

## **Oh, the Places You'll Go!** **(John 14:1-14)**

Well, it's that time of year again. I suspect someone in your life knows exactly what I'm talking about.

Yep, it's graduation time ... which means it's time for that great all-purpose graduation gift that operates as a fall-back for when you can't figure out what else to give the graduate who has everything.

They didn't have it when I graduated from high school. In fact, despite its popularity, I'd never heard of it before I went looking for a graduation present for some kids in 1995—which is pretty strange, given how long it was the New York Times number one best-seller (not to mention all the other times it sat atop the list since).

*Oh, the Places You'll Go!* It was Dr. Suess's last book published while he was still alive. When I read it, I remember thinking how

great it was. Super insightful and well-written. Fun, in that Dr. Seuss-kind-of-way.

But something didn't quite sit right with me. It looks like a self-help book ... but it doesn't spell out how you can help the self you're supposed to be self-helping. What am I supposed to do?

The book feels like it has a glaring flaw to me—or at least, a missed opportunity. Dr. Seuss never tells you how to get to all these places you'll go. All these wonderful places but no road map.

Graduating is an exciting thing, to be sure. But it's also really scary. **Any** time you launch from a comfortable place into the unknown, things are most likely going to feel overwhelming. What do I do? Who's going to take care of me?

A few directions on how to get there would be helpful. But, to be honest, Dr. Seuss doesn't include a usable map. Indeed, it feels like Dr. Seuss just messes things up more:

*You come to a place where the streets are not marked.  
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.  
A place you could sprain both your elbows and chin!  
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?  
How much can you lose? How much can you win?*

*And if you go in, should turn left or right ...  
or right-and-three-quarters? Or, maybe not quite?  
Or go around back and sneak in from behind?  
Simple it's not, I'm afraid you will find,  
for a mind-maker-upper to make up [their] mind.*

*You can get so confused  
that you'll start to race  
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace  
and grind on for miles across weirdest wild space,  
headed I fear, toward a most useless place.  
The waiting place ...*

The waiting place?

What even **is** that?

Apparently, it's just a place everybody winds up spending time in, trying to figure out where they're going and what they're supposed to be doing. But "the waiting place" doesn't sound like a place anyone **wants** to go to, does it?

Especially because Dr. Seuss is so awful at giving directions.

It kind of feels like the pro tip I saw the other day about how to find what you want at Home Depot.

- 1. Check The Aisle You **Think** It's In*
- 2. Look For An Employee*
- 3. Check Two More Aisles*
- 4. Wander Around For 10-20 Minutes*
- 5. Check the Lumber Section*
- 6. Struggle To Describe What It Is You Need To The Guy  
Who Mixes Paint*
- 7. Give Up*

And if you happen to be in a **Mexican** Home Depot, you should probably add another half hour to wandering around the store.

Even if you figure out how to ask for a ½" elbow fitting for a dilapidated hot water heater (which, even in the age of Google Translate, is not a given), the guy who mixes paint is going to tell

you (if you speak more than rudimentary Spanish) that there's a special end-cap display in appliances where you'll find what you need—right next to the Sham-Wow!™ and the Ronco Pocket Fisherman™.

Except, you won't. You **won't** find your fitting no matter **how** long you amble around the store. But you may lose your **Christianity** wandering around trying to follow vague directions to a place you've never been.

That's the sense I get from today's Gospel. Jesus says he's going away, and the disciples want a map—turn-by-turn directions about how to go where he's going—a kind of divine GPS.

When Susan and I moved to East Tennessee so I could go to seminary, I had to deliver pizzas to make ends meet. Of course, I didn't want to deliver pizzas—not much money and a lot of work. I had applications out to area churches to be a youth minister.

The first interview I had was at a church tucked way back into a holler in Bluff City, Tennessee. Bunker Hill Christian Church—an oddly jarring juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane.

Coming from Detroit, my knowledge of Appalachia came mostly from reading *Roots* and watching *Dukes of Hazzard*. I was a city boy in a foreign land. And I don't mind telling you ... I was nervous. I remember thinking that **everybody** probably walked around carrying shotguns and chewing Red Man—even the toddlers.

My fears weren't helped when I walked up the front steps of the church for the interview and literally had to step over a huge Bloodhound lying in the doorway. I felt like I was in an episode of *Hee Haw*.

I was a long-haired, motorcycle-riding Yankee—but they hired me anyway. And they were so kind to Susan and me.

I remember asking the preacher, Ernie Depew, for directions to one of the youth's houses. He said, "It's pretty easy. You go straight up the road here until you get to Chinquapin holler. You'll know it's Chinquapin because there'll be an old red barn on the right with a tractor outside. Turn left there. Then go straight for a ways until you see a cow tied to a tree, and take another left. About three miles up the road, you'll see a creek on your right. Take the third bridge, and the house is right there. You can't miss it. Just make sure you (of all people) don't go across any of the other bridges there. Those are driveways, and looking like you do, you're liable to get shot."

In my estimation, those were terrible directions. I'm not sure if there was such a thing as GPS back then, but I'd have paid my whole \$130 a-week salary for one at the time—just to save myself from getting shot.

