

John 14:1-14

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

THE ROOM BACK HOME

It’s happened in more than one family. The oldest sibling goes away to college, and the younger siblings begin to cast lots for the newly vacated room.

If one of the younger brothers or sisters is successful in their attempt to gain more spacious digs, there is bound to be a day of reckoning. Can’t you just hear that older brother or sister on the phone with their parents?

“You mean you gave my room away? Where will I go when I come home?”

Of course that older sibling looked forward to going away from home. He or she was excited about the possibility of setting aside childish things and assuming adult responsibilities.

But, during this time of anxiety and change a person needs a home to which they can return. There is something calming about knowing that no matter what happens, there is a space in your parent’s house that is reserved just for you. Knowing that gives you the courage to strike out on your own and follow your own calling in life.

The room back home is more than just a place to hang your hat. It represents a relationship that forms the foundation for the rest of your life. It means that there is someone who loves you and who will always be glad to see you return.

Of course that's why many people have psychological and spiritual problems. They had parents who never had room in their homes or in their hearts for their children. And so they spend the rest of their life trying to find a spot that they can call home. In every group there are some who know this problem all too well.

A WORD FOR THE TROUBLED HEART

But, regardless of our family background, there will come a time in life when we face a situation that is just too much for us to handle. Our problems will be so great that there will be no place to hide from them. We will feel unsettled. We will have, as our Scripture lesson for today puts it, "a troubled heart."

The disciples had come to such a crossroads in our lesson for today. Jesus told them that one of the twelve disciples would betray him and that Peter would deny him. Soon he would be leaving them.

The disciples knew what that meant, but they did not want to acknowledge it. Jesus was like a parent to them. They wanted to follow him forever. But, that was not possible. Jesus told them clearly, "Where I am going you cannot come." (John 13:33)

And so their hearts were troubled. But, Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in me and have faith in God. Trust me on this. You have a room with your name on it in my Father's house. I'm going to get that room ready for you, and one day you will join me in that place."

Actually, the word translated "room" literally means a "staying", or an "abiding". In other words it refers primarily to a relationship instead of a literal place. It is a metaphor for the hospitality of God.

We might say to someone, "I will always have room in my heart for you." That means, "I love you. I will not forget you. I treasure my relationship with you. This will not be the last time I see you."

That's what Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us. There's a wideness in God's mercy. There is room in God's house for many. God's forgiveness and grace is expansive.

FINDING THE WAY

How can you find your way to this wondrous place filled with grace and the glory of God? That's what those troubled disciples wanted to know.

Following Jesus had not been a picnic. They had left everything to follow him. They had left their family and their homes and their jobs.

Thomas, the practical one, the one who dared to voice his doubts asked the question that was on the minds of all the disciples. What did Jesus mean when he said that he had prepared a place for them? Where was this place and how could they get there? Show us the way.

And Jesus replied, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

You hear this passage quoted a lot. But, like the disciples we sometimes don’t understand what it means. We don’t really know Jesus. We haven’t seen the glory of God in his life and ministry.

If we say that the way to God is through Jesus, what does that mean?

It means more than just having orthodox theology. We can have absolutely orthodox theology and yet be far from the heart of God. The way to God is the way expressed by the life and ministry of Jesus.

So what is that way?

THE WAY OF JESUS

First, it is the way of selfless service. In the chapter before this one, John gives us his account of the Last Supper. But, John doesn’t emphasize the meal.

Instead he emphasizes what happens before the meal. Jesus girds himself with a towel and washes the feet of his disciples. Jesus said, “This is a picture of what it means to be my disciple.”

Second, the way of Jesus is the way of forgiveness. Jesus has no illusion about his disciples. He knows that they will betray him, deny him and run away.

But, Jesus does not condemn them. Instead he seeks to comfort them. He tells them to love and forgive each other as he has already forgiven them.

Third, the way of Jesus is the way of sacrifice. We believe that Jesus is a true revelation of God. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is a human picture of the heart of God. If you want to tell the truth about God, you have to talk about the man, Jesus.

When Jesus asks God to forgive those who are crucifying him, then you see what God is all about. If you want to draw close to God, you have to come through Jesus. There is no other way.

PREPARED PEOPLE

Jesus goes to prepare a place for his disciples. But, the disciples also have to prepare. Someone once said that God's home is a prepared place for prepared people.

In other words the disciple of Christ is not just waiting for the final trumpet to blow so that real life can begin. Real life, eternal life begins here and now. Prepare now is a constant theme in the Bible.

There is a way to prepare. There is a way to come close to the heart of God, and that way is the way of Jesus. In fact there is no other way.

I find it odd that people use this passage as a way to condemn others. There are some who would say to unbelievers, "The Bible says that Jesus is the way. If you don't go that way then it's too bad for you."

But, this passage is not addressed to unbelievers. This passage is addressed to Jesus' closest disciples in their hour of need.

Not unbelievers but we who love and follow Jesus are the ones who need to be reminded that the way of Jesus is the way back home. We who claim to be disciples need to be reminded of what makes us different.

The heart of God is the way of service and forgiveness. In Jesus we see a portrait of the God who loves us so much that his love takes the shape of a cross.

