

Seeing God

John 14:1-14



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We have nearly reached the end of our Lenten journey for this year; this is the fifth and final Sunday of Lent, and next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. And that means we are reflecting on our last “I am” statement of Jesus. We began with I am the bread of life, then the good shepherd and the gate, the resurrection and the life, the true vine...and now today, I am the way, the truth and the life. There are more than just these five - or six, really, we had a two-for-one Sunday with the shepherd and the gate. We didn't touch on “I am the light of the world,” for example or the many times Jesus says “I am he” in response to other peoples' statements about who he is. But each “I am” statement and all of them together reveal Christ as both God and human, the living embodiment of perfect unity, perfect oneness between the things of heaven and the things of earth. And each “I am” statement also reveals how Jesus blurs the line for us between heaven and earth, showing us how to live abundantly, love unstintingly, abide securely in him, right now, today.

Our excerpt from John's gospel today backs us up a bit from what we read together last week, about Jesus being the true vine and we his branches. But it's the same conversation; the long, last evening before Jesus' arrest and execution. This farewell conversation functions kind of like Jesus' last will and testament. Like an Old Testament patriarch on his deathbed, bequeathing his belongings and his wisdom to his gathered family, Jesus is giving his nearest companions what he has: wisdom, and power, and peace. And he gives these things to them over the course an evenings' conversation. And it is a conversation, not a monologue or one very long speech by Jesus. That is especially obvious here at the beginning, when Jesus answers three questions posed by his disciples. Jesus starts off with words that have since become beloved and familiar to us: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.”

I do my best not to indulge too much in belabouring the details of biblical translation, ancient Greek to modern English; I find it fascinating, but I acknowledge that not everyone does. But this is an important one. A better translation of this first sentence - do not let your hearts be troubled - would actually be “do not let y'all's heart be troubled.” Did you hear the difference? You plural, but one heart, singular.

A heart, shared as one among them all; and that one, common heart is troubled.

Why would Jesus' friends shared heart be troubled? Because the disciples are struggling together with the idea of Jesus not being there with them anymore. Despite what Jesus has said about the necessity of his "being lifted up on the Cross," they can't see how his departure could possibly be good. But Jesus refuses to allow his disciples to avoid the truth of who Jesus is and what that means for them. Jesus is gentle, but firm: his death is happening, so they need to talk about it. And it's already been a rough night.

Since dinner - the last supper - and Jesus' serving them through the unsettling act of foot washing, Judas Iscariot has already been all but named as the one who will betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities, and has left the gathering. Jesus again speaks of his death, saying that where he is going, they cannot follow him; not this time. A hard thing for loyal men and women to hear, and in chapter 13, Peter, being Peter, asks our first question, "Lord, where are you going? Let me come with you; I will lay down my life for you." Shockingly, Jesus predicts that loud, loyal Peter will deny Jesus, a betrayal of another kind.

So their heart is indeed troubled: by what Jesus is saying about his own death, and by the sudden cracks and fissures appearing within their tight-knit group. So Jesus comforts them by saying that, though they share one troubled heart, they also share one common home: God's home. There's a word connection between dwelling places and abiding that disappears in the English translation, but if you remember last Sunday, when we read about the Father abiding in Christ, and Christ abiding in us, and us abiding in him - we dwell; we remain; we abide.

Throughout his gospel, John continues to express Jesus' teaching as an invitation to abide with Jesus and thereby have life, abundant and eternal, which begins right now. In answer to Peter's question - "Lord, where are you going?" - Jesus explains that he goes by way of the Cross to prepare this place where we all abide, united in the household of God. And that place is not somewhere we can only get into after we die. It's a place we can be in, right now, because Jesus died and rose again. Jesus comes and goes often in the gospel of John, whether it is into the world and to the cross, travelling in and out of dangerous Judea, or around and around a lake. Jesus is the one coming into the world who is going to prepare a place for us. When Jesus leaves, it only serves the goal of his eventual return.

Enter Thomas, the Eeyore of John's gospel, faithful and practical. Thomas responds to Jesus' poetic promises of coming and going and dwelling places in his usual practical way: we don't actually know where you're going, Jesus, so how can we possibly know the way to get there on our own? On behalf of the whole group, Thomas pleads ignorance; we can imagine the tone of his question to be anything from confusion to frustration at Jesus' mysterious, imprecise answers. How often do Jesus' disciples claim that they don't understand him, excusing themselves from decision-making or action-taking or changing their minds on the basis of not getting it?

They often seem to be looking for clear directions, a battle plan, a route map, or better still, a final destination to arrive at. But the answer lies in belief and relationship: trusting, faithful belief, and confusing, challenging, vital, abiding relationship - the most significant one being between Jesus and them. Jesus, for his part, is not letting the disciples off the hook this time: they know enough to be going on with, because they know Jesus: I am the way, Jesus proclaims, and that way is truth and life; training their eyes on Jesus will always lead them down a path that will be true and life-giving.

I think it is probably worth pausing for a moment here, and considering all the ways we might hear this passage and what it means and what Jesus meant. Jesus is telling us that following his way is the only path to that unity, that oneness with God, and the only way to have full, abundant, eternal life. We might want to push this further, by saying that this statement is therefore about excluding some people from being part of this abundant, eternal life; or we might want to use Jesus' words to convince unbelievers that they had better start being Christians or suffer eternal exclusion from the household of God.

