

The Way to Our Place

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John 14: 1-14

They were words of comfort and reassurance. He was trying to be that good friend who comes when things are rough and takes you out to lunch, puts his arm around you, listens while you cry and maybe sheds a sympathetic tear. The disciples were deeply troubled. You don't reassuringly tell someone not to be troubled unless they are, or you know they soon will be. They were deeply troubled by the events to come that Jesus is talking about. He's been speaking about his death and he's just told them that one of them will betray him. They're troubled by that glimmer of recognition in themselves that indeed they are capable of betrayal and denial. They're troubled by a world that wants to kill Jesus. They're troubled at the thought of that huge loss in their own lives.

And the fact is, that as John writes this gospel for his own community, somewhere around 80-90 A.D. (fifty or sixty years after the crucifixion), he's reading his own community's troubled hearts back into what he writes. After all, he wants to bring a Word of God to *them*. Who knows all the things that were troubling them? Maybe the persecutions at the hands of Rome, or things similar to the stoning of Stephen, maybe some of them had lost personal friends and loved ones to such things. But, in any case, they're troubled and Jesus seeks to reassure them. And you know, the thing is, without media of any kind, not even print media, much less electronic media, their world was a whole lot smaller than ours.

We know a lot more of all the troubling things around the world, and even across town, don't we? So, we are troubled, too, maybe even more so than they were. Because, not only do we all have the trouble that comes to each one in their own life, you know the stunning death of someone you loved more than you can say, or, a divorce, not to mention all the turmoil and heartache that led up to that divorce, or maybe just a fractured relationship. We know the trouble in us that comes from physical or emotional abuse. We know the trouble in our hearts coming from leaving friends behind and moving to a new place, or from the fear of some debilitating physical diagnosis. Human beings have always experienced all of that.

But, now in this age of electronic media, not only do we have all of that to deal with, we also know more than we want to about what others are enduring. We hear every week about some child abuse incident. We know about the devastation left behind by tsunamis and droughts on the other side of the world, and we see in our homes the images of these broken, destitute people. We see the rubble and heartache left behind by war. We know of the trauma wreaked by drugs and gang violence. We hear of people getting laid off from work and their homes repossessed. We read of the possibility of coming food shortages. How can we not be troubled? Whether by events in our own personal lives, or things half-way around the world, our hearts are troubled.

So, listen to Jesus' words to the disciples. He speaks of trusting in him, and he talks about "places" for them to dwell, to abide in God's presence. In the language of the Gospel of John, that's what it's all about. The whole challenge of being human is about living a kind of life that John refers to sometimes as "abundant life," and sometimes as "eternal life," but in both cases (they seem to be interchangeable for him) he means a life lived in harmony with God. He means a life lived along the same lines with what God's purposes are for us and for the world. So, Jesus speaks to the disciples about living their lives on the way to these "places" where they dwell in God.

And those "places" seem to be varied according to the circumstances and personality of each one. There's a "place" where each one can live their life in harmony with God's purpose for them and for the world. And what's more, Jesus says to them that they know the way to that

“place.” They know how to live the abundant life. It's really just John's language for what the synoptic gospels call the “Kingdom of God.” And how do they know the way to live in the Kingdom, to live the “abundant life?” They know the way, says Jesus, because they know *him*, and he is the way. How they've seen him live his life, how they've lived that same life alongside him *is* the way to live this life, it is the *life* to live, it is the *truth* at the heart of all things.

That's what Jesus means when he says, “I *am* the way and the truth and the life.” And he continues on, “No one comes to the Father *except* through me.” That is, no one finds their “place” in God, except by living the way Christ does. See, too often these verses have been used to make some kind of “us and them” claim. You know, we Christians are going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell. The problem with that is that's not what Jesus is talking about here! He's reassuring the *disciples*. He's not talking to or about Buddhists or Muslims. He's telling the *disciples* that they already know how to live the abundant life, that they know the way to find their “places” in God. They know how to live their lives in harmony with God's purposes for them and for the world, because they've seen him do it, and they've already been doing it with him. And he says, if they've seen him, they've *seen* God. If they've seen what Jesus does, they know what God's purposes are. And what's more, he's telling them that being on his “way” in life, living a life of prayer that seeks to stay open to God's purposes of love and then living that in relationships is what will calm their troubled hearts.

Well, I guess a lot of times what the real stumbling block is for us is trusting that Jesus' way of love really is who God is. Like I said before, we know all too well what's going on around the world, and we know the heartache in our own life. We might very well think, where is this loving God we see in Jesus? Well, you know that's why it's called “faith.” Faith by definition is stepping out, acting on, taking a leap about something for which there is no hard evidence. So, that element won't ever be removed, but listen for us Christians, from the story that forms us, it should come as no surprise to us that there are all these suffering people. We know that the love and the purposes of Christ get crucified in the world. And it's the resurrection assures us that love and life are still, even so, the last word. They are still what God is about. And the way we have seen in Jesus is *indeed* the way of God in the world. It is the way to *our* “place,” the way for each of *us* in *our* life to live in God.

The best way to calm our troubled hearts is focus on Christ's way in you and Christ's way in the world. And that's where trusting comes in. If you can trust in God's embrace of you, that is Christ's way in you, isn't it? It's Christ's way in and for the world. Trust in God's embrace of you and then live that same embrace of you and of others, no matter who they are, no matter who you are. It's this trusting, even with all the hurt you've ever suffered, even with all the hurt you've seen around you, even with all the debilitating struggles you have within you... it's this trusting that enables you even in the midst of all of that, to open your heart again and find life!

In the pop psychology jargon from some years back, we tend to get stuck in a place of either “I'm not okay, you're not okay,” or “I'm okay, you're not okay.” In the vision of that book the task was to end up at being able to say “I'm okay, you're okay.” The problem is, as we've said, in looking either at our own lives or those of others around the world, we know better! But friends, Jesus offers a third way. It's this: I'm not okay....you're not okay, but God says, that's okay, I love you all anyway. God says life and love are not shut down by any of that stuff. God still loves you, and God still loves them. So, we can still risk loving ourselves and we can still risk loving them, too. That's the Gospel! Trust in God. Trust also in Jesus.

Amen.