

Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 2023

Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Read by Heather Hobbs

Acts 7:55-60 Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 1 Peter 2:2-10 John 14:1-4

You Know the Way

It is after sharing the Passover meal with his closest companions that Jesus tries once more to allay their fears about his coming death. Jesus is continuing to teach and console them. He says those words we have so often heard at funeral services: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*

Of course they are afraid, these disciples. They have followed their beloved friend into the teeth of the enemy, into the city, Jerusalem, bursting with people, guarded by soldiers from the nearby Roman garrison, shadowed by Temple police and spies.

Of course they are anxious. Judas, their fellow disciple, has left the meal to wreak his havoc. He's gone to inform the authorities that Jesus is planning to usher in a new ruling order, the kingdom of God.

It was customary after the meal to have further conversation. This practice was called "the symposium", a time to drink wine, to ask questions and have discussion. And so, after the meal, Jesus asks the first question: *if it were not so – that I go to prepare a place for you – why would I have said that?*

Now some were thinking, where's this place he's going? How are we to go there? Thomas speaks up, asking, *"How can we know the way to the place where you are going?"* They may be thinking of a location, a place on a map or at least a set of directions. Jesus needs to correct this misunderstanding. But in John's gospel, a conversation with Jesus is never straight forward. It often mystifies rather than clarifies.

You remember Nicodemus struggling to figure out what Jesus means by being, "born again." He pictures a mother's belly and birth canal – at his age! And in John, Jesus says other puzzling things. "Those who love their life must lose it." He says, "I came into the world so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."

Sometimes we forget that when we come to John's gospel we're going to have to learn another language. "Anti-language", it's called. It's a sort of code. This gospel was written for insiders. It wasn't intended to be read by us 2,000 years later. It was for those attached to Jesus, those already completely embedded in his inner circle. These disciples are on the very edge of belonging and knowing. They won't be fully embedded until after the resurrection, when Jesus comes three times to continue teaching them. He'll teach them to be attached to each other, to "love one another", just as they have been attached to Jesus, and through him, to God.

Now Thomas asks, "how can we know the way?"

Jesus' answers, "I am the way."

Remember Moses at the burning bush, asking God for a name? The answer: “I am.” It means, I am. I have been. I will be. It means all of these. And it means Jesus is intimately related to God. “I am the way, truth, and the life,” he says.

In John’s gospel there are many times that Jesus uses the name, “I am.” He says, I am the good shepherd, the water, the gate to the sheepfold, the bread and the wine. If you know me, you will know my Father also. It’s as if Jesus says clearly, “I am the great I am.”

Now it is Philip’s turn to make a request: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Clearly, Jesus’ earlier statements haven’t made sense yet. Perhaps we hear some impatience in Jesus’ reply: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?” He’s saying, “I am....I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” There’s that anti-language again, that code for insiders. What he means is that they will need to be embedded in the family he’s forming.

That is how one knows Jesus and knows God: by becoming deeply rooted in all that the Divine does; rooted in the works, the actions and plans of the Divine. He invites them to believe in the Father and also in me.” In John, to believe in is to trust, to love. It is to act, to demonstrate by acts of love one’s commitment to the group. And it is the way to eternal life.

The hymn we will sing in a moment is an invitation to come into that family Jesus continues to build and love. Like the conversation with Jesus, this 16th century hymn can seem puzzling. Yet it is Paula’s favourite communion hymn.

In the hymn, Christ calls us into the way, the truth, and life as we move toward the communion table. We know we are on the way, the right way, the way that gives us breath, gives us strength, shows a feast. The feast mends in length, carries our life into eternal life. This offering of bread and wine, of Christ’s body and blood, promises love that none can part, love that joys the heart. Amen.