

Trusting the Way

John 14:1-14

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (May 7) 2023

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Gathered in an upper room with Jesus, the disciples give Jesus their full attention. They've just shared this meal with him, which we now know was his last before his arrest and crucifixion. They've watched him kneel and wash everyone's feet. They're shocked to hear that one of them is a betrayer and they're highly aware that outside the doors of their tiny room, the powers are organizing to put a stop to their small movement that only a few days before looked like it might become a successful revolution. Now, things look dire. To top it all, Jesus tells them that he is leaving them, and they can't go with him. So, when Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," it is because their hearts are troubled.

These well-known words from Jesus are read most often in the church during the troubled times of funerals and grief. These are words of comfort. And to comfort us, Jesus tells his disciples to trust him. When he says, "Believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1 NRSV) he is using the Greek *pisteuo*, usually translated as "believe" but we have so thinned this word that to most of us believe means a kind of intellectual assent. For us, believe is head knowledge. But *pisteuo* has more of a connotation of trust and fidelity, of personal involvement and participation. Not so much intellectual assent or getting the facts straight; *pisteuo* is about relationship. Not what you know as much as who you know. And not just who you know but who you are involved with. This is a conversation of intimacy and tenderness: "I know you're troubled and afraid, trust God. And trust me, too."

As usual, the disciples did not see this coming. Following Jesus is an adventure, and one never knows for sure what will happen next. About the only thing we can do is to keep our eyes on Jesus and do what he does. In other words, trust him.

Of course, they also must learn to trust each other. For the past three years, that's part of what Jesus has been trying to teach them and help them practice: trust. I've mentioned many times over the years the mistrust between Matthew the Tax Collector and Simon the Zealot, who before Jesus called them, would have probably tried to kill one another. Or Nathaniel, from the town of Cana, located about 8 miles from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, who said, "Can anything good from Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Can he trust someone from Nazareth?

Or what about Simon Peter and Andrew, brothers who were partners in the fishing business? Down the beach was the rival fishing business, "Zebedee and Sons Fishermen" run by old-man Zebedee and his two sons, James and young John. Sure enough, Jesus has all four of these fishermen in his community of disciples.

And what about this Judas Iscariot? He spends three years with Jesus and these other disciples, in intimate trusting friendship and discipleship, yet right before these words we've read this morning, Judas slips out to betray Jesus. Indeed, he betrays all of them.

Trust is not easy. We have plenty to be suspicious of. We are suspicious and skeptical for good reason. We've been let down, betrayed, led astray, and been made fools of too many times. We have been deeply hurt and even abused.

And in the world we're living in we've learned to be skeptical. Advertisers constantly try to lure us to buy their products, politicians mislead and use us to gain power, while churches and hot-shot preachers manipulate us.

For a disciple of Jesus, it's not simply a matter of trust or mistrust. It is learning who and what to trust and what not. We have to learn to discern who to trust. Jesus tells us to trust God, trust him, and the rest of the chapters 14 through 17, is about learning to trust each other in the church as we receive the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. To be in the church, the community of disciples, is all about trust. Sam Wells, former dean of Duke Chapel, and currently the Rector of St. Martin in the Fields in London, calls the church, "the community of trust."

Following Jesus, alongside one other in this community of trust, is hard. We don't usually know what will happen next, no matter how much we plan. And when facing the unknown and unfamiliar, we get careful. We hunker down and bunker up. We mistrust. This is why betrayal of trust is such a big deal in the church.

In church no one is a passive observer. Especially not this church. And we must learn to trust God, trust the Bible, and trust one another. Building trust takes time and lots of small steps. Building trust means that everyone is going to do their part, show up, be counted on, contribute with time and effort, participation, and contribute financially. Trust means learning that everyone will pray for each other and seek and give forgiveness and receive forgiveness. Trust that everyone will do what they say they will do, keep their vows and promises. So listen to me – when the chips are down, we're going to have to trust one another and have each other's backs.

Jesus goes on, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places” (v. 2). A better translation would be “In my Father’s household are many abiding places” or “There is plenty of room in God’s house,” or “God’s community is bigger than you know, and you can trust that you can safely live together there.” It’s a good and safe place.

