

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 05/07/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, May 7th

John 14:1-14

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The way, the truth and the life

John's Gospel during this fifth Sunday of Easter presents some familiar texts that challenge us to look at life through a Christological lens. Through these words we can lift our troubled hearts and make sense of what is happening around us, we find comfort, and we find an exhortation to trust in Christ that ultimately gives us meaning and purpose for our lives.

John 14:1-14 Commentary

The text falls within the Upper Room Discourse (chapters 13-17). These five chapters cover a rich block of material occurring on the evening before the crucifixion as Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples. This material forms Jesus' farewell message to His disciples. Immediately preceding the lectionary passage, Jesus talks about betrayal (13:21-30) and His impending departure (13:33;36). As Peter indicates his willingness to lay down his life for his Master, Jesus shocks them all by foretelling Peter's denial (13:37-38). This abrupt response has the effect of silencing Peter for the next few chapters. Peter and the remaining disciples would have undoubtedly become deeply troubled by what Jesus was saying. It is against this context that the text begins.

¹ "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

The disciples were clearly troubled and despondent. Jesus responded with these well-treasured words offering peace and affirmation. They are commanded to believe (trust) in God and to believe (trust) in Him also. The Greek reflects both of these as imperatives (commands). Verse 2 uses the metaphor of God's house for heaven and thus "room" (*monē* = dwelling place, place to stay, room) continues this metaphor. We should not limit our thinking to place. It is as much about relationship. Someone on earth who resides in the father's house has certain privileges conveyed upon them that others do not. "Many rooms" reflects there will be room for all who God intends. Jesus, the Son, prepares a place for us in the Father's house. At the end of time Jesus will take His disciples to this place. Where he is, we shall also be.

⁴ And you know the way to where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Jesus has already explained the way (8:21-30; 10:11; 12:23-24) but it will only be clear after Jesus' death and resurrection. Thomas has the boldness to speak up and voice the question that was probably on everyone's lips. This is also another example in John's Gospel of the confusion that can result when the characters misinterpret the literal versus the symbolic. We must be grateful to Thomas because we have the answer that echoes through the ages. Jesus responds with another "I am" statement (*ego eimi*), a play on "I AM" being God's name in Exodus 3:14): "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*"

The Way: Jesus does not just provide directions by pointing the way (*hodos* = way, road, path), he holds our hand and leads us. He is the path. "*Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path*" (Psalm 27:11a). Jesus is the way of *reconciliation*.

The Truth: Jesus is the Living Word, the living exegesis of Scripture. Jesus is the truth revealed. "*Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth*" (Psalm 86:11a). Jesus is the ultimate source of *revelation*.

The Life: Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live*" (John 11:26). Jesus is the life - the abundant life on earth and the means to eternal life in His presence. "*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy...*" (Psalm 16:11a). Jesus is the means of *regeneration*.

The next sentence indicates the exclusivity of the Gospel, "*No one comes to the Father except through me*" (v.6). There is no other path to reconciliation with God than the one He provided through Christ.

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ 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 authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

Despite the clear statement from Jesus in v.7, now it is Philip's turn to express his confusion. Not understanding that Jesus and the Father are one, he asks to see the Father in a way that is analogous to Moses asking for a limited vision of God's glory (Exodus 33:18). The response here is unmistakable. God is like Jesus. Jesus came to reveal the Father (1:14, 18). The idea that the Father dwells (*menō*) in Jesus connects back to the relational idea of dwelling place (*monē*) in v.2. To put the disciples' confusion into perspective, even with the illumination of the Holy Spirit we still have difficulty in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity.

¹² "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Interpreters have struggled with these three verses over the years. What is meant by greater works? Can we really ask anything in Jesus' name and it will be done? It may simply be this: Jesus' ministry was limited by God to a short time and one particular place. In the two thousand years since, Jesus' disciples across the generations have expanded His ministry across the world. "*Whatever you ask...*" Jesus is quite clear that answered prayers in this context are those that bring glory to God. As v.12 shows, it all boils down to faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflections

There is the temptation to latch onto some of the more well-known verses in this text and take them out of their context. In doing so we may thus miss something. At the same time, there are some clear themes that emerge in this text. Jesus' approach to the despondency of His disciples is something we can apply to our lives right now,

whatever the source of the despondency (and there are plenty). First, Jesus acknowledges that we have fears and can be despondent. Second, we are exhorted to not let ourselves become troubled. Third, in order to not become troubled, we must believe (trust) in God. Therefore, instead of being sucked into a downward spiral of fear and despondency, we are commanded to have more faith. This is how Jesus expects us to deal with our fear. Faith chases out fear. In this way we can get on with the "greater works."

What are these greater works? In the West it is still not possible to look out on the skyline of a village, town, or city without seeing physical manifestations of the Church on the landscape. This imprint goes beyond the many steeples, it permeates our institutions and literally every aspect of our culture. Where Jesus fed thousands of hungry people at a time, organizations inspired by Jesus to feed billions of hungry people every year. Where Jesus cured the lame and raised the dead, humans following the commands of Jesus and acting out of love have found ways to eradicate entire diseases. These are just some of the legacies of the "greater works." It is such works, whether the signs in the Gospel of John or the greater works ultimately performed by Jesus' disciples through Him that point the way to Christ. We must not forget that it is only through His Word that we understand the significance of such signs.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6) can be taken out of context and to be used as a source of divisiveness. While the Gospel is exclusive, it is not meant to be exclusionary. On the contrary, the message of the Gospel and its applicability makes it the most inclusive message of all time. Disciples in each generation are called to continue to proclaim it and live it.

Application

- What do you typically do when you have a troubled heart?
- To what extent does your life reflect (however imperfectly) the Way, the Truth, and the Life?
- Are your prayers more focused on accomplishing greater works for the Kingdom in Jesus' name or a shopping list of actions you require?



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