



Sermon, September 13, 2020  
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Junction City United Methodist Church

Sermon Series: The Way of Ways

## **“The Way’s Way of Ways”**

### **Scripture: Psalm 1**

1 Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
2 but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.  
4 Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff that the wind blows away.  
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

**There’s an old story about a couple who were on their way to a concert at Carnegie Hall in Philadelphia. They were from out of town, and unfortunately lost their way. As they drove around downtown, they saw a sidewalk musician standing along the sidewalk playing a violin for whatever few coins someone might toss in his open case. The couple pulled up alongside the curb and asked the man, “Excuse me, but how do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Without missing a beat, the busker replied, “Practice! Practice! Practice!”**

**The Psalmist in the scripture reading this morning contrasts the “way of the righteous” with the “way of the wicked.” One might legitimately ask,**

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“But how can I be sure to walk in the way of the righteous?” And the answer from Jesus could well be “Practice! Practice! Practice!”

Now, it is significant as we speak of Rebooting our lives with the new Life Operating System, the *Jesus Path for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, to talk about “the Way.” One reason it is significant is that a journey is usually taken along a road, or a trail or path of some sort. Bushwhacking is okay for trailblazers, but for most of us, a well-trod and trustworthy path is preferable. But the word “way” has another meaning as well. It can also refer to the manner in which we do something. So, it can refer not only to a path, but also to *how* one is to take the path. A spiritual “way” usually means both things simultaneously.

We read in the Book of Acts, Chapters 9:2 and 19:9 & 23 that from the earliest days, Christianity was referred to as The Way. In fact, this is probably what it was called at first. This may bear some allusion to the reference in John where Jesus refers to himself as “the truth, the way and the life.” When Jesus proclaimed that he was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, he was urging all who followed him then and all who have followed since that time to listen to his teachings and learn from his actions. His Way leads to the Heart of God, which is Truth and Life. Faith and belief in Jesus are not simply intellectual exercises or matters of opinion. Jesus is not a fad to try or a bumper sticker sentiment. He is a spiritual presence and reality that accompanies us and leads us on this journey to the Heart of God.

So, what are the features of this Way?

### **TRANSFORMATION**

First and foremost, the Way of Jesus is a journey of transformation. I have used that term, “transformation” repeatedly in talking about this journey to the heart of God, but just what do I mean by “transformation?” The notion of “transformation” implies the change or adaptation of something from one form or state to another. Sometimes transformation can involve a simple change of status, such as when a

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student graduates from one grade to another or at the completion of a course of study. Another kind of transformation has to do with a change in appearance, such as when a house is redecorated and repainted, or when a person has a “makeover” of their hairstyle and personal appearance.

The word “religion” is derived from the Latin word, *religaré* meaning to “rebind.” The basic meaning of religion is that human social force that seeks to repair what is broken, to reweave what is frayed, to reconnect what is disconnected, to reintegrate what is disintegrated. Spirituality serves as the personal and individual application of this social tendency towards collective cooperation, order and harmony. A popular political slogan expresses this notion succinctly: “Think globally, act locally.” Spirituality acts at the local level of the individual person. Its methods, ideas, and perspective on the world arise out of the global perspective of religion.

The work of transformation of persons by the work of the Holy Spirit refers to an inner change of attitude, belief and commitment that results in an outer change of behavior and habit. Christian spirituality involves the transformation of human persons through the experiential presence of the love of God as taught and lived by Jesus and mediated by the Holy Spirit. This transformation is part of the process of rebinding the brokenness within each of us, and the brokenness of the world.

### **PRACTICES**

Jesus provides for us the model of a life that is both religious and spiritual. He was born and died a First-Century Palestinian Jew. He was embedded completely in the religious practices of First Century Judaism. He was circumcised shortly after birth, brought to the temple for dedication, attended Passover celebrations with his family and followers in Jerusalem, attended other pilgrimage festivals, and even allowed himself to be baptized by John in the Jordan river as part of a Jewish renewal movement. He quoted the Hebrew Scriptures extensively,

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disputed points of the law with religious authorities and teachers, and the Gospel writers quote exclusively from the Hebrew Scriptures when speaking about Jesus and his fulfillment of the scriptures. His final meal with his followers was a Passover Seder, adapted slightly to impress upon his followers his own work in leading them to spiritual freedom in a way analogous to how Moses had led the Israelites to freedom out of Egypt hundreds of years earlier. Several times when Jesus healed persons, he immediately commanded them to go show themselves to the priests at the temple for confirmation of the healing and to offer the proper sacrifices of purification and thanksgiving. Clearly, he was both spiritual and religious. What Jesus taught his followers was how to go to the heart of religious practice and drink of its life-giving waters. At the same time, religion did not exist for its own sake, but served as the vehicle for the work of the Spirit of God in the formation of persons according to the way of God.