First of all, God so loved the world that he sent Jesus into it to save it, not condemn it. No one and no part of creation belongs on the outside of that saving work. And second of all, this is a private meal among friends, people who already believe in Jesus whole-heartedly. It doesn't make any sense for this to be an evangelistic statement, when everyone hearing it is already a believer.

So Jesus must have meant just what he said: it's time to drop the excuses for not doing anything, for hesitating, for being tentative and, instead, trust that we know enough and are equipped enough to follow Jesus' way.

And then Philip steps up with his question. And it's interesting - his question is not as well-received as Peter's or Thomas' was. Where Peter wanted to come, too, and Thomas wanted marching orders on how to get moving, Philip wants to jump the line-up and arrive directly at what he sees as the end result: seeing God.

Show us the Father, Philip says, and we will be satisfied. While Thomas and Peter speak for the whole group and Jesus answers them that way - it's y'all again, the plural you, between these two disciples and Jesus - when Philip tries the same thing, Jesus answers him personally: have I been with y'all all this time, and you still don't know me? How can you, Philip, say, 'show us the Father?'

Regrettably, Philip still seems to be stuck back in John, chapter 6, back with the loaves and the fishes and the massive, hungry crowd, back with Jesus, the bread of life, who supplies the hungry with spiritual food, and never fully satisfies our spiritual hunger, our yearning, for more and more of him.

Philip presses Jesus for more, so that "the disciples," or rather Philip himself, might be satisfied; he wants the full belly, the quick fix of an instant answer. But as always, Jesus offers abundantly more: he tells Philip, tells us, that if we yearn to see God, well, we already have, if we know Jesus.

In his own way, Jesus has directly and clearly answered all three questions his disciples posed to him that night. To Peter's "Lord, where are you going and can I come with you," Jesus replies that he is going to the Cross to prepare a place for them, a way, for the triune God and all his believers to dwell and abide with one another. To Thomas' "how can we know the way," Jesus replies that he is the way, that following him on this way of truth and life is how we come to that place of indwelling, abiding unity with God and Jesus. And to Philip's question - or his request, anyway - to be shown the Father, Jesus replies, if you know me, if you see me, then you see God the Father, too.

These are questions that we might well have asked, or be asking, of Jesus ourselves. When our heart is troubled by what we see happening around us, by the apparent inevitability of trouble and loss and worry, when we are yearning for spiritual fullness or a hot meal, we might ask where Jesus has gone; or how to get to where he is; or to be shown God's power, his love, his intervening grace, right here, right now.

The answers that Jesus gives us for those questions all rely on a single, underlying truth: that God and Jesus really are unified, that they are one; Father and Son - as tight as family - and yet the same God.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus just says stuff and then it happens? Jesus heals the sick by speaking, even at a distance, like with the royal official whose child lay dying at home several days' travelling away from Jesus, and was healed at the very time Jesus said "your son will live." Or the well-know "stand up, take up your mat and walk," or even Jesus' first sign, instructing the household servants to fill jars with water and draw out wine. God the Father does this sort of thing, too, even to the extent of speaking creation itself into being. Words and works are not two separate things for God, nor are they for Jesus, especially not here in the gospel of John.

This is the point that Jesus, I think, is trying to make when he says to his disciples: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." See what I do, recognize how it reveals God to you, and know that we, God and Jesus, are one, mutually abiding, inseparable from one another. The Father works and Jesus works, indistinguishably and in life-giving ways. But as impressive as this claim is, Jesus goes on to say something even more surprising and exciting: "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

Whoever believes in Jesus, trusts him, follows this way of truth and life, will also do the same work that Jesus and God do. It's that trio of relationships from last Sunday coming into view: God and Jesus, Jesus and us, and us together. If we want to see God, we can look at Jesus, and if someone wants to see what Jesus is like, they should be able to look at us and see our Saviour, working through us.

The believer - you and I - we are participants, not bystanders: in this relationship of abiding and dwelling with God and Jesus, and in the work that God and Jesus, together now with the Holy Spirit, are doing. The point of this part of the conversation between Jesus and his disciples comes after what we read together, in verse 23, where Jesus answers another question: "Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

Jesus answers: “Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Everything that matters - abundant, eternal life, trust, knowing enough to be able to get on and do the work that Jesus invites us into, abiding with God in that dwelling place prepared just for us - everything that matters is already available right now. There is more to come, of course, but God is not currently holding out on us in any way. Abundant life, mutual abiding, love, it’s all here for the living, from this very moment into eternity. There is no room to dream small and no time to get stuck in the mud of hesitating questions and inaction.

From the ordinary to the extraordinary, Christians have and can do what Jesus did and more; we can live the promised new abundant life; we can love one another and abide in Christ, we can let people who do not know Jesus meet him when they look at what we do and hear what we say...if we trust that Jesus is the way, is truth, is life. Whether we will follow that way is up to us; but we can follow it and live abundantly now because, at the end of this long, lingering, last conversation with those he loved, Jesus finished the work God sent him to do on the Cross. Thanks be to God. Amen.