

“Called To Be” – John 14:1-14 – Apr 24, 2005

I’m going to have to speak up this morning, mostly to overcome the deafening sound of eyelids closing as I begin a sermon on the opening verses of John 14. Why the sound of eyelids closing? Well, this has to be the all-time number-one text used for funeral services, and I suspect that many of you have sat through countless renditions of “in my Father’s house are many mansions/rooms/dwelling places/whatever, so much so that you can’t help yourself thinking “here we go again” and put the face on autopilot while the brain checks out for a quarter-hour nap.

Part of the reason that this text is used so much for funerals derives from its original context, with the impending funeral of Jesus hanging in the air. Even though the disciples still hadn’t clued in to what was coming that very night, we can’t help thinking about the coming arrest, trial and execution as we hear these last minute instructions from Jesus to his disciples.

It seems most appropriate that Jesus’ opening words to them here are, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” After all, he has just startled his closest followers with a series of devastating announcements, beginning by telling his disciples that one of them would betray him. Naturally enough, their first reaction is to look at each other in confusion, wondering what he means, and which one of them will be the culprit. And before they can recover from that shock, and as soon as Judas had slips out to fulfill his role, Jesus then drops the bombshell on them. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer ... where I am going, you cannot come.” A stunning revelation, that shakes them to their very cores, even if they had heard a couple of hints recently. “Going away?” “When?” “Where?” “What next?!”

Peter, ever the impulsive leader, cannot contain himself, and asks, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus softens the blow a little, repeating the statement that they cannot follow, but adding that it is “for now”, and gives them reassurance that they “will follow afterward.” But Peter can’t let it rest, and demands to know why he can’t follow now, and professes his undying devotion, to which Jesus predicts that before the night is over, Peter will deny him not once, not twice, but three times.

The disciples’ world is in shambles. Their beloved teacher is leaving them, he tells them they cannot follow, and already one by one they seem to be betraying and abandoning him. “What’s happening? What’s next?!” they had to be asking themselves, if not each other. Confused, in turmoil, shaken to the roots of their faith in him, the disciples are troubled.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” With these words, Jesus begins one of the most comforting, reassuring passages in scripture, and makes to his disciples and to us three most profound promises.

The first of these is the promise of a place to live forever with God. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Or “mansions” as older translations put it. The confusion about what to call them is due to the fact that there is no simple, easy English word to convey the rich set of images in the word that is used in the gospel. That word is the noun form of the verb “to abide”, and implies much more than just a room, or a house, or even a grand mansion. These containers, or boxes, or buildings do not adequately convey the concept of a permanent place only to live for the moment, but to dwell or abide. That is the deeper sense and implication of Jesus’ promise, that he has prepared for us not just a play to stay, but a permanent residence with him and with God.

There’s another subtle reassurance in Jesus’ promise that we tend to skip over, though, and that’s the word ‘many’. Not some, not a few, but many dwelling places. This may be disappointing to those whose vision of heaven is a wee tiny cottage, just big enough for “Jesus and me” (well, maybe a couple of other people). That there are many places to dwell or abide with God may come as a bit of a surprise to them, although perhaps the ‘many’ does includes even a few isolated wee cottages! I think Jesus was trying to give to his disciples, and to us, a much larger and more encompassing picture, with enough dwelling places to cover the multitudes streaming in through all

the gates of heaven, and enough to accommodate all of the faithful from all places, all backgrounds, all cultures, all times, and always with room for at least one more!

The second promise Jesus made to the disciples, and makes to us, is of a sure and clear way to God. “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you will be also.” Not left to roam aimlessly, not abandoned to search without success, a promise that he will return and take us with him. “I am the way and the truth and the life” Jesus says, assuring us as well as Thomas that in him we have all of the guidance, direction, support we need to be ushered into life everlasting with God. “No one comes to the Father except through me”, he adds, giving a clear warning to the church that he cannot be dismissed as a historical curiosity, that he cannot be displaced by either overzealous emphasis on the Holy Spirit or overreaching claims to being in direct contact with God. Jesus ever was and ever will be one with God the Father, and as part of the body of Christ our salvation and reconciliation with God the Father is through Christ, and Christ alone.

