

John 14:1-14

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 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? 3 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. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." 8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." 9 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'? 10 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. 11 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. 12 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. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Grace to you and peace from our God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Among other things on my mind when I was beginning to write my sermon this week, I thought of Mother's Day. (And happy Mother's Day to all mothers and those of you who have been like a mother to someone!) When I read the gospel for today I was initially drawn to this statement: "...but the Father who dwells in me does his works." Certainly, this is a statement about the relationship between Jesus and the Father, but I wonder if we could take this a different way. What if each of us had the Father – or a father or mother of the highest degree – within us that could be consulted at any point to give us good advice? Wouldn't that be nice?

And you have to understand that I didn't get this kind of father in my own family. On the contrary, when we had the memorial service for my dad, it was an informal affair with only the family in attendance. In my "sermon" I talked about what Joseph said to his brothers when they begged for his forgiveness: What you intended for evil, God used for good. After that, I asked my family if any of them had anything they'd like to say. My older brother, Jeff, said that dad had actually done us a favor by being the way he was. "Whenever I have a tough decision to make," he explained, "I ask myself what dad would do...and then I do the opposite." So yeah. My dad was not that kind of father.

There's a little fella at the core of me. He's the one who is the natural result of my childhood. When stressful decisions are presented to this guy, his decisions are always bad because they come from a place of pain and shame. I have many workarounds because I have come to the conclusion that he's here to stay. I just need to love him...and not let *him* run the show. Because of him, I've always been searching for a better guide, some better advice for what to do, especially during stressful times and difficult decisions.

So, yeah. I'd LOVE to have the best father – the best parent – in the world inside me so that I would make better decisions based upon love, not fear and woundedness. This is the very promise that Jesus will make to us over the next few weeks, so I'm getting ahead of myself. But keep this in mind. You *have* been given another better voice inside of you, a guide and a strength that is not of yourself. In the meantime, let's take a look at what's going on in today's Gospel.

Jesus is with his disciples, his friends, on the last night before he goes to suffer and die. He wants to offer them powerful assurances that they will be fine – more than fine – when he is gone. He is now going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house. They who have left their own homes behind *will* have a home with Jesus forever. And they don't know what he's talking about, which is hardly unusual. There are only a handful of times in John's gospel where they actually understand what Jesus is doing and talking about. Misunderstanding is the name of the game with Jesus and his disciples.

I find what Thomas says to be strangely comforting. "We don't know *where* you are going. How can we know the way?" That's the question I hope I would have asked. It's as if he's saying, "Would you please speak plainly to us, Jesus? Pretty please??"

But it's not only in John's gospel that we find confused and distressed disciples. In the fourth chapter of Mark's gospel, for instance, we are told that from that time forward Jesus never said a word in public except in parables. How frustrating would that be? All he will do is tell these stories, never giving a straight answer to anything. If he's asked to speak more plainly, he's quite likely to tell another dang parable. "Here's a parable about speaking plainly and not in parables..."

Give us a map, point a direction, give us the location, anything! We want to be with you in your Father's house and all we're asking is for you to tell us how to get there!! Is that too much to ask?? It's almost like this is a weirder version of the Abbott and Costello routine, "Who's on First?"

Jesus does, in fact, answer Thomas' question, but not the way that he or any of the others could understand at that time. He points to himself. He says that in and through him – and their relationship with him – is the way to the Father. In him they would find their home.

Being a pastor means that you are going to live a semi-nomadic life. Each time you accept a new call to a new congregation, it means another move to another town. Maybe this is why my late wife, Vicki, would occasionally tell me that she was homesick, but she didn't know where home was. I knew just what she meant and ached with the same ache.

Over the years we discussed this hollow feeling that both of us experienced. This is what we finally figured out: we were each other's home. In the midst of many moves, leaving friends from previous congregations, making friends in the next town...then leaving them as well, the one constant we had was each other and our love for each other. Maybe it wasn't the home we were really longing for, but it got us through. It was enough. Perhaps the home we were really longing for is the one Jesus is talking about today. Our home in Christ.

But it takes us a long time to get there, doesn't it? We want to rely on the comfort of our "reality," of the fixed nature of our lives, or at least the lives we used to have. We assumed we would have a stable job, that the grocery stores will be well stocked, that we will be free to go out and come in again without fear...as we have been able to expect most of our lives. All of these things, all of the certainties, are not so certain anymore. We are huddled in our homes, much like the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion, out of fear of this invisible enemy.

And yet, strangely enough, although we are huddled in our homes, we all feel homeless in a way. We have been set adrift in a time and space where an increasing number of those things that we have always counted upon simply are not there anymore. We are very much like the disciples right now. Grasping at straws trying to make sense of the situation.

To which Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest." And Jesus says, "I am going to prepare a place for you...and you know the way." Which of course we do. We've known it all along. We just want it to be something different. A place we can go to, a thing we can touch and see and smell. Something concrete. Not this relationship crap. I mean, that's all fine and well, but where do we plant the garden and where is the driveway so we can put up a basketball hoop?

