

John 14:1-14
1 Peter 2:4-10

THE PLACE OF BELONGING

Whenever I read the opening verses of the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel I think of my dear friend, "Maude," who was a member of one of the churches I served. Maude was getting on up there in years. Her husband had died and her health was on the decline. She was beginning to face both the end of her physical life and the beginning of her heavenly life. Maude said to me on one occasion when I stopped by to visit her, "Now, Randy, when you do my funeral I want you to read the opening verses to John 14 but I don't want you to read it from any of those new translations of the Bible. I want you to read that passage from the King James Version of the Bible." I asked Maude why she wanted the King James Version in particular. Maude, who at this stage in her life lived in a single room within an assisted living unit, replied, "I don't want any rooms or dwelling places. I want a mansion; the KJV says, 'In my Father's house are many mansions!' I'm tired of living in a room! Give me a mansion in heaven!"

It never ceases to amaze and inspire me when I recall that Jesus spoke these words not only in the Upper Room but especially in the context of his pending death on the cross the very next day. Jesus' words in John 14 mark the beginning of Jesus' farewell discourse; Jesus was saying goodbye (for now) to his disciples. He initially spoke these words of comfort and care to his inner circle of disciples. And yet, these words are meant for the ears of the faithful down through the ages. Since these words are addressed to us (and speak to us) as well, let us listen in as the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus, speaks:

READ JOHN 14:1-14 (This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.)

The first thing I want to say is that I don't believe Jesus was talking about a literal, physical setting. I don't think Jesus was referring to an actual room, dwelling place, or (forgive me, Maude!) even a mansion. Rather, when Jesus talked about place – "I go to prepare a place for you" – he was employing figurative language to point the way to an ongoing, loving relationship with God. Our journey homeward is focused on an ever-deepening relationship with God. Our place is with God, here and in the hereafter. God is the place of our belonging! Since, in life or in death we belong to God, we are called to live by faith and not fear. We are asked to believe, to trust, that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ (as well as the Holy Spirit!) to make God's home with us. In God's grace and love, there is a room, a relationship, with God in life and in death for each one of us. We abide in God, now and forever. And, because we can never be separated from God's love, Jesus tells his disciples (in every age), "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

My friend, Jim Johnson, tells this story about Martin Luther, who was the leader of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. As Martin Luther sought to reform the Church of his day, he became very distraught with all of its controversies and conflicts. Because he had become very troubled, his heart full of fear, his wife, Katy, one day decided to try to reach him. She dressed in black mourning clothes, darkened the house, and sat down in her rocking chair. Luther came into the room, and, after a while, noticing his wife, he snapped out of his preoccupation and said, "What's going on? Who's died?" Katy replied, "Well, God must have died. You are so worried and distressed I concluded that God must be dead." Luther's wife had given her husband a wake-up call. That's what God in Christ is doing in this passage. John is telling us that trusting in God and in Jesus as God's way and truth and life made visible will result in our hearts being untroubled because we have a house from God, a relationship that can never be destroyed. A special place made special because of God's unconditional love. A place from which we can never be evicted. Never. (All Are Chosen, pp 109-110)

This note of relationship, this sense of belonging to God, is sounded throughout the passage. Jesus said, "I will come again and 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 blurted out, "Lord, we don't know; show us the way." To which, Jesus responded, "I Am the Way" – Jesus didn't give directions, he gave us himself; as long as the disciples remained in him and followed his teachings, he would lead them home to God. After all, Jesus is not only the way to God, Jesus is God. "I AM the truth" – Jesus didn't have to search for truth; he was the eternal Word, the Wisdom of God in the flesh, the Light that enlightens those who see by faith. "I AM the life" – Jesus had already identified himself as the bread of life; in him, there is life in abundance, now and for all eternity.

Following Philip's inquiry to "show us the Father," Jesus told his disciples that they have already seen God: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. These past three years that you have been with me, you have also been in God's very presence for we are one and the same. You can see how God is in me because the Father is at work through me." In John's Gospel, these works are more than just miracles; they are signs of God's power breaking into the world as a means of pointing to Jesus and thus to God.

