

“Room for You and Me”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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John 14:1-14

[Jesus said to the disciples,] “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus 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’? ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹Believe 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. ¹²Very 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. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

This week’s lessons offered this preacher no escape, no easy way out. The texts are challenging:

Consider the story from Acts 7, which tells of the stoning of Stephen, with whom I coincidentally share a name but who was, more to the point, the very first Christian martyr, a man of faith and patience and understanding. He is the very model of what a follower of Jesus should be, and he has set an example for generations of the faithful, both in their living and in their dying. That’s all well and fine, but I sometimes wonder if lifting up a pious man who dies for his religion is the best way to encourage others to be faithful.

The Gospel text is more complicated and contains many points of departure for a sermon—but it also contains one inescapable, difficult verse for anyone who seeks to expound on Scripture in these modern times.

This passage from John is familiar to those of us who have attended or presided at funerals. The image of God's house with its many dwelling places offers comfort and peace to the bereaved, who may find reassurance that there is a place just for them with our Maker. Furthermore, there is the high Christology of John's Gospel, which is made plain in Jesus' exchange with Philip, who needed only see the Father to be satisfied that what his teacher had said is true. Clearly implied within this passage is the fact that the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father—and thus, Jesus is God. He's not just a teacher, not just a rabbi, a holy man, a good guy for the ages, but Jesus is divine. This is theologically rich material that is worth exploring.

However, some people in the church today may stumble on this claim, believing that Jesus was just a great man, indeed the best who ever lived, but not God. Others might accept that he was divine, but that doesn't preclude respect and even affection for other faiths.

The trouble in today's lesson arises in verse 6, with Jesus' declaration, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" There is no equivocation in this statement, no room for alternative paths to God. For mainline Protestants, for those who would like us just to be one big happy human family, things would have been so much easier had Jesus said, "I am *a* way." But no, he had to be exclusionary; he had to essentially declare, "It's my way or no way."

What are we to do with this verse? I do not believe we can simply ignore it. We cannot be like Thomas Jefferson, excising passages we don't like to assemble a Bible to our liking. We must deal with all of it, come what may. But I would suggest we not succumb to a fruitless proof-texting. Instead, we should look at the totality of Jesus' teaching, and we should remember that this was *John's account* of Jesus' teaching—though we should be careful before taking the easy path and arguing that the parts of the Gospel we do not like were clearly not spoken or performed by Jesus but added by a later editorial hand with its own agenda.

Now, you may wonder why I am going on about this. Forget what I said a moment ago: why can't we just set this passage aside, forget the hard parts, or at least focus on the questions that are asked by the disciples or the other parts of Jesus' response to them? The answer is simple: Because it will still be here in the text, a big, brash, bold claim that can make people uncomfortable.

Did Jesus really shut the door to God on those who take a different road? As Rob Bell once asked rhetorically, is Gandhi really going to hell because he was not a Christian? What about all those people who lived before the time of Jesus? What happened to them?

Again, these questions might seem academic, but they are not. Over the years I have performed many funerals, here in our sanctuary, by gravesides, in funeral parlors, and at

other chapels. Each was unique and distinctive, but they usually shared something in common: the gratitude of those mourning, for the life of their loved one, for the ministry of the church. Often, I receive notes from members of the family of the deceased which are filled with gratitude, often complimentary, and, frankly, quite humbling. But the exception to the rule was the letter I received from a mourner, a friend of the deceased, who happened to be Jewish and asked why I had read this particular text with its debatable claims. Could I not have offered something that *all* people might be able to hear and receive? I looked for that piece of correspondence recently and, much to my frustration, was unable to locate it. But I remember it and have long pondered it.

My first reaction to reading that letter was to be put out. Why on earth should I, a preacher in a Christian church, have to apologize for what my holy text says to someone who is not even a member of my faith? We were not conducting a non-denominational memorial service but celebrating a Christian funeral rite. Further, my focus in my message had been on the “house with many dwelling places” imagery and not on the “way, truth, life” language. But over the passing years, my response has changed, and for a long time, I have heard this man’s challenge in a different light.

It is not so much that I have become a universalist who believes that all religions are the same. They are not, and I can point you in the direction of some very good reading if you disagree (e.g., *God Is Not One* by Stephen Prothero, New York: HarperOne, 2010). However, I do not question the sincerity of another’s faith, nor the quality of the life he or she may lead.

All of this brought me back to my divinity school days, and my interactions with classmates of varying religious practices. We had Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and, for all I know, animists in my class. Rather than find this a threatening experience, I found it bracing. I was preparing to do ministry in a pluralistic world, and I believed that rather than defensively fight my corner, I should learn to positively articulate my faith to others. As I have practiced ministry, I wonder if I have lost some of this capaciousness, focused as I have been on our own corner of the theological vineyard. I would hope not. Regardless, I believe that in this time of divisiveness and rancor it would be good for us all to adopt an attitude of engagement and dialogue. There is much we might learn from one another, even if we do not agree with each other’s views and beliefs. And that brings me back to Stephen in Acts.