The Way of Jesus involves a number of what we can call “spiritual practices” that set up the physical conditions whereby the Holy Spirit can do its work within us. I use the term “practice” deliberately. Whenever I have been in a theatrical production, I have spent a good deal of time in rehearsal. In order for any actor to be prepared for an actual performance, they must run through their lines and movements on stage over and over again in order to memorize their part. This is called “practicing.” Similarly, athletes on a team practice together as a team over and over so that they develop their skills and learn how to work as a team. They have certain “plays” that they need to know as a team in order to compete in a game. In order to compete well and effectively, these plays must be so well-rehearsed and practiced that they are second nature to each player and to the team as a whole. In essence, through repeated practice and rehearsal, actors and athletes each internalize their lines, parts, routines and plays to the extent that the actor fully embodies their character such that they seem to actually be that character, and the athlete executes their plays so well that they seem to

have been born to the game, or such that they are football or baseball itself.

## **DEVELOPING OUR CAPACITIES**

Now here is the important consideration. In the same way that most human beings are born with the capacity to walk but require specialized training and development in order to become dancers or professional athletes, so also the spiritual capacities latent in every person need to be developed and disciplined. They need to be *practiced*. Just as baseball or football players in their spring training engage in a series of drills, agility exercises and weight training, so those who want to follow in the way of Jesus must engage in those spiritual drills and agility training of the heart that are necessary to become proficient as a player on Jesus’ “team.”

This is how it is on the spiritual journey. We may have a sudden, life-changing experience that forever alters our direction and priorities. But in order for this change to have lasting effects, we must find ways of acting that are in accord with this new direction. We must redirect our thoughts and attitudes along lines that are in concert with this new direction. What we need to do is to adopt a set of practices that serve to reinforce our new life and to help establish the change as permanent.

## **SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

This is the work of formation. As human beings, we each have as part of our normal developmental process the natural capacity to learn, grow, change, and adapt. As human beings, we are malleable and formable. This is true physically as well as intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Human behaviors are shaped by a wide variety of factors. This is because we are fundamentally *shapeable*. Because of this malleability, the primary way we are formed spiritually is through the process of engaging in a set of practices that serve to reinforce and fashion our behaviors and attitudes according to our

particular set of values and beliefs about the world. These practices are called spiritual disciplines.

This work of spiritual transformation can be both sudden and gradual. In fact, it is usually a combination of both. In the example of a person graduating from a course of study, the moment of commencement represents a sharp change in status – one moment a student, the next a graduate, an alumna or alumnus. But much work and study has gone on in order to achieve that moment. Knowledge has been gained bit by bit, and skills have been acquired gradually. Yet the work of education is not over. Skills and knowledge must be applied and assimilated into the practical demands of jobs and employment. The transformation from student to graduate is, in a sense, instantaneous, whereas the transformation of the person from their life before being a student to their life as an employed person is long, progressive and ongoing.

The same is true in the spiritual life. A person may have a sudden, life-changing experience that forever alters their direction and priorities. But in order for this change to have lasting effects, the person must find ways of acting that are in accord with this new direction. They must also redirect their thoughts and attitudes along lines in concert with this new direction. What they need to do is to adopt a set of practices that serve to reinforce their new life and to help establish the change as permanent.

## **THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES OF JESUS**

Jesus was a practicing Jew in first-century Palestine. The Jewish spiritual disciplines for which we have evidence that he practiced include the following:

- prayer,
- study of the Scriptures of his time,
- acts of charity,
- devotional practice and worship,
- observance of religious rituals and festivals.
- time alone in the natural world,

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- fasting,
- repentance,
- works of mercy and justice as well as works of love and compassion.
- acts of forgiveness and reconciliation,
- simplicity of life, and
- a new form of community among his disciples and followers.

The way of Jesus is holistic. If you take these practices together, you can see how they work together in a holistic and synergistic fashion.

(“Synergy” is a word to describe how it is that when you get several forces to work together, the effect and outcome is far greater than if you simply added up the individual effects.) All of these spiritual practices work together as a path, a way we can travel, as well as a manner of traveling on that path. They are well-trod path, and a well-tried and proven Way.

For the next several weeks, we will be looking at what I call Jesus’ Way of Ways that he taught and demonstrated to his followers, and bequeathed to us as well. So, buckle up, put on your spiritual walking shoes, and let’s get ready to practice, practice, practice!