We need to pause for a moment, and deal with the issue of the word, ‘Father’, which for many people is troubling. Whether through all-too-common cases of abuse in families, or the scandals of abuse in the church, the image of God as ‘Father’ has become tarnished and repugnant to some. This is not an easy problem to solve, and I would hope and pray that anyone who is wrestling with it would be able to somehow see the image as Jesus presented it, with God as the ideal of what a true and loving father should be, not as humans can corruptly implement it. Otherwise, we let the perpetrators of such unkind and hurtful acts steal away from us the power of the image of God as a loving and caring and tending parent as used by Jesus, and that just compounds their perfidy. I, for one, do not want to give them that power, and do not want to surrender the image.

Again, recall that we were looking at Jesus’ second promise, of a sure and clear way to God. “I will come again and will take you to myself”, Jesus assures us. While the language echoes strongly the sense of Jesus’ re-appearance at the end of time as we know it, and invokes images of great crowds of people rising to meet him in the clouds, there is also a more personal understanding. There comes an “end of time” for each of us, and what greater comfort can there be than the reassurance that we will not have to make that final journey alone to the place that has been prepared for us? While we all want to put that trip off until the very last minute, still it is a wondrous reassurance to know that we will be in hands that are infinitely better than the very best of First Class on any airline, and oh, what a destination!

But what about in the meantime? Jesus says he is leaving - what do the disciples do while he’s gone? To answer that Jesus makes a third promise to his disciples, and to us, and that is the promise of power not only to sustain the believing community in the world, but to enable it to do even greater works than he did. That’s us. We’re part of the believing community, the church.

This is the interesting part, and where we take a turn from the usual funeral sermon. This third promise, and the implied commission that goes with it, is usually missed in a funeral sermon, because the emphasis there is on the comfort of being assured of dwelling with God, and the ease of getting there through Christ. Here we are not only being promised strength in being disciples, there is the underlying assumption that we are being called to be disciples. Now that starts to get uncomfortably personal, and challenging, doesn’t it? Up ‘til now it’s been all smooth and comforting, but here the implication is that any who would believe in Christ and pray in His name not only will receive strength – they will need it!

Jesus makes it fairly clear to his disciples that He expects that they will not just sit in comfortable pews waiting for either the Big Day of His return or for their own arrival into the abiding places in God’s great mansion in the sky. Even though Jesus is leaving, they are called to ‘be’, to have life and to live it, and they are specifically being called to be his active disciples,

drawing upon His strength and answered prayer to accomplish the tasks to which they are being sent.

That word ‘sent’ has some powerful connotations. The disciples, “those who follow”, eventually became apostles, “those who are sent”. “Just as the Father sent me”, Jesus will tell them, “I am sending you”, as He commissioned them to go into the world to proclaim the Good News of forgiveness and reconciliation with God in Christ, demonstrating through their own acts of mercy the power of God’s love in Christ Jesus and in those who would name themselves as His.

‘Apostele’ is the Greek word for “sending/sent”. What we are being called to be comes a bit clearer when we realize the related word in Latin is “missio – to send”, or “missionary – one who is sent”, or even “mission – the task to which one is sent.”

What is that mission to which Jesus calls those who would believe in Him and invoke His name in prayer, in other words the church? That mission will differ in the specifics for each congregation, but in general we know that it is to proclaim through action, through abiding, through living the love and forgiveness that was Jesus’ mission. We know from what else Jesus told His disciples that in calling us to be His disciples, He is sending us on a mission to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, comfort the distressed. Jesus is calling us to be missionaries, proclaiming in what we do and what we say the love of God in Christ, showing others where to find the gift of abundant life that we have found in Him.

What is the mission Christ has for us here at Central? What and who is He calling us to be, sending us in the assurance that we will be able to accomplish mighty deeds in His name? We know part of it, and we are living some of it out already in several ministries – the Community Ministries, including the breakfast this morning, the Sandwich Ministry on Wednesdays, the International Student Ministries, the Hospital Visitation Ministry, the Hummingbird Ministries, the Families in Recovery Ministry, the Music Ministry, and more. And I expect there will be more. As you, the people at Central who believe in and pray in Christ’s name hear who you are being called to be, as you hear what mission Christ has for you I encourage you to let us know, let me know, and we will try to affirm and encourage and help you in your ministry. Will it be a ministry in some area we already know, for example in a Hospitality Ministry serving coffee after worship? Maybe. Will it be something totally new that nobody’s tried before? Perhaps. Only God knows, but isn’t that exciting to contemplate?

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled” – you may be afraid to step forward, but as you do remember also that you have been promised by the one in whom you believe, even Christ Jesus, our Lord, that you will have the power to accomplish mighty deeds in His name.