Here is someone who was clearly in love with his Lord. He eagerly followed the path of discipleship. And other people could not abide that—so they killed him.

As time went on, Christians went from being the ones who were stoned to the ones throwing stones. Yes, I know that people of other faiths have engaged in their share of

wrongdoing. But should we not focus on ourselves and what we do, before we criticize others? When Christians quote Jesus' words, they often do so reprovably, as if those bad people out there who don't follow his way, his truth, his life, are going to wind up in a very bad place. But how well are we Christians following Jesus? How well are we doing at placing Jesus at the heart of our lives? Are we standing with Stephen, or are we on the sidelines busy throwing rocks?

Jesus admonished those who place stumbling blocks in the path of other people. He chastised those whose actions would dissuade people from coming to God. As I've thought about today's Gospel lesson in recent years, I've concluded that it's best not to preach it at funerals. People aren't focusing on Jesus' promise of a place for the faithful, one to which he will take them. I think they are focusing instead on that dwelling place itself, or "mansion," as the King James Version put it. And just as we noted last week that the use of the word "want" has changed these past five hundred years, so too has the meaning of "mansion." Gary Burge explains in his commentary on John that the Greek word from which this was translated was *monai*, or "rooms," the early-seventeenth-century meaning of mansions. So the present-day vision of heaven held by many, of some beautiful palace, is based on a misconstrued translation. The truth is we know nothing of the afterlife and where we will be once we die. Zip. Nada. Other than what Jesus has promised us, that he will be with us, that there will be room for you and me.

The lesson we read from John is from the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, a rather dry term that scholars have given to the conversation and teaching that Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he was betrayed. It was in that darkening hour, when the forces of evil were closing in, that Jesus looked out for his companions, and thought of their welfare, and offered an assurance—*before* he was tried, crucified, and resurrected—that he would be with them forever.

Forever.

It was that promise that carried the disciples forward after Jesus left this earth, that enabled them to build the church and spread the faith to women and men far and wide. It was the promise that Stephen embraced, that enabled him to endure martyrdom. It is the promise that Jesus wants you and me to hear, right now, on this day.

During this season of Eastertide, we remember what God did for us in Jesus that long-ago morning. We remember that God so loved us that he came to be with us, died for us, and defeated death for us. That God made a promise to us that we might have eternal life. Now, think about these words. If we look around, we know death is still with us. People we love have died and will die. *We* will die. We do not know what eternal life is like, and if we imagine it, it is actually a frightening prospect in many ways.

Still, we believe these words to be true, though we recognize there is something going on here that we cannot fully comprehend. Yes, conquering death might mean freeing us from the psychological power of *fearing* death. True, eternal life might mean our work and dreams will live on in others. And perhaps there is more than just a literalist reading of “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” What I am sure of is that *we* are not the way, the truth, and the life—that all of our political theories and ideologies, all of our fads and isms, all of the theories that we humans conjure up to explain how the world around us should run will ultimately come up short.

Think of the disciples: Thomas, who wanted directions; Philip, who could not see what was before him though he’d been a disciple of Jesus for three years; and poor Peter, who at the end of Chapter 13 feared being left behind. They needed Jesus to guide them, to lead them, to inspire them. And we are no different. Left to our own devices, we too will get lost. We live in a world with so much bad news that it is tempting to throw up our hands in surrender, to think that there is no point to it all and we should just give in.

But then think of Peter and Dorcas and Mary and Stephen and all those saints of the early church who would never think of giving up, who truly believed in the promises of Jesus, who took seriously his charge for them to go out and do his work. Remember what Jesus said in verse 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.*” The faithful are empowered to do great things because of Jesus, who is with God. This was true 2,000 years ago, and it is true today.

Now, more than ever, Jesus needs us to be active disciples who take his teaching, his life, his example, seriously. We need to love one another, to serve the stranger and those without hope, to ensure that the church which he founded is able to share the Word and help the poor, to worship with joy, to be people who will be prepared to go to the dwelling place that Jesus has already prepared for us.

I have a hunch I would like to share with you: we have already seen what those dwelling places look like. We see it in one another’s faces; we see it in our church; we see it in the people we serve; we see it in this world that God made and has entrusted to our care.

Someday when we die, our faith tells us we may go somewhere, but right now, we’re here. Let us live our lives in this moment and in this place as Jesus would have us live them: with faith, in service, accepting and sharing the love of God with all people.