

PEACE FOR THE TROUBLED HEART

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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John 14:1-14

Our lesson from John's gospel on this Fifth Sunday of Easter takes us back to Jesus' final evening with his disciples, at what we know as the Last Supper. At the end of John Chapter 13, Jesus warned his disciples that he would lay down his life for them, and so chapter 14 begins with Jesus' words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? ... I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." These are reassuring words of hope in God through Jesus. Jesus is a good leader, and he promises his followers that he will not forsake them, nor will he ask anything of them that he is not willing to endure himself. Certainly, that was good news for these disciples who had left everything to follow Jesus.

His reassuring words remain good news for those of us who are anxious about the future today, in these days of isolation and uncertainty. An invisible killer is at large and apparently will be for quite some time. Our economy is shaken. We are prevented from gathering to comfort one another. It's anyone's guess when—or if—we will get back to what we recognize as normal. If you're not at least a little troubled these days, you haven't been paying attention.

Yet Jesus invites us to trust in him in spite of troubling times. He also invites us to a deeper level of discipleship, one that may involve risk. We might discern the shape of such trust in Jesus' response to Thomas' poignant question, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Not only does Jesus reassure the disciples, he directly responds to Thomas' question with a road map of sorts. In the midst of uncertainty, he asks the disciples to follow him. Even as he is announcing his death, Jesus insists that he is the way, the truth and the life, and that they can continue to trust in him. Jesus assures the disciples that they will go with him to the same place where he is going. Clearer than the precise, physical location of such a place is the certainty of Jesus' promise.

When Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you," he is evoking the Jewish wedding custom of a groom going to prepare a place for his bride and then formally coming again to take her to live as part of his larger family. In other words, Jesus is making space and describing his relationship with his disciples as a marriage. The point is clear enough: they are a family. They are part of an extremely large family, coming together and building a distinctive household, thanks to the person and work of Jesus. On the heels of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and instructing them to do likewise, forgiving a traitor, giving a new commandment to love, and then noting that even a close friend will deny him, the invitation is sweet. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust that God has space for you, no matter how unreliable, proud or unfinished you may be. You

are invited to live as a member of God's own household, acting in the distinctive way this household acts.

What is that way? Jesus shows us. His life *is* the witness and the way. Jesus walks among and sees even the overlooked. He befriends a range of people. He heals. He serves in the most humble of ways. He forgives and reconciles in advance with those about to betray or deny him. When facing what is ahead, Jesus embodies peace and courage. What does it mean to follow "the way, and the truth, and the life" of Jesus? It means living the way he lived; embodying the values, postures, and truths he embodies; and spending our lives sharing the freeing, reorienting, abundant life of God. It means incarnational, relational, and missional living. It means living our story as Christ's story, as part of the same family, set up and sent out to show the needed love of God, who welcomes, creates space, and empowers us to "do the works that I do...in fact,...greater works." It is an inclusive vision.

Sadly, this verse—"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."—has a dreadful and exclusionary history. Plucked out of context and weaponized, it has been wielded as a triumphant statement of Christian superiority, a public challenge to other religions and individuals who disagree. It has been treated as if Jesus offered a mic-drop ultimatum. It has been made to sound as if Jesus suddenly stopped his private conversation with friends and issued a worldwide proclamation to all people, demanding explicit, universal, unequivocal belief in him.

What do we say in the face of all other faiths? Is Christianity the only way to God? Does no one come to God except through Jesus? When Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," is he putting down all other ways of believing? Is he dismissing the possibility that we may come to God in any other way except through belief in Jesus Christ?

I would suggest that such an interpretation just doesn't hold up when you consider the verse in context. On this night when Jesus prepares for death, forgives those who will betray him, witnesses to many rooms in God's house, and lines out how his family should live after he is gone, he is not threatening or condemning outsiders. This night when Jesus washes feet and prepares to do something so self-giving, humiliating, and terrifying as dying on a cross, he is not issuing a proud ultimatum. Instead, Jesus is speaking to insiders, exhorting his family to witness to the God we know and see in him, urging them to keep living this way, this truth, this life, even after he is gone and especially when the going is tough.

If Jesus had aimed for his disciples to embody a narrow exclusivity, he might have said, "My Father's house has just a few reserved rooms, so you had better get your act together and command the world to do the same." Instead, in his last hours, Jesus teaches his disciples to live as he lived, revealing the stunning abundance and welcome of God. He exhorts them to live as the way, truth and life that reshapes a pain-filled, broken world.

So how ought we to think of other religions? We ought to think of them with respect and take them seriously. Who is to say that God, in God's infinite wisdom, does not work through the cultures and beliefs of other people whose view of life is very different from ours? Are all the same? Of course not! "You will know them by their

fruits,” Jesus advised his disciples.¹ And elsewhere John, in one of his letters, suggested that we “test the spirits to see if they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”² The idea is that simply because a religion has many adherents does not make it ultimate truth. The truth is in the quality of life that religion brings forth from its believers and whether, from a Christian point of view, that belief bears the marks and signs of the commonwealth of God, where the whole creation exists in praise of its Creator, and the people of every nation and culture do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

Somehow, rather than dismiss the distinctiveness of other faiths, we need to find a way to honor those differences while preserving the claims of our own. That, it seems to me, is the spirit and thrust of the gospel, not intolerance and religious fanaticism, but humility, patience, and the strong power of love that knows God can make sense of all we have confounded, and that as sure as Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, he is able to manifest that way and truth and life in many and various forms.

Our faith is that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and Savior of the world. He performed a unique and unrepeatable act of love and sacrifice on the cross, revealing the true nature of God’s love. God raised him in power, and by his resurrection we know how great is God’s ability to overcome evil and sin in this world. To know the story of Jesus is to have a special and beautiful knowledge of God and the way the universe hangs together, the meaning of the human experience, and the mystery that surrounds us all our days.

Our imperative is to share that story with all who do not know it, and with all who will hear it. It is still the way of salvation, to wholeness, and to communion with God, which is what salvation means, being whole and at one with God. The Great Commission to go into all the world baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is still our mandate.

But to interpret Jesus’ saying, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” as a polemic against all other religions is, I think, to say more than we know. In the case of every passage of Scripture, we have to weigh what is said with the measure of the whole force, spirit, and power of the gospel. The gospel never seems to me to identify as its greatest enemy other religions as we know them.

How do we combat the true enemies of the gospel—sins like idolatry and injustice and hate? By following the way that Jesus has shown us, loving God and loving neighbor. The world yearns to see the John 14 way of life Jesus lifts up embodied in the lives of real neighbors, coworkers, leaders and friends. We yearn to see it in our own lives. We are called to the way of life embodied in Jesus, and it is the resurrection power of Christ loose in the world that enables us to live this way. Forgiven, we forgive. Reconciled, we pursue ministries of reconciliation. Given reason to hope, we live boldly.

It is an inclusive vision. God’s house has many rooms. Jesus has prepared a place for us where unexpected people become family. Consequently, we disciples can live as compelling a life as Jesus did, embodying the joy, openness and justice we know in him.

¹ Matthew 7:20.

² 1 John 4:1.

So, be at peace and follow him. He will not desert you, neither today nor in the age to come.

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.