

Closer Than We Think

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Scriptures covered today:

John 14: 1-14

Jesus Comforts His Disciples

14 "Do not let your heart be troubled; [a]believe in God, believe also in Me. 2 In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going." 5 Thomas *said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do 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 but through Me.

Oneness with the Father

7 If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."

8 Philip *said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus *said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who 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 initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. 11 Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. 12 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and *greater works* than these he will do; because I go to the Father.

13 Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do *it*.

Deut 30:11-14

11 "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it [a]out of reach. 12 It is not in heaven, [b]that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, [c]that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.

I know you have heard these verses from John before. I want you to think of them as a single jewel with many facets. Today we are going to talk about one of those facets. This part of Deuteronomy has a similar ring to our verses in John. In fact, take a moment and look at the last line in your call to worship again. Today, when we are finished here, spend some time with John 14 and form your own personal message.

The gospel tells us that Jesus has made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem after being anointed by Mary in Bethany and raising Lazarus from the dead. Great crowds came to greet him. I'm sure there was a very festive atmosphere, especially with Passover just around the corner. Then Jesus tells his followers some disturbing news. He says he must suffer, that someone will betray him, and that Peter will deny even knowing him. It's a little like planning an exciting vacation only to be told your plans were cancelled – except worse. Then, he introduces some puzzlement when he says he is going away and that the disciples know the way he is going. Thomas, who reminds me of a guy from Missouri because he wants to see it first; says he's not so sure about all this. He says they really don't know the way. I can see Thomas' point. He's probably thinking, 'Hey wait a minute; we were just getting the hang of it.' At that point, Jesus utters the very statement on which Christianity is founded; he says he is the way, the truth and the life. He goes on to say that no one will get to the Father except through him, Jesus. So, Philip, whom I also think is from Missouri, decides to cut to the chase and says Jesus should just show them the Father. That's enough. We'll take it from there. For some of you, that may sound like faith. But to me, it almost sounds a bit arrogant. Ladies, doesn't that sound like a 'guy' thing? He says, "Just give me the destination and I'll do the rest."

Can you imagine Jesus' frustration with Thomas and Philip? In fact, earlier in the same gospel, Philip had declared Jesus to be the messiah. He had told Nathaniel that he had found the one Moses wrote about in the law. He was the one the prophets wrote about. But apparently Philip's view of who Jesus really was fell short. What about the others? They were just sitting back listening to Thomas and Philip. At least these two spoke up. I give them credit. The rest are just sitting there, probably shocked, or confused, or doubtful of all they have been hearing. So, Jesus says what a lot of us would have said. He reminds Philip that he has been with them for a long time – 3 years, actually – and he still doesn't get it? Philip, have you been

watching and listening? In Philip's defense, let's remember that all these men grew up in an environment where the promised Messiah was supposed to be something totally different from what Jesus presented. But he's trying to tell them that they knew the answer of 'the way' all along. He's saying, "C'mon, Philip, you can do better than that!" I wonder – how much of Philip is in each of us? How many people do you know who make their own path, their own way, their own idols and gods?

Going back to our scripture, Jesus said, 'Now you know.' He is telling them they don't give themselves enough credit. After all, they have seen the living Christ with their own eyes. They have witnessed all he had done and heard the words he had spoken. They have seen his boldness with the local authority. And, Jesus spoke with authority, but the disciples still didn't understand it. I think it's because they hadn't yet witnessed the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension. They didn't have the wisdom and teaching of Paul; not yet. And now, this wonderful man says he is leaving. Can we imagine the grief they must have felt when they heard this? He was someone they had followed and admired and loved. He was someone who said things and did things that led the disciples to believe they were at a pivotal point in human history. I'm sure they woke up every morning with such excitement and anticipation, wondering what new thing lay in store for them. They gave up everything for this! And now, he's leaving? Yes, it looks that way. The training wheels are coming off. Not only that, but he is empowering them to do great things after he leaves.

But we can't overlook Jesus' frustration with these men without asking why. Why did Jesus expect more from them? What is it about us – mere humans – that allows Jesus to expect more from us? Later in Romans 10, Paul says that the people were seeking righteousness, but didn't know it came from God. For generations, they thought it came from the law and now Jesus was trying to break them out of that mindset. The disciples weren't looking deep enough. How about us, do we look deep enough?

Let's read verse 7 again. "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him." Talk about a hint! That's more than just a strong hint! I can assure you that this is no play on words that is unique to just one translation. Every translation I read, from the King James, to the Revised Standard, to the NIV and the New American, all make the same statement.

