

A Reflection for Easter 5, Year A – May 3, 2026
by Jennifer Irving

I feel like this year's lectionary is on my last nerve. I mean, where am I supposed to find the good news to preach in the stoning of Stephen. That he stays forgiving and trusting in God right up to the very end—sure, that is pretty impressive when you think about it—but it seems like a pretty big ask if you ask me. Is the average person supposed to measure themselves against Stephen's faith? I feel like if they did, they would constantly find themselves falling short of his example. Or is that just me? I mean, someone just has to honk at me in traffic for me to want to strangle them! But, I do want to hold up for us that not only is Stephen able to forgive those who are actually killing him—Stephen also doesn't blame God for what is happening. Which I think is important to notice. Because all too often in our daily lives, when things go wrong, that is exactly what we, as people of faith, do. We turn to God as though our faith is supposed to prevent anything bad from ever happening to us. When, in fact, what our faith is supposed to do, if it is anything like Stephen's anyway, is help us in the face of the bad things that happen to us in life—even the things that lead to our death. Not to accept them, but to hold on to our faith through them, so we can lean on God and be open to feeling the presence of God through it all. That's the real power of a faith like Stephen has. Where does that kind of faith come from?

Well, that leads me to my other reading for this morning from John's gospel. The reading where Jesus, in the middle of what we now know was his last supper with his disciples, tells his disciples that he is leaving them. That he's going somewhere and they are going to be left behind. But he gives them instructions on how to get to where he is going—on how to keep the faith. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." he says.

"Believe in me."

In the New International Version of the Bible, the title of this passage of Scripture is "Jesus Comforts his Disciples". Which gives you a pretty good idea of what these words are supposed to do. They are supposed to bring comfort to those followers of Jesus, gathered around the table, facing the unknown future where Jesus is not going to be with them every step of the way. How are they going to survive? How are they going to continue in the way of Jesus without him there to show them the way? They are a panicked, scared bunch dipping bread into the oil and sharing the cup. And they are pretty sure, no matter what Jesus says that they don't know the way.

And he tells them, "I am the way"! Which begs the question—how can a person be the way?

I grew up spending my summers up at our family cottage on Kawshe Lake. Amazing, fun filled summers where Aunts and Uncles and cousins would often arrive and spend the week or the weekend and invariably a few extras would roll in like the friend of a cousin or the sister or brother of an in-law and all their family, or a great aunt and great uncle and their kids, second cousins, boyfriends and girlfriends. On any given Sunday a dozen extra people might show up. And in my lived memory, I don't ever remember my mum or dad being anything but welcoming and gracious hosts, adding more gas to the boat for another ski or tube ride, and more propane to the bbq for extra food to be prepared. They were a model of hospitality and welcome for me and for many others I do believe. I've been trying to model their way my whole life. So I don't know why I asked that, I know exactly how a person can be the way.

So, if Jesus is the way, what kind of way was Jesus modelling for his disciples? I would argue, and did at our bible study on Tuesday morning, that Jesus was modelling the way of love. From the first sermon he preached about coming to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed... to the last supper when he gave the disciples a new commandment to love one another just as Jesus loved them... to: "Father forgive them" uttered from the cross—Jesus lived love. Teaching and showing his disciples how to do the same—our evidence, Stephen's words even as another stone was cast: "Forgive them." Living a kind of love that draws the circle wide and invites those on the margins into the centre.

So, if Jesus is love, then another way to read these words in John's Gospel is "Love is the Way, the Truth and the Life". If what you are doing is loving—lifts up the lowly, embraces those on the margins, brings justice to those who are oppressed—then you are on the right path—you are on the way. If you are looking for what is "TRUE" in this world full of questions, then you can't do much better than to find what will spread love. And if you want to live life to the fullest—then keep love at the centre of your life because those who are capable of loving, no matter what else is happening all around them, are the ones who are truly LIVING (all caps). And when you read it this way, the next line of the passage isn't bad news at all (which is the way I've often seen it used—as bad news, used to exclude those who aren't "Christian" from God's love). "No one comes to the Father except through me" Jesus says. But when Jesus is the role model of love, that simply becomes an instruction of how to get to God—no one can find their way to God, except through Love.

This becomes a way to determine what way to go, how to live, what is true. Is it loving? Does it lead to others feeling loved and valued, included and welcomed?

If the answer is no, then it's not the way, the truth or the life. And we have to make a change.

It is such a blessing for me to be a part of church—this United Church of Canada—that I feel is working so hard to course correct and live into the hard work of loving others as Jesus loves us – fully, unconditionally and without exception. Even the person who was going to betray him and lose his way entirely was included in Jesus' love and acceptance. So, we strive to be just as love-filled and just as faithful.

Sometimes this means offering apologies like we did this summer to those within our church who have been hurt and excluded because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sometimes it looks like anti-racist work like the travelling and virtual 100th Anniversary project around black history in the United Church of Canada. Sometimes it looks like hanging a red dress on our front lawn or wearing a moose hide pin to signify we are living into the love of right relations. Sometimes it looks like dedicating a worship service to Mental Health and taking the time and loving care to break down stigmas and keeps people on the "outside".

On this Mental Health Sunday, I hope that we are able to offer comfort and reassurance and a place within the circle of God's loving care. Love is the way, the truth and the life. Love is where God is.

Thanks be to God—Let's draw the circle wide. Amen