

“A Place for All”

John 14:1-14

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I imagine that portions of the text I am about to read to you will sound familiar. There are many beloved sayings in this passage. It's important for us to remember that its original context is part of Jesus saying farewell to his disciples. It's his way of helping them understand what is to come. It's also important for us to hear it on the other side of the cross and resurrection. The words are no less meaningful to those of us who receive them as resurrection people. Jesus' words are for both those who long for new life and who are experiencing new life. And those two ways of being are not mutually exclusive. Hear now the words of the gospel according to John, chapter 14 verses 1-14.

“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? 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.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 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’? 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. 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.

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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

A week or so ago, I decided to go to my parents' house this past Friday night simply to enjoy time with them without medical appointments or other things we had to get done, but on Wednesday mom was

admitted to the hospital. Spending a long day on Friday in the hospital talking to my dad, the nurses, and interviewing home care companies to get my parents the help they need is part the background out of which I am thinking about today's text with you. My mom will hopefully get home tomorrow but I'll be headed back in the morning to make sure all the arrangements are in place.

Many of you will recognize this text from funeral or memorial services which you have attended. You may have even chosen it to be read at the service of your own loved ones. Jesus letting the disciples know that there will always be a place for them and that he does indeed go to prepare that place is comforting. The text was comforting enough to someone in this congregation that they commissioned one of our stained-glass windows to reflect it. It uses the old King James version "In my father's house there are many mansions" that is what that little text right above the top says and no those are not jellyfish or alien spaceships in the upper left corner, they're meant to be mansions. Many have lampooned the beliefs that have arisen from the King James version of the text. I have known people who have said they really do expect a mansion upon arrival in heaven, but most do not take it that literally. The Greek word has the sense of a place where one might sojourn, stay and rest awhile, or longer even.

Perhaps we understand it best when we understand Jesus to be saying there is a place for us, that he will be there with us, will indeed make sure we get there, and that this place is more like a household than a house. All of God's people will be gathered there living in loving relationship with him and with one another. I point back to last week's sermon and the community I understand we're called to create here and I believe this text points forward to the perfected community that we will experience fully and finally in God's kingdom. No wonder this text is of comfort when facing death. A reminder that death is not the end and that we can expect to be reunited in God's household with those whom we love, relationships reconciled and perfected.

You may be wondering though when I say, "all of God's people will be gathered," who exactly do I mean? Because this text, and John's gospel as a whole, has been interpreted in both inclusive and exclusive ways. Jesus says that he goes to prepare a place for us, and that we know the way, but when Thomas protests saying "we don't know the way," Jesus says "I am the way, no one comes to the father except through me," and when Phillip says, "show us the Father and we will be satisfied," Jesus responds that they need to look no further. That our Abba God is fully revealed in Jesus, himself which has been taken by some to be a very exclusive claim. It used to be, and probably still is, that when pastors were interviewed on the floors of Presbyteries for ordination or in some cases installation, the question was always asked, "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" The asker always wants a yes or no answer, guaranteeing to anger ½ of those listening. That question and this text, have been used to build fences if not walls around God. So thinking about the question, what does Jesus mean when he says, "no one comes to the Father except through me?" is also part of the backdrop to my preaching this week.

That question asked on the floor of Presbytery really isn't a yes or no question, especially in our fraught pluralistic world. And it's not just a question for pastors. I'm sympathetic to the argument that to even

ask the question is unnecessary theological navel gazing, that we should just get out there and do our best to follow Christ and act on his commandments, but I also believe that theology matters and that what we believe affects our behavior more fully than we recognize or can always articulate.

I debated about whether to share my answer to this question now, but I believe you have a right to know where I'm coming from so at the risk of alienating ½ of you or in this context maybe more, yes, I do believe that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord for all people everywhere. But I still maintain it's not a simple yes or no question. For me, It's a yes AND. I recognize that belief comes with specific responsibilities. And those responsibilities don't include trying to save people or win people for Christ, he's already done that. I tell our confirmation classes that should people ask you, "when were you saved?" the answer you might consider giving is either "from the foundation of the world" ala the Apostle Paul or "when Christ sacrificed his life on the cross for all people everywhere." Either will do.

