

Words of Comfort

John 14:1-7

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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There are many privileges that I get by virtue of being a pastor. One of them is being invited into intimate moments in people's lives. My clergy colleagues and I get to hold small children and speak words of blessing. We get to stand with people who are imagining their life together and remind them of the importance and holiness of the commitment they make. We get to help families find words to name the impact of a life after someone has died, and sometimes we get to be at the bedside as a person makes their transition from this life to the next.

I remember one time many years ago when I had the privilege of sitting with a family as their mother took her last breath. There are many things that are holy about that space...watching a daughter gently brush the fallen hair off her mother's forehead, holding space for laughter and tears are that both so much a part of the ending of a life well lived, holding my own breath as we all sat in the silence wondering if she would inhale again. But in this particular memory what was most holy was how Geri in her last moments sang out, "Thank you, Jesus" with the same confidence that she had during her life. It was clear that she knew that she was with God and God with her, no matter what.

Too often Christians have taken verse 6 of today's reading where it says, "*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me...'*" and used it as a way to exclude others from God's reach and from God's love.

But, when we really listen to this passage, it is much more about what my friend Geri knew...that we are never separated from God.

Because, do you know what the context of this passage is? Dale gave us some insight into this when he introduced the scripture. In chapter 13 of John's gospel we get the story of Jesus' last meal with his friends and of him washing their feet. We see Judas depart. We hear, along with Peter, the prediction that he will deny Jesus.

And then in chapters 14 through 17 we hear what we commonly call Jesus' farewell discourse, in other words, his last words.

Have you ever been with someone who knew they were dying, who took time to tell you all the important things they wanted you to remember, who took time to tell you how valuable you were to them, who took time to encourage you, perhaps who finally shared their secret pie recipe or told you where the key to the China cabinet was?

In these four chapters of John, the writer gives us the last words Jesus spoke - not in a public forum on a mountainside, but in an intimate setting with his dearest friends.

Jesus looked in the eyes of those who had walked with him and worked with him, who had learned from him and helped him become more fully who he was called to be, those whom he loved. And he saw their fear and their hope, their grief and their loneliness, their belief and their disbelief.

It was to these, in this situation, that these words came.

And it is so important to remember that! Because context matters.

You have probably all heard the story about the young newlywed woman who was hosting her first holiday family meal. She went to prepare the ham and she cut off the ends just as her mother had done. When she next talked to her mom she asked why it was important to cut off the ends of the ham. Her mom said she didn't know...that's just what her own mother had done. Now more curious, the young woman called her grandma. "Grandma, why do we cut the ends of the ham off before we cook it?" she asked. Rather than giving her advice from a kitchen sage, her grandma simply said, "My pan was small and I always bought too big of a ham."

Perhaps it's a silly way to think about context. But the reality is that just as the instruction to cut the ends off the ham holds very different meaning if you think it is important to the ham's preparation versus if you know it is simply a matter of practicality, so Jesus' words about how he helped connect them to God are different if we envision them as a public speech to seekers than they are when we realize they were said as words of comfort to his closest friends with whom he already shared a deep relationship.

Too often throughout Christian history, the Bible has been used to cut people out and to exclude. It has also been used to force people to become Christians or to threaten them if they do not.

There are many stories across 2,000 years of Christian history from times when people have been baptized enmasse whether they chose it or not, to times here at the beginning of our own country when native people were required to become Christians or to be enslaved or killed, to times not that long ago when native children were taken from their homes to boarding schools where they were forced to cut their hair, give up their native language, and assimilate into the dominant culture, often in the name of Christianity.

And yet it is important to remember who Jesus was. Jesus was someone who always showed people the heart of God, but never forced or coerced them to follow. Jesus was someone who always pointed toward God, not toward himself. Jesus was someone who was far more likely to show the religious authorities the value of the outsider or sinner who they had dismissed than he was to tell someone on the outside that they

had to become like him. Jesus was someone who modeled for us what it is to be firmly who he was in relationship with God without having to condemn others to make his beliefs valid.

So, if we remember who Jesus was and if we remember the context of this passage, then his words about going to prepare a place and showing them the way to get to him and to God, these aren't words of exclusion, but in the context of an intimate conversation with friends, they are words of comfort and hope, words of continuing connection. And because sometimes we seem to like to pull sentences out of their context and use them for our own agendas, it is important that we remember this.

Perhaps Martha Melton summed this up best in a Bible study a couple weeks ago when she said, "I believe the Bible is inspired as a whole but not word for word as we have it." She went on to remind us that the Bible has been through many translations, and many versions within our own language, not to mention the fact that we don't have whole original manuscripts. Finally she said, "If we listen to the whole of the Bible, what we find is love and that's what is important."

Friends, sometimes life is hard. Grief can hit deep. Loneliness can be a struggle. Depression is real. There is a reason that throughout scripture angelic greetings tend to begin with, "Do not fear..." There is much to fear in this world.

These words from Jesus are words to be embraced as we face these realities. They are not intended to be weapons to use against others. These words don't need to be about dividing people into "us" and "them" - that was never their intention. Rather, as those who have come to know God through the example of Jesus, they are reminders to us, as they were to his closest friends, that we are never alone and that we never will be.

When we are scared and don't know how we will make it through what we are facing...Jesus is with us.

When we are lonely...God is our companion.

When we are grieving and feel like the tears will never leave us...Jesus reminds us that he is there to wipe them for us.

When we wonder where God is or how to find our way back to the divine...Jesus comes alongside us and shows us the way.

Friends, no matter what...in this life or even beyond it...you are never alone. And when you feel like you don't know the way, you can look toward Jesus and toward each other and trust that you will find it. Amen.