Getting shot was something the disciples were acutely aware of in our text this morning—and if not "shot," then strung up. It might

help to take a moment to remind ourselves of where we are in the story.

Jesus and the disciples have just finished the Last Supper on Thursday evening. In less than 18 hours, Jesus will find himself hanging from a cross. And in our text for this morning, he's in the middle of what has become known as his farewell speech. And while the disciples don't know exactly what will soon transpire, they're savvy enough about the politics of the situation to know that Jesus has made some very powerful people angry and that they're all in very serious jeopardy of finding themselves at the wrong end of a Roman sword. Jesus is going to have to start the revolution soon before the Romans take him off the board.

So, when Jesus says, "I'm fixin' to leave, and I'm going to prepare a place for you," the disciples want a few more details. How do you get there?



They'd like a map, turn-by-turn directions. Things are pretty dicey for them right now, and they want to make sure they know exactly what they're supposed to do to stay out of the cross-hairs of the goons who're getting ready to whack Jesus.

But Jesus, as is his custom, disappoints them. He tells them that he's going to be with God, and their first instinct is to ask, "Um, okay. How do we get there **ourselves**? Spell it out. What's the way?"

It's then that Jesus gives simultaneously one of the most famous and one of the least satisfying answers of his life: "**I** am the way and the truth and the life."

And you can imagine the disciples looking at each other, exasperated. "What does **that** mean? '**I** am the way.' What is that? We ask for directions and we get "I am the way?" Come on, man. We need something a bit more concrete, something with

roads and rest stops, a place to pull over and get a gas station hot dog.”

The disciples want easy-to-follow instructions. They want geography, landmarks, some way to know whether they’re headed in the right direction.

But Jesus isn’t talking about geography; he’s talking about a way of being.

We get a clue about this a few verses prior to our passage this morning. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.”

The disciples want some well-defined guideposts to let them know when they've arrived at their final destination. But Jesus offers them something much less satisfying. Instead of paint-by-numbers, Jesus tells them that they're going to have to put in the work to become actual artists. And they—and everyone else—will know they've arrived when they look like Jesus himself.

Philip says, "Okay, that's all well and good, but we'd like to see God. Can you throw in the directions for **that** family destination?"

Now it's Jesus' turn to be exasperated. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen **me** has **seen** the Father."

In other words, Jesus says, "If you want to see God, take a look at me. If you want to know the way to God, then do the things I do. 'By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.'"

And you can see the wheels turning in the disciples' heads. "Okay, if we want to see God, we have to do what Jesus does."

But what does Jesus do?

He does all these works. And Jesus says that his disciples will do these same works, and in fact, even greater works than Jesus ***himself***.

Even greater works than Jesus? That sounds like a pretty tall order, doesn't it?

If I'm the disciples and I hear this from Jesus, immediately I'm thinking he means miracles. Jesus turns water into wine; he heals the blind; he raises the dead. And pretty soon, I'm thinking Jesus is saying that I'm going to be Benny Hinn—sending out anointed prayer cloths and curing Janice from Des Moines and her debilitating case of dyspepsia. Those are the works that will tell me I've finally arrived where Jesus is going—which frankly is

pretty discouraging given that I have a difficult time keeping air in my tires and changing the furnace filter.

Are these the “works” Jesus is talking about?

I don’t think so. If they were, Christianity would be a colossal failure—unless you count the faith healers on late-night cable—and I’m not ... counting them, that is.

So, Jesus must be talking about some other kinds of works—works that he tells the disciples they will do in even greater ways than **he** has.

But what are these works?

I think the purpose of the Gospels is to show the kind of work Jesus is busy doing—and it almost always has to do with challenging the machinery of domination that grinds down those without the power to defend themselves.

In the Gospels, Jesus is always raising a fist against the people in charge, the people who get ahead by stepping on the necks of the vulnerable and the dispossessed, calling out the powerbrokers who game the system so that the only people capable of making a better life are **them**.

That's the story of the Gospels. But much closer to our text this morning is Jesus' reference to the **kind** of works he expects. Remember, just a few verses prior, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In other words, if you love one another, you're already **doing** the works that I've done—and you won't **have** to question the "way to the Father," about whether you're following the step-by-step directions since everyone will already know who you belong to.

If you condemn a system that allows police officers to kill a Black man in cold blood ... on video ... you and everyone else will know you're following "the way."

If you raise your voice on behalf of the unemployed and the undocumented in a culture satisfied to let them suffer unaided by the powers and principalities, you won't have to question where I'm going—you'll already be there with me.

If you think more about our trans neighbors who hear every day how they're some kind of predatory aberrations than about the intolerant chuckle-heads who spend way too much time trying to figure out new ways to torture them—you're headed in the right direction.

Following me isn't paint-by-numbers. There's no quick fix, no easy way to look like you know what you're doing without ever putting in the effort to become a master. That'd be nice, but that's not how it works.

If you want to know the way to God, you're going to have to live the way **I** live, challenge the injustice **I** challenge, show mercy the way **I** show mercy.

If you want to see God, you only have to look at me—love one another, and everybody will see **me** in you. Love the people **I** love, and you won't have any doubt in your mind about whether or not you've arrived.

The whole world will know.

Oh, the places you'll go!

—Amen.