It does include the responsibility to remember who exactly this Jesus is, through whom we come to God. Theologian Shirley Guthrie answers this beautifully and succinctly:

He is the one who came to do the will of the Father who sent him: the God of Israel who created not just Christians but all people in God's own image and wills the life, health and welfare of all human beings; the God of the prophets who promised and demanded justice for all who are poor, powerless, excluded and oppressed.

This Jesus came not just to give his followers everything they want to be happy, successful and secure in this life and the next. He came to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, the world-wide reign of God's justice and compassion for all people, everywhere.

He was the friend of sinful, unbelieving or different-believing people who were excluded and rejected by law-abiding, morally respectable members of the religious establishment.

He believed that caring for needy, suffering human beings is more important than conformity to the requirements of moral and theological orthodoxy.

He came not to condemn, defeat and lord it over his enemies and the enemies of the God who sent him, but to give his life for them to reconcile them to God and each other.

And God raised this Jesus from the dead and made him the crucified and risen Lord over all principalities and authorities everywhere. Not just Lord over and for the church and in the hearts of its members, but Lord over and for the whole world. The Lord who by his Spirit continues his healing, reconciling, liberating, saving work everywhere to create a whole new humanity in a whole new heaven and earth. Even where he is not yet known,

confessed and voluntarily served. Even before Christians get there to tell others about him.ⁱ

That's all Shirley, he had a lot more time on his hands to write theology than I do. He wrote this in the context of a book examining interreligious dialogue and to make the case for more dialogue. Again, not to convert or "take" Christ to people of other religions, but to go meet him in our encounters with people of other religions and to also be prepared sometimes to discover a depth of faith, personal integrity, gratitude for the goodness of God, commitment to justice and self-giving love for others that puts us to shame."

And what he writes helps me articulate why believing Christ is the only Lord and Savior of all people matters. Because that's true, we can trust that no matter where we go, he is there. No matter who we meet he is present in them. Whether stepping out to live in this world or stepping out to live in God's eternal embrace we will be met by him. In the lyrics of Hymn 543, "Walking behind to hem my journey, going ahead to light my way, and from beneath, above, and all ways: O Christ surround me; O Christ surround me. Christ in the eyes of all who see me, Christ in the ears that hear my voice, Christ in the hearts of all who know me: O Christ surround me; O Christ, surround me." Trusting that Christ goes before us and seeing him in others isn't for our sake. It's so we can be salt and light, healing balm, reconciling power in the world. We do it for him who did it for us first.

We interact with the world rightly only when we see Christ everywhere and in everyone. Again, I do not pretend that this informs us about anyone's eternal destination, and I don't pretend to know how Jesus works it all out and I definitely don't believe in a transactional faith in which not professing Christ in this mortal life equals damnation in the next. Professing Christ Lord of all means remembering that "Jesus' first stop on his way to the Father's house was the cross. There, in laying down his life out of God's great love for the world, Jesus opened the door for everyone, in every culture, time, and place, to come into the Father's house."ⁱⁱ What I do know is that it's all left in his gracious loving merciful ways.

There are many dwelling places in God's house, but we will all dwell together wrapped in the mystery of love that reconciles. That will be so in the fulfillment of God's kingdom, seeing Christ everywhere and in everyone, Lord of all, strengthens us to make it so now. Amen.

ⁱ [https://faithconnector.s3.amazonaws.com/owegofpuc/files/the_way_the_truth_and_the_life_by_shirley_c_guthrie_\(1\).pdf](https://faithconnector.s3.amazonaws.com/owegofpuc/files/the_way_the_truth_and_the_life_by_shirley_c_guthrie_(1).pdf)

ⁱⁱ Williamson, Lamar. Author(s). Many Rooms, One Way: Preaching John in a Pluralistic Society." *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2006, 15-20.