As Jesus spoke these words, as he gave his last will and testimony, he then passed on to his disciples – then and now - his own job description. As his followers, the Twelve (and everyone else who believes in Jesus as Lord) were called and commissioned to “do the works that I do,” and, even more, “will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” When Jesus walked the earth, he was limited by time and space, just as we are. He couldn’t be two places at once. He was confined to a small part of the world and had direct contact with only a few people for the most part.

But after his death, resurrection, and ascension, in the Person and by the power of the Holy Spirit, now numerous disciples would take up Jesus’ ministry and reach out to millions in many more places, the world over. In this sense, Jesus’ disciples are able to do greater works than Jesus. While no one can come close to accomplishing what Jesus did on the cross or by way of his resurrection, by sheer volume in number over the centuries, the Church has done what Jesus had promised.

In this passage from John’s Gospel, Jesus talks in terms of relationships; he speaks about a place or a sense of belonging. In life and in death, we belong to God. By grace, we belong to Jesus, who called us to be his disciples. Jesus and God the Father are one. This is clearly seen by the fact that Jesus did the work that God had assigned him to do. And now, by his death and resurrection, Jesus has brought us into a close and loving relationship with God. In the process, we have inherited Jesus’ ministry in order to show God to others. Also, we are one of the ways by which God will reach out to others in order to draw them into the same loving relationship and eternal embrace.

In much the same spirit, the author of First Peter also talks about the place of belonging. By the grace of God, we have been brought into relationship with Jesus, the living stone; in fact, he is the cornerstone of God’s kingdom.

As we abide in him, we become like him; in fact, we are like living stones that are being built into a spiritual house. As we enter into relationship with Jesus, who is the stone that the builders rejected, who has become the very head of the corner, then we also enter into fellowship with God. Here, with God, we find our true home and the source of our real identity: we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

However, be sure to note what comes next! As God calls us by our given names (i.e., given by the grace of God), God does so “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.” God wants to make sure that many, many more people will come to God and belong to God. After all, Jesus said it best: “In my Father’s house, there are many rooms,” which, at the very least, means there is plenty of room, room enough for all!

We all want to belong. We all yearn for a place to feel safe, to be nurtured, to grow and become whole. God, in Christ, has done that for us by inviting us into the household of God. As a way of expressing our gratitude, we pick up Jesus’ ministry where he left off, and we take the good news to others. As living stones built into a spiritual house, we seek to provide refuge for those in need. We strive to become a place where others will meet Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and the very presence of God in our midst. Once we were not a people but now we are God’s people; once we had not received mercy but now we have. Thanks be to God. And, with God working through us, we pray others will belong to and give thanks to God as well.

There is a story about a traveler from Italy who came to the French town of Chartres to see the great church that was being built there in the thirteenth century. Arriving at the end of the day, he went to the site just as the workmen were leaving for home. He asked one man, covered with dust, what he did there. The man replied that he was a stonemason. He spent his days carving rocks. Another man, when asked, said he was a glassblower, who spent his days making slabs of colored glass. Still another workman replied that he was a blacksmith who hammered iron for a living. Wandering into the unfinished building, the traveler came upon an older woman, armed with a broom, who was sweeping up the stone chips and wood shavings and glass shards from the day’s work. “What are you doing?” the traveler asked. The woman paused, leaned on her broom, looked up into the high arches and answered, “Me? I’m building a cathedral for the glory of Almighty God.” (C. Edward Bowen, *Lectionary Homiletics*, April 2002, p. 30)

Isn’t that our task as well? Because we belong to God, and God has built us into the spiritual house that extends from earth to heaven, from now until for ever, we are commissioned to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others in the hope that they too might find the way home to God and live in the place of belonging. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, let us always be bearers of the Gospel, witnesses to the risen Lord. Just as the works Jesus did spoke well of the Father, may our own attempts at discipleship proclaim, loudly and clearly: “I’m building a cathedral for the glory of Almighty God” – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
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