

“A Home at Last”  
A Sermon Delivered  
at  
Plymouth Congregational Church  
on  
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by  
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John 14: 1-7, 18-19, 27

The story of our faith is a broad and rich narrative. The richness and diversity of that tradition is only matched by the variety of the people who sit in our pews.

There is one thing that seems to link all the teachings Jesus offered. I suggest that Jesus always offered both content in words and spirit. Call it practical and spiritual.

Today’s lesson from John is no exception.

We know a couple of things about this passage that will help us understand it.

It was written in Ephesus between 90 and 100 CE. It was written at a time when the Christian community was in the middle of a battle that continues down to this day. The followers of “THE WAY” (as mentioned in vs. 5) were divided between a couple differing understandings of Jesus.

One group wanted to emphasize the humanity of Jesus and saw him as a prophet. The other group wanted to emphasize the divinity of Jesus and saw him primarily as Messiah.

John’s Gospel was an attempt to bring those two factions together. It was intended also to make room for the increasing numbers of former pagans who had begun to find their way to Jesus. In the name of that inclusion there are parts of John’s Gospel that are undeniably anti-Semitic.

The actual content of these few verses in today’s lesson is staggering. We can only deal with a tiny fragment this morning. In the second verse there is a wonderful promise that there is a place for us in the house of our Lord. Just looking at that on the practical side for a moment there are several implications.

First of all there was a tradition in the Ancient Middle East that revolved around the old traditional walled homes that housed many generations of families. According to the rabbi who taught my seminary course the tradition worked as follows:

A space would be set aside and a wall built around it. Initially there would be one house built within that enclosure. Over time as the family grew more houses would be built but always within the enclosure. The problem naturally arose when there was no more space. On the first most practical basis Jesus is telling all those who will listen that in his Father's house there is no shortage of space. There will be a place within the compound for you.

What that came to mean for the early church was pretty simple. The church of Jesus Christ was not in the business of excluding. It was in the business of including.

I cannot tell you how many times people have come to me and told me that the best thing about our church is that there is a place for them here. I wish that were always true! To the degree that it is true then I think we are living in the broad tradition of this passage.

But, as powerful as this promise is on the practical level it is more than that and we all know it.

How many times have I read this passage as I stand in the midst of the tears and courage of a memorial service? For 35 years I have been carrying John's words into some of the darkest corners of the human soul.

This witness in John's Gospel is not just about housing accommodations—as important as that is. No, this passage is about SPIRIT as in THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Hear it again and this time in the King James Version.

*Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me.  
In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.  
And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.  
And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.  
Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?  
Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.  
If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also; and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.*

*I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you.  
Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me; because I live, ye shall live also.*

*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

Can you not feel the Spirit that under girds that poetry?

This is personal because I cannot explain the spiritual power of this text in the same way that I can explain the historic references and the socio religious context.

If you will indulge me for a couple of minutes I will offer you a personal story that for me helps me make the leap from the practical to the spiritual. Please don't get lost in the story. Let it make a point that is larger than my life and my family.

My family had always had a summer cottage in Maine, first on a lake and later on the ocean, but always in Maine. My Dad was a private school headmaster for many years when I was growing up so I lived in the school's houses in much the same way my family has always lived in the Church's houses. That's a great privilege but now and then it was and is good to go to a place that is "home" in a different way. A place, as my dad would say, where he could drive a nail in the wall anyplace he wanted.

Every year the first trip to the cottage would be over Memorial Day weekend. That was the time to open the doors, sweep away the dust and get the first taste of the summer to come. It became pretty close to a spiritual occasion for our family.

After my Dad died it fell to me to continue the tradition and that's the point where my story picks up. It was Memorial Day weekend and I was going to Maine to open the cottage. Actually by that time there were a couple of cottages, one that Judy and I and our boys lived in and another one that my mother lived in. It was about a five-hour drive from the place I was living up to the cottage. My mother was living in a continuing care facility in those days and she was doing well. I stopped by on the morning of the day before she was to come to Maine and I made sure she was ready. I was going on ahead in order to turn the heat on and get the place opened up and aired out. I had arranged for a ride for her the next day. When I reached her room she was packed and ready. We laughed and talked and she assured me that she would be ready the next morning when the driver came to get her.

That evening, once I had safely gotten the cottages open and the heat on I called back to my mother as I promised I would. She eagerly answered the phone. I told her that the place was ready. She wanted to know about any winter damage. How was her garden looking? Would the screens make it another year? We must have talked an hour. I finally promised that Judy and I would have a late lunch ready when she arrived the next day.

She died that night—peacefully in her sleep. Her bag was packed and she was ready to go home.

I tell you that story because for me it really does make the leap from the practical to the Spiritual without denigrating the importance of one in order to elevate the importance of the other.

Jesus cared about whether or not we have a place to put our head down and sleep both in this world and the next.

Surely the Church of Jesus Christ is called to open its doors wide and make a place for all who would be a part of Christ's welcoming family. We must not fail to keep that promise!

But just as surely Jesus will not fail to keep his promise either. In verse 19 Jesus promised, "In a little while the world will see me no more but you will see me and because I live you will live also."

How true is that!

On the morning in Maine when the doctor called me from Boston to tell me that mother had died the doctor was distraught beyond measure.

As I stood there in the hallway of my home I knew that Jesus had gone on ahead of us to another home and that in that place he had prepared a welcome for my mother that put my modest efforts to shame. She was at that very moment in the embrace of a family that had gone on before her and a savior who was certainly no stranger. That poor distraught doctor in Boston could not see that but it was so clear to me that I found myself smiling and trying to comfort the doctor.

Friends, this text is about generosity and welcome and hospitality on the most practical and tangible level. It is also about eternity and our place in its unfolding.

Personally this passage is the Easter message brought right down to me. The resurrection is not some cosmic mystery. It's about a Lord who has gone on ahead to make sure there is a place for me—a place for me that I don't have to earn or even know how to find. He has done for me what I tried to do for my Mom. Only he's so much better at it.

Living as the people of Easter means living as people who know we have a home that awaits—a home that can't be mortgaged or foreclosed or overcrowded. A home that is filled with the people we love and the Lord we have tried to serve.

I know I'm sounding like some sort of country preacher but let me tell you.

*In MY father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, Jesus would have told us. He goes to prepare a place for us.*

*And if he goes to prepare a place for us he will come again and receive us unto himself..*

That's good news. Good News we can live with right here today and good news for all eternity.

Amen