the lives which they shared with everyone that met. They had

help. The Holy Spirit had transformed their lives and sent them into the world to love like Jesus with joy, peace, patience and kindness.

I have an example of this from my walk on the Camino Ingles. It was the work of two followers of the way with a stranger, not unlike that wonderful Emmaus Road story.

The second day of the Camino Ingles is a rugged one. The walk is very steep with an initial climb of 1.2 miles out of Pontedeume at an 80% incline that felt like you are walking nearly straight up. Some of the guide books even tell you how to take a taxi and avoid the hill. That seems to me to be cheating but nevertheless, some choose it as an option. A third of the way up, I met Lisa, a woman from London who was having a tough time. She was terribly out of breath and tearful, about to give up. I stopped, caught my breath and offered to join her on the rest of the way up. "I don't think I can finish." "Sure, you can." I said, "We are almost there." I really believed that, maybe hoped that. As it was, we made it to the top and were rewarded with a glorious view.

It wasn't very long before we caught up with my previous day's walking partner, Roselita, the woman with a butterfly on her neck representing the spiritual transformation she was seeking on her walk. Lisa spoke some Spanish so they began a conversation and soon, I was outed when I heard Roselita say, "El Pastor." Lisa turned to me and said, "Now I understand. That is why you did it." "Did what?" "Stopped and helped me." "No, I was out of breath too. We helped each other," I said. "Whatever, it was kind of you." Then she announces, "I'm not religious. I haven't been in a church in over 30 years." I thought about it for a moment, thought about what sort of hurt that was behind that statement. Then I said, "But you are walking a religious pilgrimage. Why?" "I'm hungry. I am a forager." And went over and pulled some grapes of a vine, handing some to Roselita and me.

We walked on an hour and she was indeed foraging nearly every step of the way. We stopped for a second breakfast and she watched Roselita and I pray for our meal. Then, we started off again. We walked a couple of hours more down the Camino until we came to a 11th century Romanesque chapel, still in use. It was Sunday morning and a man was out front about to ring the bells. On the previous day, Roselita and I had visited every church we passed. And as we headed into the courtyard of this chapel, Lisa stood back. We were walking into the chapel when Roselita fell back, and extended an invitation to Lisa, waving for her to come in. I thought, "Over 30 years." She hesitated and then, she came in for a moment or two and then, left without saying anything.

We walked on for the rest of the day, entered the Bentanzos and as we went separate ways, made plans to walk together the next day. We didn't walk together again. Over the next three days, I didn't see her on the Camino. I did see her one last time. It was on the day after my pilgrimage was finished. Each day at 11:00 am, there is pilgrim worship in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a sanctuary that holds 1200 people but always has people standing at the side. I didn't notice until it came time for the Holy Eucharist. Pilgrims were lining up from all over the world. There, on the opposite side of the cathedral, was Lisa, getting ready to take communion.

I don't know. I hope that what I saw was Lisa beginning to address that hunger. But this I do know. Whatever success Roselita and I might have had on Lisa being in the worship again happened because we had help.

The way of discipleship is to be with Jesus, become like Jesus and do the work of Jesus. You can do this because, "you've got help."

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/idioms-and-expressions-with-way-1211223>

² <http://exceedingfaith.com/holy-spirit-helper-parakletos/>

³ Where do you abide, Mark Trotter, <https://sermons.com/sermon/where-do-you-abide/1353311>