Jesus then starts talking about us knowing “the way.” And Thomas speaks up and says, “Jesus, what are you talking about?” And Jesus replies with one of his famous “I am” statements, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (v. 6).

Here’s where things get sticky for some of us. We immediately start asking questions like, “Is Jesus the only way to God or are there many ways?” Or “In our world of anger, violence and religious bigotry isn’t this a little too exclusive sounding?”

But let’s remember the context. Far from being the dominant (and dominating) religion it is in America, here in John is a small band of friends, huddled together behind closed doors with a growing fear and impending grief. They’re hanging on by their fingernails and Jesus is telling them to trust him. When their fear distracts them, Jesus says “Listen to me. I am the way. You can trust me on this; God has a place for all of us and I’m going ahead to get everything ready.”

I think of the Confessing Church in Germany during the mid-1930’s who faced the popular and hate-filled nationalistic theology of the day which said, “God comes to us today through Hitler and through the nation.” The Confessing Church responded with “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Jesus Christ.”

Jesus is speaking intimately to disciples barely hanging on. They have no power, especially no social nor political power. They're scared, and don't know who to trust and Jesus says, "Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on. Trust me. I am the way." We've got to be clear about who we are trusting and who we are not. With the rise of gun-toting White Christian Nationalism, we trust the Way of Jesus Christ and not the way of guns, hatred, fear, and the flag. When the hurricanes come, we have to count on one another. Going into cancer treatments, we must trust God and trust one another. Serving hurting people down on the border, we trust each other. With out-of-control gun violence, incredibly power-hungry governors and lieutenant governors and senators, overt and aggressive racism, we must be able to count on one another. Hear me again – when the chips are down, we're going to have to trust one another and have each other's backs.

This dates some of us, and with respect to Ray Parker, Jr. and *Ghostbusters* but:

If there's somethin' strange in the neighborhood

Who ya gonna call (Austin Heights)

There's somethin' weird and it don't look good

Who ya gonna call (Austin Heights).

Years ago, a woman's husband was taken by ambulance to the hospital. She was a member of Austin Heights and was here every Sunday. She later told me, "I sat in the ER, alone and afraid and in shock, and all I could think of is, who can I call?" She went on, "Then it hit me. Who was I holding hands with on Sunday during the Benediction? That's who I called."

That's called trust.

Back to our story. Are there other ways to God? “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” Jesus already told us back in John 10:16. And he also just told us that the household of God has a lot of rooms, so there is much going on here that we don’t know about. I do think it is safe to say that God’s household is bigger than we know. God’s house has a lot of good, safe places with plenty of room.

Back in December of 1990, Jane and I, and 6-month-old Emily were at a party with a lot of gay men. Many of them were coming to our church and invited us to a Christmas party. One of the men, Nat, told me, “You know why I’m coming to Austin Heights? It is because there among all of you I’m discovering that Jesus has enough room for me.”

The church of Jesus Christ, especially this branch called Austin Heights, has a place for you. There is room for you. While power-hungry, manipulative politicians are using hate language against transgender young people, this church is a safe and welcoming place with room for you. You can trust us.

We can trust because God in Christ first trusted us and has shown us what trust looks like. Christ Jesus is worthy of trust and can be counted on. Furthermore, God sends us the Holy Spirit, our Helper and Guide, and says, “Okay, I’m trusting you to do this work. I’m trusting that you’ll make room for others. I’m trusting that you’ll love and forgive one another, and I’m giving you the Holy Spirit to help you, encourage you, and show you the way.”

My old friend and member of the Neighborhood, Nathan Stone ran away from home when he was a boy. Two things worked in his favor: his older brother went with him. And they lived in Hawaii, so they figured it wouldn’t be too hard. They could sleep on the beach and beg food from the tourists. But after a

week or so, the beach got lonely. And the tourists got stingy. They thought they should probably go home to make sure their parents were doing okay without them. It was dinnertime. As they snuck up to the house, they could smell Mom's home cooking. They peeked through the dining room window. And there, at the table, were two place settings waiting for them to come home.

We're gathering around the Lord's Table today. There is a place setting for you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.