

Trust, and Why
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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John 14:1-14

Where do we think God is in the middle of a crisis?

Or, to frame it another way: where is God when bad things happen to us either personally, or collectively, and it feels like the world is spinning out of control?

The collective wisdom of the Church has always been that God is in it, somehow, even if our limited human ways of knowing don't necessarily lend themselves all that well to being totally sure of it. That uncertainty often comes out in our prayers. There, we scream, "WHY?" as loudly as possible; beg for help; and, sometimes, eventually admit that while we don't know what is going on, we trust God is doing something about it. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and author based in Denver, offered one such prayer on her Substack a few days ago:

"I won't ask for you to fix the world to suit me because better people than I have tried those prayers and they don't work, so could you maybe just help me be in this world without letting it hollow me out quite so much?

And if you're not going to just fix this [stuff] (which, again, I assume you're not), then could you help me to see where you ARE knitting together what I've unraveled, where you ARE ushering in reconciliation between people who have disappointed each other again, where you ARE quietly loving us into tomorrow?"¹

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "A Shitty Little Prayer for Tuesday." <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/a-shitty-little-prayer-for-Friday> [accessed April 30, 2026].

Pastor Nadia's prayer does a couple of things. One is to reflect a trust in God. The other is to capture capture the reality of the doubts we all face on a day to day basis – doubts created by the unique ability most of us have to believe that we are at the same time both totally in control of our own destinies and that nothing we do in the process of getting there is ever quite enough. Coming to a place where we learn that we are not, in fact, able to be kings or queens of the world can be incredibly difficult. Feeling like we're in control makes us feel good, secure, like we know exactly what the teacher is talking about, or maybe that we're in on some piece of shared God-knowledge that keeps us from being hurt... and it always comes as a nasty surprise when we learn that we aren't.

In that vulnerable space of learning that our ability to control the world around us is limited, is where the disciples who ask Jesus questions are coming from in today's gospel reading. We're back in the upper room, during the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. After the dishes get cleared away, Jesus is delivering some final instructions and words of comfort to the disciples. Thomas – yep, THAT Thomas, the very same one who later refused to believe Jesus had risen until he saw the evidence for himself - first asks: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5, NRSV) Philip follows that up with more of a demand than a question: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (Jn 14:8).

The answers Jesus gives to both of them invite them to consider that something much more is at work here as much as they show that the disciples don't quite get it. While they seem to be wanting certainty about the literal place where Jesus is going, and a God they can see and hear and touch right in front of them, that's not what Jesus

is talking about. He's talking about relationships, which are built at least as much, if not more, on trust as they are about knowing someone else. The primary relationship to which he's referring is his own with God the Father. He characterizes it as "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." It's not just about their shared nature. It's about the absolute trust and the love which exists between them. The \$10 theology textbook word for such trust and love is *perichoresis* – which is literally a swirling around each other in such a way as makes each visible in the other, and which enables the extraordinary sacrifice of the cross.

That degree of trust requires a great deal of vulnerability, which can be a hard ask for ordinary humans. In her book *Daring Greatly*, researcher and speaker Brené Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”² Do you notice her definition does not include weakness? Instead, vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.³ For example, it took courage for Thomas and Philip to speak up in the first place. They knew Jesus was likely to make them, and their questions, look really to everyone else in the room. That said, in this heavy moment, where we the readers know things are about to go completely off the rails, Thomas and Philip aren't afraid to admit that they are totally clueless. Their trust of Jesus isn't in doubt, either. They just want to be part of the action and need clarity on the finer details in order to commit to actually doing it.

As for Jesus himself, his entire life is a study in vulnerability. It's on display here in his open admission that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. It will be on

² Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Live, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery Books, 2012), 34.

³ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 37.

display once more as he is nailed to the cross and lifted up for the whole world to see the very next day. In doing so, he will disprove the assumption that vulnerability is a one-way street where only one person has to risk the pain of exposure. As Brené Brown describes this assumption:

“We love seeing raw truth and openness in other people, but we’re afraid to let them see it in us. We’re afraid that our truth isn’t enough – that what we have to offer isn’t enough without the bells and whistles, without editing, and impressing. I was afraid to walk on that [TED Talk] stage and show the audience my kitchen-table self – these people were too important, too successful, too famous. My kitchen-table self is too messy, too imperfect, too unpredictable. Here’s the crux of the struggle: *I want to experience your vulnerability but I don’t want to be vulnerable.*”⁴

“I want to experience your vulnerability but I don’t want to be vulnerable.” That’s not how things work, not really, in the upside-down Kingdom of God. God shows us God’s own vulnerability in the cross, and through it invites us to become full participants in the trust and love which are God’s calling cards. If we accept that invitation, as Thomas and Philip do, we too will know the way Jesus is going. Even if we aren’t sure about it, like they weren’t, we too can ask those tough questions and expect to have them answered in some way.

That said, in my experience, God doesn’t often speak as directly and as clearly as Jesus does to Thomas and Philip here. Despite how the trust is there, answers may not be quite so easy to come by. That is just fine by God’s standards. God has a terrible

⁴ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 41.

sense of timing, and very often the answers we so desperately seek don't come "right away" as we think of "right away." They come in God's own time, and not a moment sooner. Which is frustrating. We want to know NOW what we can do to make it better – and that even if we can't make it better, God has at least some concept of a plan for how to get us there.

Or, as Nadia Bolz-Weber's prayer for guidance in the midst of a lousy week concludes: "And please let me know what I can do down here, even if it's small. (And make it obvious please, because I tend to miss the subtle stuff). Like what kindness I can offer that might not fix the world, but at least help another person survive this day on *your* Earth? And forgive me for not noticing how often other people are doing the same for me, because I'm too busy freaking out."⁵ Amen.

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "A Shitty Little Prayer for Tuesday."