And we are no more in control of this than the disciples were that night in the upper room. The comfort Jesus offers is profound, and in some ways we're still trying to unpack the implications of what he said that night. It's not the comfort we were looking for, but it's the comfort we're going to get. The discomfort of this time and space we're in right now is echoed in the disciples' pleas for clarity.

We are being stripped of all our delusions of us being in control, of all the things in our lives that have always been ephemeral. So where do we go and to whom shall we turn?

In a recent email I received from Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation, Sheryl Fullerton writes about what it's like to be where we are –

Like Jonah in the belly of the sea monster, we are led where we do not want to go—not once, but many times in our lives. Dwelling in unsettling liminal space, whether we are pushed or we jump, we are led to draw on resources and possibilities we may not have tapped before. In the unknown space between here and there, younger and older, past and future, life happens. And, if we attend, we can feel the Holy Spirit moving with us in a way that we may not be aware of in more settled times. In liminal time and space, we can learn to let reality—even in its darkness—be our teacher, rather than living in the illusion that we are creating it on our own. We can enter into the liminal paradox: a disturbing time and space that not only breaks us down, but also offers us the choice to live in it with fierce aliveness, freedom, sacredness, companionship, and awareness of Presence.

We might even come to Jesus and recognize that in and through him we find not only the home that we are seeking, but that it is a better home than the one we left behind.

In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. When he realizes that they are going to take him by force and make him king, he withdrew to the mountain by himself. After this, he goes to the other side of the of the sea with his disciples. The crowd follows him, looking for more bread to eat. Then Jesus begins to tell the crowd that *he* is the *true* bread of life and that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood if they want eternal life. This saying proves too difficult for them and, we are told, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

At this point he asks the twelve if they, too, are going to leave him. To which Peter responds, “Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

Lord, to whom shall we go? So much of what you say to us confuses and disturbs us, and yet there is still this: you have the words of eternal life and you promise us a home, not just in the life to come, but NOW.

In this week's Working Preacher article on the Gospel, Lindsey S. Jodrey writes about her friend, Dr. Erin Raffety, “who recently shared some of the resources she's developed,

particularly in her experiences as a pastor and a parent to a child with multiple disabilities and a terminal illness.”

Dr. Raffety writes”

I've never been able to save my daughter, Lucia. It's a truth I've had to come to grips with. When you live at the edge of your limits as a mother and a person, you get kind of comfortable there, you make a home and a peace among those unanswerable whys. You realize to ask them is futile, faithless, distracting, daunting. The control that you don't have was never an idol to be worshiped, but rather a tyrannical robber of joy.

There is truth and wisdom in many of these positions. We can't save ourselves. We can't prevent this virus. If we could, we would have done it by now. Instead, our lives are shot through with daily reminders of our vulnerability. Our naivete is gone.

A few months ago, over Lucia's birthday, I flew unexpectedly to Wisconsin for a funeral of a dear family friend. Funerals are not really for the dying. They're for the living to do the work of grieving so they can gather the resources to go on living. That weekend, we were blessed to be together and reflect upon the life of a beautiful, faithful woman. “Your mother was so good at loving people,” I said to my friend.

*And is there really anything else?* I began to wonder.

**Grief and love are the twin conditions in which we've had to make our home in these coronavirus days.** To acknowledge the former, in light of isolation, suspended gatherings, especially funerals interrupted, doesn't always seem to help. In other words, it doesn't seem to help to know what you're going through is grief these days, when it just seems like it's all grief on top of grief.

Grief all the way down.

Indeed, I worry increasingly that our vigilance around social distancing, self-protection, and isolation in the face of fear so easily turns from care to coercion. Human beings have always clung to a logic around life and death that privileges health and ability, because it makes most of us feel better than facing the unknowns of death that will never be controlled.

But even that logic won't really save us. And it definitely won't save us from pain or from grief. The paradoxical antidote, though, is to be like my mother's friend,

Sharman—in the face of life’s cruelty, to be ridiculously committed to loving people. The grief is that love never rescues anyone from death, of course, but it covers them, it nurtures them, it consumes them in a way that always and does matter completely.

My husband and I don’t always talk about how it feels to live with the specter of death at our door. It freaks people out to talk about death, let alone the impending death of a child. But we find it important and comforting to be honest and open about the unknowns.

I don’t want to live with a false security that my child will always be there. Instead, with the full knowledge of life’s impermanency, we can choose to love even more fiercely, generously, lavishly.

For many people, and importantly, the living and loving to be done in these days includes showing up as scientists, doctors, nurses, and emergency responders to those who are suffering and dying. But for the rest of us, there will be the equally hard and important work of loving fiercely, praying, honoring, and naming the dead, and not shying away from grief and fear but embracing them and their pain, in patience and hope that love will survive.

Yes. Love fiercely, pray, honor and name the dead, and do not shy away from grief and fear. Bring them home with you. Abide with them. But abide even more fiercely in Jesus. He is the lover of your soul and has gone to prepare a place for you, a place – a home – that he has made **for you!** It is not the home that we had imagined. No. It is even better than that. And even though we get confused and our hearts are troubled, feeling like we do not know the way to Jesus, it’s alright. He knows the way to you.