

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
May 7, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Fifth Sunday after Easter**

**“Do You Know ‘The Way’?”
Christian Scripture: John 14:1-14**



Credit: "musingsfromabricolage", The Reverend Emily Heizman

While waiting for an appointment last week, I picked-up and started reading an issue of *Psychology Today*. I read an article by Dr Noam Shpancer that stated “new data shows a sharp decline in teens’ mental health, in the United States and around the globe”.¹ Of course, we all know that 70 percent of statistics cited are ‘made-up’ (and that includes the 70 percent statistic I just cited). And based on firsthand experience at Centre Church, all of you know that if someone has a PhD then everything they say is true! Nonetheless, I did not need statistics nor Dr.

¹ Noam Shpancer, “InSights: The State of Youth Mental Health”, *Psychology Today*, May/June 2023, p. 9.

Shpancer to tell me that today's youth are suffering. I see issues of mental health being fought by the youngsters in my immediate and extended family. In conversations with many mothers, I hear that most children are in therapy of one sort or another. Last week at the Vermont Conference Annual meeting, Bill McKibben specifically warned us about the hopelessness felt by this generation of young people. A global survey of 400,000 respondents from 64 countries concluded that 46 percent of youth aged 18 to 24 reported being emotionally distressed.²

The reasons for youth trauma are many. The COVID pandemic took a serious toll on youth. Nearly 40 percent of students in the United States reported having poor mental health during the pandemic.³ Climate change is an obvious culprit causing disillusionment with half of young people thinking humanity is 'doomed'. The culture wars have placed youth in the crosshairs of our national vitriol with 22 percent of queer youth having attempted suicide in the previous year.⁴ We have a mass shooting every other day in the USA with lockdown drills being conducted in most, if not all, schools. We have to give instructions to teachers and students on what to do when someone comes into the school with

² Noam Shpancer, "InSights: The State of Youth Mental Health", *Psychology Today*, May/June 2023, p. 9.

³ Noam Shpancer, "InSights: The State of Youth Mental Health", *Psychology Today*, May/June 2023, p. 9.

⁴ Noam Shpancer, "InSights: The State of Youth Mental Health", *Psychology Today*, May/June 2023, p. 9.

an AR-15 to mow them down. Last but not least, “the rise in teens’ depression correlates with the rise of social media” – these phones – “which by design foster envy, anxiety, and stress”⁵. As our church prepares for our upcoming Sacred Places event in June, we need to ask our ourselves and our community ‘what is “*The Way*” forward?’.

As Priscilla and Ron rightly mentioned, following the crucifixion and death of their teacher Jesus, the disciples found themselves in a place of terrific anxiety and insecurity. In our story, Jesus sought primarily to reassure them, to comfort them. In doing so, Jesus strengthened them by saying “Do not let your hearts be troubled. [...] I am the Way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:1 and 14:6). Jesus reassured them that he is *The Way* forward. This morning, let us unpack what it means to be ‘the way’.

First, it is perhaps most important to stress that in times of anxiety, it is not abstractions and philosophical platitudes that reassure our young people. It is relationship that reassures. Jesus reassured the disciples with his personal presence and his emotional connection with them. Political ideologies and theological speculations did not assist the disciples and will not assist the youth. So, all you parents, all you aunts and uncles, and all you grandparents out there, keep strong your personal relationships with this generations’ youth.

⁵ Noam Shpancer, “InSights: The State of Youth Mental Health”, *Psychology Today*, May/June 2023, p. 9.

In our scripture this morning, *The Way is a person*, it is not necessarily a path nor even a destination. In the original Koine Greek language in which the author John wrote his gospel, Jesus used the first person singular redundantly. One scholar translated the Greek to say, “I, I mean ‘I’, am the way”.⁶ So, *a person* was the way.

I believe quite firmly that Jesus as ‘the way’ is fundamentally about *inclusivity* in the kingdom, not judgement. If Jesus judged anyone, he judged those who judged others. Jesus judged those who claimed that they possessed a monopoly on ‘the way’. Jesus’ harshest attacks were for the Pharisees and the Sadducees who enforced a way, who enforced the rules, who declared who was in and out, and who placed impossible barriers in front of people declaring that so many were just, quite simply, ‘insufficient’. Jesus declared the sinners redeemed, not the self-righteous. Jesus declared the outcasts in – women, children, undereducated, lepers, the divorced, the mentally ill, the foreigner, and the poor.

If Jesus, *a person*, is *The Way*, if relationship and inclusivity are the primary common denominators of Jesus’ ministry, then it is fair to conclude that there may not even be *one* way. When I enter-in an address in my satellite navigation, I usually am informed of three or four possible routes. I get a route that is the

⁶ Lectionary Greek, from *The Word Made Flesh*, “John 14:1-14”, May 1, 2023. Found at: <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2011/05/john-141-14.html#:~:text=To%20be%20translated%20%22I%2C%20I,am%22%20begins%20with%20%CE%B5%CE%B3%CF%89%20%CE%B5%CE%B9%CE%BC%CE%B9.>, accessed May 7, 2023.

fastest; I get a route that excludes tolls; I get a route that takes me via charging stations; and I get a route that is scenic. Today, when I go to Peru, Vermont for our Association's Annual Spring meeting, I will be able to choose any of a number of routes. None are necessarily right or wrong. Yet, I can assure you the best way to go will be with a wonderful person, Larrimore Crockett. The best way to go is not necessarily to a 'to' but with a 'with'. The best way to go to Peru is with Larry, a beautiful mentor and friend who I hope to emulate and make proud.

If *The Way* is the way, then the destination doesn't necessarily matter.⁷ Think about it. If you are following the way of Jesus, then you are going in the right direction; you are going the right way and the destination does not really matter.⁸ Jesus proclaimed in our scripture that there are 'many' rooms. Who is to say which is the right room and which is the wrong room? As long as we follow Jesus' way in humility, through inclusivity and relationship, we are on the right track.

Let me conclude by stating that "the use of the definite article 'the' has led to a misinterpreted suggestion of exclusivity inconsistent with the teaching and ministry of Jesus as reflected in the gospel narratives. Even in the Johannine account, Jesus presents an expansive care for the whole of humanity and

⁷ Though I hope to actually arrive in Peru, if only because, as the Moderator, I am leading the meeting.

⁸ Michaels, J. Ramsey. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010.

creation”.⁹ “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10:16). I am proud that Centre Church is a place of welcome for those who study the Koran, the Torah, and the Diamond Sutra. For the way is *with* another through inclusive relationship.

“The Way is a Person, not a path or a place. Jesus is the embodiment of an abundant and flourishing life in relationship with the Holy One and with creation. [...] The Way is an invitation to new life transformed and assured both in Christ and like Christ”.¹⁰ Therefore, “do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1).

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.

⁹ The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, *Sermon Seeds*, “The Way”, United Church of Christ, found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-the-way/>, accessed May 7, 2023.

¹⁰ The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, *Sermon Seeds*, “The Way”, United Church of Christ, found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-the-way/>, accessed May 7, 2023.