

Sermon – May 7, 2023

Our gospel lesson this morning is one that we hear most often, again, at funerals, as we remember the lives of those whom we have loved and have lost. Last week we kind of touched a little bit about that as well as we heard the words of the 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” Then that was paired with a chapter in John, just a few chapters before what we hear now. Jesus, in chapter 10 of John, is claiming his role as the gate, “I am the gate for the sheep”. Later in that same passage he claims his role as the shepherd. ‘They hear my voice and they follow me,’ he says. He says the gate is the way for the sheep to, ‘...come in and go out and find pasture.’

Here we are just a few chapters later. Jesus is with his disciples. He is preparing them for the time that he will no longer be with them. They are gathered in Jerusalem. He knows what's coming. He knows that he is going to be arrested, that he is going to be put on trial and beaten, that he's going to be crucified, but he also knows that he's going to rise again. So, he is doing what he can to prepare those whom he loves for this departure, for not having him with them anymore, even though they won't fully understand what this means until much later.

So, the first thing he says to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” That's a lot easier said than done, right? When we love someone and we know that they're going to die, it's hard not to be troubled by that, because we want them with us. We want their presence, we want to continue to have that connection and to make more memories and have more experiences with them. Jesus knows that that's not going to be able to happen. Instead of letting the disciples be sad about that, he wants to reassure them, “Don't let your heart be troubled.” ‘Don't grieve, I'm preparing you.’ He follows that up with the reason and the strength that they can lie in not to be troubled, “believe in God; believe also in me.” When we believe that God is with us we can handle even the valleys of the shadow of death. We can handle the departure of loved ones. It doesn't say that we won't hurt. It doesn't say that we won't grieve, but it gives us a source to find strength to make it through those times. Then he gives them a promise. The promise isn't just for them, it's for others. Jesus says, “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you?”

What's interesting is that Jesus is using a singular “you,” but he's not talking to an individual disciple. He is referring to this community that he has gathered. “Do not let your...” as a community, “hearts be troubled.” ‘My Father is preparing a place for “you,”’ this community.

If we listened to our epistle lesson from First Peter and we listen to that promise that, “In my Father's house,” a place is being prepared, we can read this passage from First Peter in a new light. “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...” What if the place that God is preparing for us isn't something that we just have to wait for? What if he's preparing us now, as we live, that we become as a community, that dwelling place of God that Jesus has promised? That community in which we can dwell and feel that God is indeed with us.

God goes beyond what we can imagine and expect and think about. We're trying our hardest to understand concepts that we may never get until we come into God's more immediate presence. It's reassuring that even those that walked with him and heard him say these words didn't even get it. Thomas asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus, I would believe in my mind, looks at him with that loving compassion that we look at our children with when they don't get something we're trying to teach them, and he says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” He's continuing to help them understand what that image of the gate was; through him we come to know God. Then he follows that up by helping Phillip understand how we can know God without being in God's physical presence.

Phillip wants what we all want, right? We want to see God. We want to see who God is. “Phillip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’” Jesus again, I would imagine, would

look with compassion and joy and say, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father", we often hear that and we think, 'Well of course because Jesus is God personified, God with us in flesh and blood;' but the way that Jesus showed us the Father was the works that he did, the things that he was willing to go to; the healing, the love, the compassion, the drawing in of those that others would not want to have associated with. That is how Jesus has shown the Father. "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." Jesus reminds them that when we say and do what God wants us to say and do, we are showing God to the world, we are sharing God in the world.

Jesus continues, "Believe in 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." What was it the blind said when he was healed? 'Here's an amazing thing, I was blind but now I see. We don't know, we know that this can't happen without God's being a part of it.' Jesus resurrected Lazarus. Jesus healed lepers. Jesus ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, homeless, anybody else that was driven outside of the community, outside of the city, told that they weren't good enough, they didn't believe right, they didn't do the right things; *those* are the ones that Jesus went to, that Jesus loved, that Jesus welcomed. Those are the works of God. That's how we have seen the Father in our world.

"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." Jesus hasn't left them and yet commissions them. He is, in effect, saying, 'You've seen what I've done. You've heard what I've said. You've watched the way that I've lived. Now it's your turn. You're going to be able to do the same things that I did, and in fact, you might even be able to do more.' I wonder if Jesus understood that the more we're going to be able to do is because we are continually doing what we shouldn't by driving people out, and we try to do it in the name of God sometimes? I imagine God weeping whenever we do or say something that we think is of God, but pushes somebody away from God.

God has many dwelling places, many dwelling places; which allows for diversity, it allows for the differing of opinion, it allows for different ways to come to know God. "In my Father's house..." Not brick and mortar and stones, but the people, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places". We believe that God dwells with us and in us. As we gather together we become the living stones which can be built into God's dwelling place and house. But we can't close the door of it. Jesus is asking us to keep the way open by living the faith that we claim and that we sing; by being willing to accept others as they are, and love them. By being willing to show compassion and understanding. By being willing to be a welcoming space for them. We can do that because God is with us. "Believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus is, indeed, the way, because he's shown us what to do. He is the truth of God in our world, and he brings us the life that we can have not just here, but beyond. May we live out the commission that Jesus gave to his followers; to do the works that he did, so that the world will know that they too have a place with God.

Let us pray. Holy Lord and God, as we are reminded of all of the ways that you have reached out, rather than closed off, we ask your forgiveness for the times when we may have intentionally or unintentionally kept someone from you; sought to push them out rather than bring them in. Help us, Lord God, help us to follow your way. Help us to do what you did through Jesus: to welcome those whom others would cast out, to look with love upon your creation, and to see each person that we view as your child, as a valued part of your community. Teach us, guide us, lead us in your way, Lord God. Help us to be faithful as we seek to, indeed, live out our faith. We pray this through the holy and loving name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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