THE CHALLENGE OF FOLLOWING JESUS

You see, when things go bad we are tempted to despair. We are tempted to give up and go back to the old way of life. In John's gospel we see that this happened to the disciples at first. Instead of fishing for men and women they went back to fishing for fish!

The risen Christ had to interrupt their settled life so that they could remember what he had told them before. His way was the way to God.

The disciples needed to do more than feed their bellies. They needed to feed God's sheep and follow Jesus wherever he led. That was the message of the risen Christ for his disciples, and that is his message for us. (John 21:1-23)

The road for these troubled disciples would not get any easier when Jesus left them. They would suffer persecution and some would even be martyred for the faith. As Jesus told Peter in that last encounter by the sea,

"Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (John 21:18)

Isn't that true? When we are young we think that we can control this or that in our life.

But, we often learn the truth later in life. We are not in control. At any moment events can impinge upon all our lives that leave us feeling troubled and afraid. We are often being led where we do not want to go.

When that happens our faith is tested.

POWER FOR LIVING

And when that happens our faith can be strengthened by the power of the Spirit. We come to know in a new way the presence of the risen Christ. We get an opportunity to practice the service, sacrifice and forgiveness of Jesus.

I am often amazed at how God can use broken people as powerful instruments of His grace. Did you catch that promise in our lesson for today? Not only does God in Christ promise to comfort the disciple with the troubled heart; God in Christ also promises to empower that disciple.

Jesus said what only God could say, and Jesus did what only God can do. And Jesus told those first disciples that his words and works were just the start of something really big. Jesus said in effect,

“You are going to continue my work. More than that, you're going to do even greater things than I have been able to do. When I ascend into heaven I'm going to empower you with the Spirit. If you ask for something in my name, I'll see that you get it.”

This is where believing in Jesus gets tough. Yes, I believe Jesus did great things. Yes, I believe Jesus was the way, the truth and the life.

But, I have a hard time believing that I can do works that are greater than the works of Jesus, even on my best day!

I don't know about you, but I have never raised the dead or walked on water! And I know from personal experience that my prayers are not always answered, at least they are not answered in the way I would like for them to be answered.

How can we understand this promise of power when in real life we often experience a lack of power?

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Perhaps Jesus meant that the community founded upon his way, the church is empowered by the Spirit to do even greater works than him. I would refer once again to Paul's image of the church. We are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. Working together we can actually become the hand of God's love in the world.

Think of all the good things that have been done down through the years by those who were disciples of Christ. Communities have been transformed. Justice has been done. Hospitals, schools, and institutions devoted to caring for the least and the lost have been built.

Now, of course, just because the institutional church is doing something doesn't mean that God in Christ is at work. The institutional church has also done some terrible things.

But, those things did not reflect the way of Christ.

It is only when we follow the way of Christ that the church is empowered to do great things. It is only when we embody his service, sacrifice and forgiveness that we are enabled by His Spirit to do more than we ever thought possible.

IN HIS NAME

Jesus promised his disciples that if they asked him for anything in his name he would do it. Janis Joplin had an idea about that. She once sang, "Oh Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz!"

Of course Janis was not a theologian (to put it mildly), and so she didn't notice that Jesus said that his disciples could ask for anything "in his name."

That doesn't mean that we just end every prayer with "in Jesus name we pray. Amen." That means that the requests we make should be in line with the way of Jesus. It's not just what would Jesus do that matters; it's also what would Jesus desire.

Our desires are a reflection of what we really believe about the way, the truth and the life. And if we want to come to the Father, if we want to get in touch with the Divine, then we have to go the way of Jesus, the way of service, sacrifice and forgiveness.

And what seems like a very modest way is in fact the way to true power.

POWER MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

There are so many things in life that make us feel small and powerless.

We face sickness and overwhelming sorrow. We face a political system that seems bent upon self-destruction. We face economic hard times. We face natural disasters that are beyond our ability to predict or control.

Scientists tell us that we are merely a speck of dust in a vast cosmos. We feel so small.

Our hearts are troubled.

But, today John reminds us that long ago some self-centered anxious disciples huddled together in an upper room. And they asked Jesus, "What is to become of us?"

And Jesus told them, "Don't worry. You have a room in my Father's house. Just follow my way, and you will be empowered to change the world."

And it happened. We are still talking about what they did today.

We are still the body of Christ. We are still empowered to follow the way of Christ and reveal the true nature of God to the world. We are not helpless.

In the epistle lesson for today (1 Peter 2:2-10) the writer tells a struggling congregation, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

That was an amazing thing to say to a church that was hanging on by its fingernails. The word priest is rarely used in the New Testament and when it is used it is usually applied to Jesus.

But, here ordinary Christians are called priests. Ordinary Christians are called a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and God's own people.

And today we hear that same message.

We who are hanging on by our fingernails have been entrusted with a divine message. We who live a life filled with trouble and pain have been entrusted with the healing touch of Jesus.

Our hearts are often troubled, but we believe that God is greater than any problem we might have.

Do you believe that?

Do you believe that our church with all its faults is empowered to do great things for the kingdom of God? Do you trust in the promise that God has room in His heart for many? Do you believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life?

Go and live it.

Serve others in his name. Be willing to sacrifice for the good of the kingdom. Forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Amen.