

Sermon for Easter 5 John 14:1-14

The readings which are the selected texts for each Sunday of the church year have been chosen by a team with a particular purpose in mind. Today's text from the gospel of John serves the purpose of reminding us that we can have peace and hope due to Christ giving his life on the cross. It is important for us to realize that John 14 is not an entity unto itself. If we look at the preceding chapter 13 it sets the stage for what is to come. Jesus washes the disciples' feet, foretells his betrayal, gives them the new commandment, and foretells Peter's denial. The first verses of chapter 14 start to make a little more sense when we know the context.

I suppose another way of looking at this would be to think about the Star Wars movies. The first movie came out when I was a child. Then two sequels were made. Now many years later three prequels have been made. Star Wars: The Phantom Menace which is now the first movie was made knowing that eventually they would need to work towards reaching the original Star Wars movie. There was a lot of space to fill.

So, John 13 helps us to better understand John 14, especially the very first words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." You might wonder to yourself why are we hearing these promises of resurrection now. Easter has already happened.

The imagery of Jesus preparing a room in the Father's house is a very peaceful image for us. I am sure you have heard this text many times during funerals and

celebrations of life because it is comforting to know there is a place in heaven for all of us just waiting to be occupied.

Some might say, “Hold on a minute. Not all have a place. Jesus says to Thomas, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Yes, the text does say that. What if we were to see this verse as the beginning to interreligious dialog and living with our Jewish and Muslim neighbours?

There are three ways to understand how Christianity relates to other faith traditions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The traditional stance is that the only way to salvation is through faith in Christ Jesus and that all others are condemned. This position is very problematic. The inclusivist position states that there are non-Christians who act like Christ, such as Gandhi, who will be saved by God. The pluralist position is that there are many faith traditions that lead to salvation, like bicycle spokes that lead to the hub.

Having a personal relationship with Christ (whether baptized or not) and believing that he is the way to salvation does not preclude an attitude of respect, interreligious dialog, and religious freedom. After all we serve a God who is much bigger than our capacity to understand.

Jesus is God’s love incarnate in human form. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. We can experience an intimate relationship of love, trust, and assurance in Jesus, and at the same time not be threatened by other religious traditions. We can believe in Jesus without invalidating the experience of others.

During the days following Easter we tend to worship the resurrection part of the story of Jesus forgetting that during Eastertide it is important to revisit the pre-crucifixion stories so that we will be reminded of the impact Jesus' life-giving promises are for the world. We can more fully rejoice in the power of the resurrection and retune ourselves to what it means that Christ is risen. We are forgiven.

Forgiven, we are called to forgive others. We are called to live out our faith. The world is yearning to see the John 14 way of life Jesus lifts up embodied in the lives of real neighbours, coworkers, leaders, and friends. We yearn to see it in our own lives. Christ's resurrection power is calling us to be let loose in the world, enabling all to live more faithfully. This could not be more timely or profound. When we are given reason to hope we live boldly.

The image of Jesus preparing a place for us speaks boldly of God's love, and inclusivity. And yet our awareness of what that looks like will not be comprehended until we here what Lindsay Armstrong states,

We do not understand what Jesus means when he says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places until we make room for placeless people: international students, internally displaced persons, refugees, unhoused people, addicts, differently abled people, foster children, domestic-abuse victims, ignored or abused elderly folks, among too many others."¹

The promise of special dwelling places is forever true. Hopefully we are not now or never have to worry about being boxed into one of these categories and be

¹Armstrong, L. P. (2019). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Worship and Preaching Year A Volume 2* (p. 269). Westminster John Knox Press.

struggling. As Christians and fellow human beings how do we make room for individuals? How do we embody the joy, openness, and justice we know in Jesus Christ? What is our focus?

Is our life as a church the powerful manifestation of the life of Jesus? What does our table fellowship look like? Whose feet are we washing? How do we help others find a family and a place to belong? Whom is God inviting us to see? For whom do we create home?

We are clearly being called to reshape our rhythms, postures, and priorities to make room for placeless people. We are being urged to recognize that church is not an end in itself but is an instrument of God's mission.

It is time to be courageous. Jesus removed barriers, drew alongside the stranger and prepared "many dwelling places" within his Father's house. The moment is now to join in this life-giving and life-changing work of making place. The moment is now to take seriously the witness of our lives. Let's act in the distinctive way God's household acts, living our story as Christ's story, as part of the family sent to show the deeply needed love of the One who welcomes, creates space and family for all and empowers us to "do the works that I do and, in fact...greater works than these" (v.12). Amen.