

## How Many Rooms are There in God's House?

John 14: 1-3; Revelations 7:9-12

How many rooms are there in God's house? In some of his last words to the disciples in John's gospel, Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many rooms." How many? And I'm not talking about God's heavenly home alone, but here and now as well.

How we think about such questions may make a difference in how we live today, in how we treat others, even how we treat ourselves. Is God a hotel manager with limited occupancy, and are we the hotel clerks who get to decide to whom we give out the keys?

In this last of my Eastertide sermons I've chosen two texts not normally joined: from John 14 and from the book of Revelation. The first is often read at funerals, the second is rarely read, because it's in a book we tend to keep on the shelf.

### I

As I said, Jesus' words in John are often read at funerals, for good reason. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his imminent death, and he is assuring them that death will not be the end of it all—nor of his relationship with him.

He is trying to answer questions children ask when their parents are going away for a few days: Where are you going? When are you coming back? And, Who will stay with us?

So Jesus tries to comfort them and us: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe, trust in God, believe, trust also in me.” I think belief is best understood as trust here, not so much believing this or that about God, about Jesus, but a believing *in*. “I know *whom* I have believed”, the scripture says. (Not *what* I have believed.)

Then he says, “In my Father’s house, my *Abba*’s house, are many rooms” Or to use earlier translation, “many dwelling places.” Otherwise, he adds, I would have told you different.

And now words we treasure:

I am going to prepare a place for you, and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself so that where I am you shall be also.

Like a child being comforted by their parents going away, we are comforted in these words. Yes I will return, he said, and I will lead you to your eternal home.

In the most common reading of the text, it is a promise that at our deaths Jesus will come again to us and lead us through heaven’s gates. Here is another

reading. He will return to us in the Spirit to be with us every day. That's what he said later on in those final words. Who will stay with us? The presence of Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit.

## II

But now let's return to the question: How many rooms are there in God's house? There are too many Christians who believe that their room is the only room in God's house. Only they and their kind are there. How stingy we can be with God's love and grace. Don't you think God wants all God's children there?

So I imagine many rooms in God's house, too many to count. Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Quaker, Presbyterian and on and on. I like to imagine with a bit of mischief a Southern Baptist, going out the door of the Baptist House that first morning and saying, "O my goodness, there are *others* here!"

And what about a Hindu room and a Buddhist room and a Jewish room and a Muslim room? These are God's children too, and God will want them there.

You may have noticed where I ended the scripture from John, at verse 3. Verses 4-6 can be read in an exclusionary way. Jesus followed his words about coming back to receive and take his disciples home to heaven with saying "And you know the way to where I am going."

And honest Thomas was the only one brave enough to speak up, and said, “Lord, we do *not* know where you are going, and how can we know the way?” (I like to call him “Honest Thomas” rather than “Doubting Thomas.” You can almost imagine the other disciples saying to Thomas: “Thomas, *you* ask him!”)

Jesus replied, “*I AM* the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” That doesn’t sound like Jesus to me, who told parables about God wanting his house filled, and how everyone is invited to the feast.

Here is how I interpret it, not that you should agree. Look at the first words of John’s gospel. I substitute “the way the truth and life” for “the word.”

In the beginning was the way, the truth and the life. And the way, the truth and the life was with God and was God,

Now let’s go on.

In the way, the truth and the life was life itself, and that life was the light of *all people*. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it.

And now the climactic verse:

And the way, the truth and the life became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

Do you think the God of love, so immense we can scarcely take it in, would hide the way, the truth and the life from his children, her children, only to offer it to *some*, born in the right place and time?

So you can read these verses in an exclusionary way or in this way: God's way, truth and life have been available to all people through all time. Jesus is the unique expression of it, but Christianity does not have the monopoly on it.

When I taught "World Religions" at Johnson C. Smith, I used the old story from India some of you read in your younger years.

There were five blind men who came to an elephant. One had hold of its *tail*, another its *trunk*, another its *side*, another its *leg*, another its *ear*. The one that had hold of its *tail* said the elephant was like a rope. The one who had hold of its *trunk* said the elephant was like a snake. The one who had hold of the *side* said the elephant was like a wall, the one who had hold of the *leg* said the elephant was like a tree. And the one who had hold of the *ear* said the elephant was like a fan.

And they argued and argued. In their blindness they each thought their part of the elephant was all there was to the elephant.

We are all partially sighted when it comes to our understanding of God. Paul said, "now we see through a glass darkly, now we see in part." What if we

lived in the wonder of the immensity of God's love? What if we saw Jesus, as John put it, as giving "grace upon grace, upon grace"? How many rooms? No one could count.

### III

Now we move to the text from the book of Revelation. Revelation can be a confounding if not exasperating book. It was the last book admitted to the final canon of 66 books to make our Bible. One reason was because it could be interpreted in so many wildly different ways. And it has spawned a number of wild end-time scenarios, some that import some things into the book. These, I think miss the main point of the book.

Revelation is best read as a book on several levels. The first, most important and most *neglected* level, is to see the book in its historical context and its meaning to its first reader. Another level is to see it as God's glorious vision of how all will be completed at the end of times. The third level is to see the visions in the book not only as God's final desires but as God's desires for this world now.

Revelation 7:9-12 is about the final completion, *and* it is about how God wants us to live in the present. It seems dream-like, this vision of heaven's future given to John by an angel, a glimpse, to use the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, of *Lord of the Rings* fame, of "Joy, Joy beyond the walls of this world." It is said of the

great Scottish poet Robert Burns that he could not read this passage without tears coming to his eyes.

John looked and saw .... A great multitude that no one could count from every nation from all tribes and peoples and tongues....

Some have tried to limit the number, some using another number in Revelation, 144,000. That's a pretty exclusive club when you think of all who have lived on this planet and shall live. But John saw so many no one could count.

Then multitude is also *diverse*, more diverse than some are comfortable with. "Of *all* nations, tribes, peoples and languages." This is no homogenized heaven. Let's do a stop frame and imagine heaven right now. Wouldn't it include Africans coming from their original religions, and Buddhists in China and Japan and Hindus in India, and Jews in Israel? Wouldn't it include people in Iran speaking Farsi, and those who speak in Spanish, French and English? What about Swahili by Africans?

All this is too wonderful for our hearts and minds to capture. In Quebec those who speak French are called Francophones. They hear and speak French. In heaven all the tongues will be the language of love, the one language that transcends all tongues. What we will hear is love.

## IV

And what are they doing, this multitude? They are waving palm branches and singing

Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the Throne and to the Lamb. In Revelation, the Lamb is Jesus, who from the foundation of the world has been seeking and saving all God's children.

You don't have to audition for that choir. All are singing their hearts out to God. God's music makes all of us singers.

There is an old hymn some of you may have sung. It goes like this:

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,  
Sing his mercy and his grace,  
In the mansions bright and blessed  
He'll prepare for us a place.

Then the refrain:

When we all get to heaven  
What a day of rejoicing that will be!

We don't have to wait till then. Heaven's coming is for us now. Look around and see all the beautiful people God loves.



