

In Jesus' Name
A Sermon on John 14:1-14
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2020

Introduction

This is the beginning of the Farewell Discourse. It runs from John 14 through John 17. There is no Last Supper in the Gospel of John; instead there is a Farewell Discourse. Jesus gathers with the disciples and explains to them the significance of his death and departure. The Farewell Discourse appears on the lectionary each year during the Easter season to help us understand Jesus' death and resurrection *and* his ascension.

The ascension is an overlooked part of the Gospel of John. God is glorified by the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; they are all one event. They are what Jesus refers to as his hour.

Jesus is a pastor. He knows his sheep. He knows they are troubled by his absence, especially now that they have been kicked out of the synagogue. They may be questioning how God could allow that to happen.

Jesus reassures them that God still affirms them. God has a special place for them.

First Move: Jesus Affirms the Disciples

Jesus can see that the hearts of his disciples are shaken up. The Greek verb *ταράσσω* is translated as troubled by the NRSV, but it actually means to be shaken up, disturbed, confused. That makes more sense if we understand how the heart was thought of in the first century. It was not the emotional center of a person, as we think of it today; it was the seat of your will and your intentions. The disciples are confused by what is going to happen to Jesus, and the Farewell Discourse helps explain it to them and to John's community 50 years later.

Jesus tells them that the most important thing is for them to continue to believe in God and to believe in Jesus. To believe in God is to trust that God is still watching over them and has their best interests at heart. To believe in Jesus is to believe that he was sent by God from heaven and is now about to return to God.

My Father's house has many rooms can be understood in two ways. We should hold them both together. Father's house means heaven in Jewish literature. We often

hear this text at funerals and what people want to hear is that there is a place for you and your loved ones in heaven when you die. That was how Christian tradition interpreted it, but that is not the emphasis in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the Son of Man who came down from heaven and returned to heaven. Now Jesus promises to take his followers to heaven with him when he returns. It elevates his followers. They become divine beings. We leave out the *when he returns* part at funerals. It is not much comfort to say that your loved one will go to heaven only when Jesus returns at the Parousia.

My Father's house can also be read more figuratively. The Greek word οἰκία can also be translated as household. It is a similar message, but it is not tied to a place. You are part of a social unit, the household of God, wherever you are. And right now, not just after you die. The Greek word μὴ is usually translated as room, but it also can be translated as *abode*, the noun form of *abide*. Abide is a supercharged word in the Gospel of John. Abide in me means to stay permanently with me. Having an abode in the household of God means that you have a permanent place with God.

We have another famous "I am" saying in today's text: "I am the way and the truth and the life." Scholars believe that the "I am" sayings come from John rather than Jesus. They express how John sees Jesus.

John does not give equal weight to all three nouns: way and truth and life. John probably means, I am the way that leads to truth and life. John is not referring to the Way with a capital W, as the shorthand name that Christians used to refer to themselves. Before followers of Jesus were called Christians they called themselves the Way. Way in that sense is about a journey that Christians make with Jesus as our leader. It is our faith journey. And John is not referring to it in the Jewish sense, which we see in Psalm 1: there are two ways of life, one leads to life and one lead to destruction.

It is another way of saying, "I am the gate [of salvation]." John's style is circular and repetitive. It is difficult to outline. He writes in spirals, not in straight lines. He is emphasizing the point by rephrasing it and repeating it.

Truth means that Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus reflects God's will. Jesus was sent by God. Truth is all those things in the Gospel of John. John reinforces this reading in the next verse: "if you have known me, you also know the father of me."

Life means eternal life. That is the essence of God, to create, to bring life. And that is the mission of Jesus, to offer the gift of eternal life to all people who recognize the truth that God is revealed through Jesus.

No one comes to the father except through me. Some Christians today interpret this text to mean that no one gets to heaven except Christians. Gail O'Day, a UCC scholar, says some Christians use it as a weapon to beat up non-Christians. They are Christian triumphalists; they believe that Christians have the corner on God and that people of other faiths or no faith are condemned. I have heard well-meaning Christians reject the concept of religious pluralism because of this text. Other Christians are embarrassed by this text. They see it as exclusionary and narrow-minded.

John was not thinking of religious pluralism when he wrote those words. There were no Hindus or Buddhists in the Roman world. Islam hadn't been invented yet. *Christianity* hadn't even been invented yet.

John is trying to comfort his community and reassure them that Jesus should still be central to their faith. He is helping the group build a sense of identity.

We shouldn't diminish the text by relativizing it. John meant it when he said it, but we can't use it as a sledge hammer against other world religions. We would be applying it to a context that did not exist in Jesus' day.

John emphasizes the unity of God and Jesus. "I am in the father and the father is in me." Jesus tells his disciple Phillip that if he cannot believe that, then he should believe on account of his works or deeds. These refers to the signs in the Gospel of John; they are revelations of the glory and power of God. The first 11 chapters in the Gospel of John are sometimes referred to as the Book of Signs; they describe seven signs or miracles that show that Jesus is channeling the power of God: turning water into wine at Cana, walking on water, feeding the 5,000, healing the blind beggar, and raising Lazarus from the dead.

Today's text closes with another *Amen* saying. As I mentioned last week, when Jesus begins by saying, "Amen, amen," it means he is taking the discussion to a deeper theological level.

Jesus elevates the disciples. He tells them, You will do the works or deeds that I do. You will do greater things than I do. You will give even more glory to God because I will be gone and you will multiply my works.