And what did Philip say in response? “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough.” So, Jesus says candidly, “You’re looking at Him. You’ve seen me and that means you’ve seen the Father.” And furthermore, when he said “I am the way,” the WAY is not the destination; it’s not the end. The WAY is the path to the end. The disciples were looking for the end, but Jesus is not the end, only the Father is that. Maybe they were spending too much time focused on the messenger and not enough time on the message. They were still looking for a hero figure like John Wayne or Hopalong Cassidy. When Jesus said, “I am,” he was implying that we must look below the surface, to the root meaning of what he represents. And what’s more important, Jesus says we have the ability to begin to understand it. That’s a big job, but Jesus says we’re up to the task. I don’t think we will fully and completely comprehend Jesus and the Father in this lifetime, but we can come closer and closer. We keep hoping. We keep believing. You’ve heard the story, heard the sermons, and you’ve read the scriptures.

Focus on the words of John 14. To believe that Jesus is the way and that he is in the Father requires faith from us. Faith is something we can’t buy in the store, it’s a special tool that comes from the Holy Spirit. We all face crossroads in our lives. There are times when we have to accept and believe things we cannot understand without proof. There are times we have to follow based on faith and trust.

To be clear, when it comes to faith, the Spirit is not a cookie-cutter that treats us all the same. No two people will have exactly the same mental image that comes from this scripture. Each one of us is unique and therefore faith is highly individualized, and maybe – just maybe – that’s why he spoke of the many rooms in his Father’s house. Each of us has his/her own room waiting to be occupied, because each one of us is unique in God’s eyes. But the joy found in each room is the same. It comes from knowing Jesus and the Father, completely, one and the same. And we will then say, “Okay, NOW I get it.” And then we suddenly realize we knew it all along.

I have an example for you. So, it's 7:30 PM on any given weeknight; you turn on the TV to the right channel and you see Pat Sajak and Vanna White. The studio crowd announces the name of the program and it's "WHEEL OF FORTUNE!" So, they make the introductions and begin the game. You see a board with blank letter boxes and a clue at the bottom that says something like "THING" or "FOOD AND DRINK." So, the contestants begin guessing the letters and slowly an image of words begins to take shape. After a couple of minutes, one of the contestants takes a stab at the answer and gets it right. What is your reaction? You say, "AHH! I knew that!" And you wonder why you didn't see it sooner.

Okay, maybe that's a simple example, but with a thread of truth to it that connects with our scripture today. Simple is okay.

I have a friend from years ago named Bruce. Bruce was a PhD physical chemist and he had one of the most brilliant minds I have ever met. He could have had a casual conversation with Stephen Hawking; he was that intelligent. What he taught me is this: Loving God is not **SUPPOSED** to be that hard! But it is, because we make it that way. Christianity and the love of God is **SUPPOSED** to make sense! Simple is just fine!

We have the advantage over the disciples; we have the whole story. That carries a level of responsibility with it.

How do you know you can trust Jesus? His claim to be the Son of God was incongruent with his behavior. He came to serve, not to be served. He didn't come like so many we know in our culture; men who are charismatic and draw crowds to them only to surround themselves with pleasure and luxury. As C.S. Lewis said, Jesus was either a lunatic or he was who he said he was. Once you have decided that he was who he said he was, you have crossed the Rubicon. You can't go back. You can't say he was the Son of God and then ignore it. Your journey has started; stay on the train!

So this WAY Jesus is describing is not a set of rules or a club like the Elks or the Rotary, not a Jesus ego trip, not a focus on just the person of Jesus, but a focus on the entire process of love, eternity, forgiveness, salvation, sacrifice. I once heard someone say that we are the only creatures on this earth who see the world the way it is and can envision it the way it should be. That comes from being made in God's image. If you remember

nothing else from this sermon, remember that Jesus said we know the way. We know what we have to do.

In preparing this sermon, I began to hope for an “Aha!” moment to pass along; something that makes the WAY crystal clear to you. I found mine in these scriptures. I can’t give you any personal epiphanies; no preacher can. You have them in your heart. Listen to your heart. Keep watch, keep looking. The evidence is there. You may recall the words of that old classic hymn, “How Firm a Foundation.” One line reads, ‘What more can He say than to you He has said.’

Reflecting on the words of our OT scripture for today... “No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it.” He’s already shown you the way and you’re closer than you think.

AMEN