

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, May 14, 2017 // Easter 5, Year A

The Gospel: John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 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; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Background and general observations

You may have heard the first part of this Gospel lesson at funerals, and it is not hard to see why so many people have found John 14:1-6 to be helpful when they are struggling to commend someone they have loved to God's eternal care. This portion of John's Gospel is sometimes referred to as a part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in which he tells his disciples that he is leaving, attempts to console them, and gives them instruction and promises for the future.

In the verses that immediately precede this passage, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be with them only a little longer, and he gives them a new commandment that they should love each other as he has loved them. Peter asks Jesus where he is going (13:36) and Jesus responds, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now." Peter protests and says that he will lay down his life for Jesus, to which Jesus responds that Peter is going to deny Jesus three times before the cock crows. The next sentence is the first line of our passage, "Do not let your hearts be troubled...."

One of the ways in which Jesus seems to be trying to console the disciples is by assuring them that he and God are one. Anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. In other words, they might be troubled, frightened, and uncomprehending now; but Jesus wants them to know that they can trust him. Where Jesus is going there are many dwelling places for them, and Jesus will prepare a place for each of them and will ultimately take the disciples to himself. In the meantime, Jesus' leaving is necessary, so that the Spirit can come, and the disciples "will do greater works than these."

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The disciples are, understandably, anxious and afraid. Jesus has said he is leaving, and they have responded that they want to go with him. Jesus says they cannot go where he is going yet, and the disciples respond by asking several questions that convey their anxiety.

This is the atmosphere in which Jesus exhorts the disciples not to let their hearts be troubled. Jesus intended these words to be comforting to the disciples, and we often read this Gospel lesson at funerals, as a reminder and a consolation for the bereaved.

However, this Gospel lesson could apply to any number of situations in our lives when our hearts are troubled.

Think about times in your life, even very recent times, when your heart has been troubled (and aren't there countless ways a heart can be troubled?)... What are some of the events, people or circumstances that cause your heart to be troubled?

What are the resources of your faith that seem to calm your troubled heart? What consoles you?

Have you experienced being calmed, strengthened, or encouraged by God when you were in a particularly difficult situation? When your heart is troubled, are there things you can do that better position you to receive God's calming and strengthening influence?

2. “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.”

Although the traditional interpretation of this passage is that Jesus is referring to our place with God after death, all along our life's multifaceted journey, God seems to prepare and provide for us “many dwelling places.” Our constantly changing life's circumstances call for new dwelling places with God. Try to think expansively about how—and where—dwelling places exist.

The “dwelling place” with God that we need when we are children changes when we become teenagers, when we are in our 20's and 30's, when we are in mid-life, and when we are elderly. Also, certain life events—in crisis, in grief, in great joy—can call for different “dwelling places” with God.

How has God provided various dwelling places for you at different stages and in different situations of your life's journey?

3. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

These sentences are often cited as proof that non-Christians cannot be saved and/or do not know God.

But consider C.S. Lewis' remarks in his famous book, *Mere Christianity*:

"Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."¹

The famous Jesuit priest and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, has written, "Christ plays in ten thousand places/Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his..."²

How have you understood or interpreted this saying of Jesus, "No one comes to the Father except through me"? Do you believe Christ saves or brings people to the Father through means other than a belief in Jesus? How do other Christians receive your belief about these things?

4. "Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'"

Jesus seems to respond to Philip in exasperation, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

Reflect on how incarnational our Easter Gospel lessons seem to be. How often do we wish we could see or know God better? How often do we desire proof in order to overcome doubt? How often are we blind to God when God is right in front of us, or even right within us?

Jesus makes God known in the flesh, and many Christians believe that we are called and empowered to do the same. As Rev. Penny Nash explained in a recent sermon, we need "real human contact in order to be transformed." She extends what lawyer, writer, and activist Bryan Stevenson calls "getting proximate." In other words, it is our nearness to one another, especially in suffering, that empowers and changes us. And it is difficult to experience real transformation from a distance.

Have you ever longed for some sense of divine reassurance or divine presence, and then realized later that God had been near to you all along, perhaps reaching out to you through a family member, friend, or stranger? When has your "getting proximate" led to a sense of clarity, or divinity, or transformation?

5. "Very truly, I tell you, 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."

Christians believe that we have within us the power of the Holy Spirit, the very Presence of God. What does this mean concerning how we have been empowered? You might remember how Paul says in Ephesians, "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine..." (3:20). Paul also says in Philippians, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (4:13).

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, New York, 1960, p. 65

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"

What does this mean for you? The context for Paul in Philippians was his explaining, “In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need” (4:12). In other words, Paul is not saying, “Now that the Spirit dwells in me, I can perform works of magic.” Rather, he is talking about a different kind of empowerment that sustains him in any and all situations.

What do you know of this kind of spiritual power in your own life?

6. If you read this passage with special attention to the ways in which Jesus is giving his disciples instructions on how they should live their lives once he is gone, what do you hear him saying? What is he saying to you about how you should live your life?