Second Move: Jesus Teaches the Disciples to Pray

Jesus asks the disciples to pray in my name. It is how prayers have been closed in Christian tradition ever since. It draws on the Jewish practice of praying in the name of the Patriarchs in hopes that God will be touched by remembering them. Jews would call on the God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jesus assures the disciples that whatever you ask will be given to you. Belief in Jesus gives people power to carry out the work that Jesus did. Belief unites a person with Jesus and with the Father. You won't get anything you wish for. Jesus has in mind that you are praying for a specific thing: to carry out Jesus' mission of offering eternal life to all people.

Ministers are urged during public prayers and interfaith prayers to leave out any references to Jesus. For the invocation at Thunder games, ministers are told to close with a simple Amen or In Your Holy Name we pray.

That is appropriate for a public setting, but in church I nearly always close my prayers with, In Jesus' Name. It's almost a reflex. I grew up listening to prayers closed this way.

It is the same way in the black church. If someone prays in church, and they close with a simple Amen, there will be chorus of voices from the congregation that adds, In Jesus' Name.

It is another way of emphasizing the centrality of Jesus. He is more than a wisdom teacher and a role model. Including Jesus in all our prayers recognizes that we as Christians get to God through Jesus.

John has a sense of awe and wonder about Jesus. God is breaking through to humanity in a new way and does it through Jesus. Conservative Christians think of Jesus as a Superman because he can do miracles.

What is more important for John is that has a unique connection to God. John uses two images to show this. One is as Son of Man, a figure in Jewish eschatology whom God sends to judge all people and rule the world as a human being. John softens the judgment part. John 3:17 says: "For God did not send the son into the world in order that he might judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." God is reaching out to people through the Son of Man to save people.

The other image that John uses for Jesus is Son, the only son of the Father. The Gospel of John refers to God as Father 131 times. In today's text there is one reference of God and 13 to father. John uses family imagery to emphasize the unity of God and Jesus. They are as close as a father and his son.

That may be part of the reason that mainline Christians have problems with the Gospel of John. Ministers were taught in seminary not to refer to God as Father. There are other images of God that are not gender-specific.

Evangelical churches and non-denominational churches continue to use the language of Father and Son, and that may explain part of their popularity. That is

traditional language to use for the connection between God and Jesus, and it is still the easiest for us to grasp.

Mainline churches lose something when we distance ourselves from the language of God as Father. People need a connection with the sacred; they need to be part of something bigger than themselves.

Liberal Christians have tried to compensate for the past couple of centuries by saying that God is Love. Since the Enlightenment, Liberal Christians have backed away from the supernatural acts of Jesus and focused instead on Jesus as a reflection of God's love. Jesus commands the disciples to love one another, just as Jesus loved them. John 15:9: "As the father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Today we have heard that God is love so many times that it loses some of its power. Love is a little abstract, and we also know that God is more than love. We must admit that there is a lot of mystery about God.

Third Move: Jesus Makes God Real for Us

Jews in the first century perceived that there was a great distance between God and humans. God reigns in highest heaven, surrounded by angels and enthroned at the uppermost of three or seven layers of heaven, while humans dwell below.

The kingdom of God was a way of making God's rule apparent. In the day of John the Baptist, many Jews believed that God's kingship had somehow been temporarily put on hold or hidden from view. When his kingship does return, the devil and human suffering will come to an end. Israel has been under captivity to one empire after another: Babylonians, then Persians, then Greeks, then Romans. History seemed to have bogged down, and Jews were becoming impatient. The kingdom of God expressed the belief that God was about to act.

John collapses the distance between God and humans through Jesus. John talks about eternal life instead of the kingdom of God. Jesus was the son of man sent by God from heaven to offer the gift of eternal life to all people. He was the only Son of God the Father, who shares God's love with the world.

Today God can still seem distant. We have problems connecting with an invisible God.

Jesus helps us to know the invisible God. What we as Christians know and believe about God comes mostly from the Gospels.

We believe that God is non-violent because that is what God is like in the Sermon on the Mount. We love our enemies because God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

We believe that God cares for the poor because God chose a peasant girl to be the mother of the Christ. Every Advent we hear the Magnificat in which Mary prays for God to bring about the great reversal, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. We know the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where Lazarus is reclining on the breast of Abraham, while flames of fire are licking the Rich Man for ignoring Lazarus lying at his gates.

We believe that God is near to us because Jesus saw the sacred wherever he looked. God's eye is even on the sparrow. God knows how many hairs are on your head. God is a father to us; we are beloved sons and daughters of a God who delights in us.

We pray to God when we are in distress just as Jesus prayed to God in Gethsemane. At the most critical points of his ministry, Jesus turned to God in prayer, seeking direction. During Christian worship services for the past 2,000 years, we have prayed the prayer that Jesus taught us.

I could go on. The point is that our images of God come from the New Testament, and are largely Jesus' images of God. Our spirituality is Jesus' spirituality. We see God through Jesus' eyes, and we pray to God as Jesus prayed.

So closing our prayers with In Jesus' Name makes total sense. Jesus is how we understand who God is.

Conclusion

I used to struggle with the Gospel of John because it has such an exalted image of Jesus. I argued in my seminary class on the Gospel of John that it was a mistake to include it in the canon.

Now I am coming to appreciate the Gospel of John. Yes, it exalts Jesus, but it is John who is exalting Jesus, not Jesus exalting himself. The Gospel of John also exalts humanity. The rightful place for people is to be intimately connected with God and Jesus.

More than any other book in the New Testament, the Gospel of John helps us understand the centrality of Christ. We pray in Jesus' name because of the Gospel of John. It is a reminder that Jesus is our gateway to God.