

Comforting Words for Troubled Hearts

This passage is so packed that it's hard to know where to begin. And besides, it's like a proof-text minefield. Verses 2-3 have been cherry-picked and read at funerals, to reassure everyone that when you die, you go to live with God. Verse 6 has been used—make that misused—to proclaim the exclusive superiority of the Christian faith. And verse 14 could cause more people to lose their faith than to find it, and more people to quit praying than to start praying. I mean, really? If I ask for anything in Jesus' name he will do it? Anything? Let's say, a million dollars? What if it doesn't work?

In order to understand this challenging passage, I suggest we begin with the disciples. Their hearts were troubled, big time. Jesus had just dropped the bomb that he wasn't going to be around much longer. He had pulled out the proverbial rug from beneath them. He had left them standing in quicksand.

And so, at the beginning of John 13, Jesus gathers them together (presumably just the twelve, although John doesn't give us a comprehensive guest list) and over the course of the next five chapters, tells them everything they will need to know in his absence. More or less.

Today's passage from John 14 contains three promises, three pieces of good news, that would sustain the disciples, that would comfort their troubled hearts.

First, in verse 2 he promises them that “in my Father's house there are many dwelling places.” The NIV says “many rooms”; the King James splurges and says “many mansions.” We automatically assume that Jesus is talking about heaven, that wonderful place to which we will go when we die. I especially like “mansions.” I've always wanted to live in a mansion! Not that there's anything wrong with the MennoKate, but . . . ! Anyway, it's always nice to have something to look forward to, right? 😊

To be sure, Jesus is in part talking about the future: “I WILL come again, and WILL take you to myself.” Two future tense verbs. But the question is, whose future? His future? The disciples'? Ours? And also, which future? The distant future? The near future? What if for us the their future is now our past? What if Jesus already has come again, in the form of the Holy Spirit? (Which, I might add, Jesus talks a lot about in the Gospel of John.) When he said “I will come again,” he was talking to his disciples, in the upper room, the night before his death. Might his words to us more accurately be in the perfect tense, “I have come again, so that where I am, you may be also?” That last clause, by the way, isn't future but present, and for you grammarians isn't indicative but rather present subjunctive, which is the mood of potentiality rather than time.” We could also translate that clause “so that where I am, there you might be also,” or “there you can be also,” or even “there you are able to be also.” What if we already are living in God's dwelling place or house or mansion?

Let's take a closer look at that word. In Greek it's *monai*. It's simply the noun form of the verb *moneo*, which John uses over and over throughout his gospel. It means “to abide,” to stay, to hang out with, to be connected to, as when Jesus says to the disciples, “I am the vine and you are the branches . . . abide in me, as I abide in you.” It's the way we're supposed to live, not

in the future but right here, right now. Connected to Jesus. Sharing his blood, his branch, his sap.

I want to make one more point about these two verses before moving on. When Jesus says that in his Father's house there are many dwelling places, is he talking about just for me? Or at most, just for "us," as opposed to "them?" Is not the whole point of this clause that God doesn't only have a lot of rooms, but a lot of room? That God is a spacious God? That there is a place for everyone? I'd call that a promise of good news indeed!

Which leads us to our second promise and piece of good news. Verse 6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Hmm. Does that sound like good news? We always tend to read that verse through exclusive lenses, and assume that what it means is you're only "saved" if you're a Christian, and everyone else is going to hell. Where is the good news in that? What right do we have to decide who is saved and who isn't? Isn't that God's job? And anyway, wouldn't that undermine the very spaciousness of God we were just talking about?

So how might we read this as good news, particularly for the original disciples (which, remember, were the people to whom Jesus is talking)? What if some of them were questioning whether there was any way to God? Or for that matter, whether there was a God? Or even if there is a God and is a way, they don't know what it is? This is precisely what my friend "doubting Thomas" says to Jesus in the preceding verse: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Leading Jesus to respond, "I am the way."

In both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, the word for "way" (*derech* or *hodos*) can mean "road," or it can mean "path," as in "pathway." In other words, it has as much to do with how we walk as where we walk, how we live as where we live. No surprise that so many of Jesus' teachings focus on precisely that. And when he wasn't teaching the disciples how to live, he was showing them. Just as he did when he washed their feet in chapter 13. Just as he did when he died on the cross in chapter 19. Jesus' way is the way of forgiveness and generosity and self-emptying love. In shorthand, we could say it is the way of the cross. No one comes to the Father except through what? The cross. Through living the way Jesus lived, and dying the way Jesus died. Which, granted, will still not sound like good news to some. But to those who are looking for the way to God, and in particular the true way to God, Jesus shows us. And that is good news indeed. To be saved you don't have to be a Christian. You just have to live the way Christ lived. And that includes a lot more people than those who happen to call themselves "Christian."

Finally, what do we do with verse 14—or really 13 and 14, because he says essentially the same thing twice: "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"? In my name. Which in biblical times is another way of saying "consistent with my character," or "following my example." Here's how one commentator put it: "To use Jesus' name as authorization for one's petitions to God implies that those who do so know Christ, abide in Christ, and make their requests from that relationship rather than making selfish requests imported from another value system." (Like, say, asking for a million dollars.) Another commentator points out that the second person pronoun here, "whatever *you* ask in my name," is plural rather than singular, communal rather than individual. He writes, "The answering of the requests does not serve those

who pray, but is to the end ‘that the Father may be glorified in the Son.’ These are prayers offered in behalf of the community and the community’s mission.”

It’s so easy to misunderstand (and thereby misuse) scripture, to get lost in the detail, to miss the forest for the trees, to want to nail things down, make everything black and white, clean and easy. When in doubt, may we turn to Jesus’ own teachings and example, and of course, the guiding of the Holy Spirit, already poured out upon us. In the meantime, this much is crystal clear (both from this morning’s passage and the Gospel of John as a whole): once we become connected to Jesus, once we abide in him, he abides in us. And that promise, that good news, is eternal. Past, present, and future.

Amen.