

Which Way?

John 14:1-14

Whitefish UMC

April 20, 2008

- † Hurrying down the aisles of her local Target store toward the shoe section, our niece Anya stopped abruptly in the department dedicated to teen room décor. “I think I’d like to change my room now,” she said. Five years ago, after her mother died, Anya moved into my younger sister’s home a few suburbs away in Chicago.
- † One of the very few consolations of being orphaned was getting to choose colors and curtains and bedding for her new room. Her nine-year-old self chose lime green and aqua blue to color her new space. In one of our conversations, she told me that her last best memory of her mother was the vacation they took to the Florida beach, and I think those colors helped her remember.
- † When we redecorated our guest room for her summer stays with us, Anya chose a sunny yellow for the walls with blue and green accents. Horses frolicking in fields bordered the ceiling, a reminder of a passion she shared with her mom and shares with Tom.
- † Do you remember the first time you got to choose what your own room would look like? In the first three years of my life, we lived with my grandparents in the city. And when we moved into our own first house, my baby sister and I shared a room. A few years later, we moved again, and this time I got my own room.
- † I don’t remember a lot about being seven years old, but I do remember choosing the colors (pink) and wallpaper (flowers) and bedspread

(green) for my new room. It was a big deal—my room had a window seat, because I loved to sit in it and read.

- † In this fifth week of Easter, the gospel lesson tells us that Jesus said to his followers: “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In God’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”
- † Have you ever wondered what your room in God’s house might look like? Of course the question assumes that you’ll have one, doesn’t it? In the last few months, I’ve quoted this passage of scripture five times. Each time, it’s been in a memorial service for a beloved church family member.
- † And each time, as this passage is read, I notice people in the congregation get a far away look in their eyes. It’s almost as if they are thinking about their room, and how it will be decorated. Or maybe they are thinking about whether they’ll have one at all.
- † For generations, Christians have been fascinated, comforted, troubled, puzzled, and misguided by today’s Gospel lesson. Look for a minute at what all it contains:
 - The comforting part about rooms in the Father’s house prepared for us;
 - The troubling (and often misguided) part where Jesus says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me;”

- The puzzling part in which Philip says “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied;” as well as “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it;”
 - The fascinating part in which Jesus says “whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” along with “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.”
- † Jesus is preparing his closest followers for his imminent departure. This passage is part of his “farewell discourse” that he offers as he and his disciples celebrate the Passover meal together for the last time before his death. The disciples seem shocked and confused by Jesus’ words, too.
- † William Brosend, writing in this week’s *Christian Century* says that the problem with this passage and all its troubling, comforting, misguiding, puzzling, and comforting parts, is a matter of emphasis.
- † “Do we emphasize ‘ask me for anything and I will do it’ or ‘the one who believes in me will do greater works than these’? Do we emphasize ‘show us the Father’ or ‘whoever has seen me has seen the Father?’ Do we emphasize ‘in my Father’s house there are many rooms’ or ‘where I am, there you be also?’
- † Last but not least, do we emphasize ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ or ‘no one comes to the Father except through me’?”
- † Most of the time, Father Brosend says, “God help us, we emphasize the wrong thing: what’s in it for me, not what I can do; the search for unarguable justification for what we believe, not trust in what we have already seen; wondering what our room in heaven will look like, not enjoying Christ’s presence with us each day;

- † And most destructively, trying to decide who is in and who is out, rather than following the path of the One who is the Way. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”
- † Why do we hear that, Brosend asks, as perilous affirmation fraught with exclusion rather than a suggestion of the right path for the disciples, including us. “Could it have anything to do with the fact that calling the roll is easier than following the leader?”
- † And so, what about those who are not Christian? Will there be no room for them at the heavenly inn? Yes, we as Christians belong to Jesus through the waters of our baptism, but Jesus does not belong only to us! We are the Lord’s, yes, and his promises are for us.
- † And Jesus asks us to share the good news with all who will receive it. But we don’t control it or have the authority to place limitations on it. That’s God’s role, isn’t it?
- † Earlier in John’s gospel Jesus says, “I have other sheep not of this fold.” Jesus has the freedom to call whomever he chooses, whenever he chooses, even if they may not know it. If they live as he lived, walk the way and embody the truth through their living, will they not receive the same gift of eternal love and life?
- † The apostle Paul reminds us that “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” And Jesus says, “I come not to condemn the world, but to save it.” God has acted in Jesus Christ on the world’s behalf. What God did in Jesus Christ, God did for the world. What makes us arrogant enough to believe that the outcome depends on our choice?

- † Instead the outcome depends on God, who depends on us to live in the ways of Jesus. What does that life look like? That’s what we ought to wonder about, not the color of our room in heaven or who will be in or who out.
- † We learned about a blueprint for that life when we heard the scripture from Acts last week, in chapter 2, verses 42-47. Jesus asks us to join in the beloved community that offers love, fellowship, food, teaching, healing, and sharing as he did while he walked this earth.
- † Then we will see the Father, as we will see and be Jesus for this world. Steve Garnaas Holmes says, “The point of believing in Jesus is not to think about him; it is to join him. Over the centuries Christianity has presented itself as a set of creeds, but Jesus did not give us beliefs to think. He gave us a Way to follow.”
- † “When John says, ‘No one comes to the Father except through Jesus’ he does not mean thinking some thought about Jesus, such as ‘Jesus is the Son of God,’ or attaching Jesus’ name to your prayers to God. He means participating in Jesus, in the life and spirit and work of Jesus.
- † He does not mean that the only way to be close to God is by ‘being a Christian,’ by asserting certain beliefs. It means that the only way to be close to God is to love and give and bless—like Jesus. That is, ‘to do the works that I do.’ If God is love, then when we love, we are close to God,” regardless of the label we give ourselves.
- † But how is this possible? We are only human after all. And it was one thing for Jesus to live in and be love all the time, but it’s another thing for us. One Presbyterian pastor says that in his new members’ class, they discuss the two natures of Jesus—fully human and fully divine.

- † He asks, “How did Jesus do the miraculous things he did, out of his divine nature or his human nature?” Inevitably, people respond with a tentative question, “Out of his divine nature?” But as tempting as that is to believe, this pastor says, it flies in the face of one of the earliest teachings of the church.
- † Paul quotes it in his letter to the Philippians, as an illustration of Jesus’ humility, urging the same on the Philippians. He reminds them that though Christ was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.”
- † In other words, he became human, just like us. Remember that old Joan Osborne song, “What if God Was One of Us”? If God is present in creation, in the daily miracles of human love and compassion, in the hopes and dreams of all who seek after God, can we not see God?
- † And so the fully human Jesus loved as we can love, through the power of God. We need only to ask, as Jesus tells us to. That doesn’t mean we’ll get straight A’s, instant parking places, the sale right on time of our house, or a stock market portfolio that defies a rollercoaster downturn.
- † It does mean that when we ask for what he wants for us and for our world—love, forgiveness, abundant life for all people, we will be given the power to do greater works than his own.
- † How? By the power of the Holy Spirit, with which he leaves us, fills us, comforts us, confronts us.
- † The question is, will we waste our time decorating our room in heaven or wondering if our loving but agnostic neighbor will have one, too? Or will we decorate this life with the blush of compassion, the green

of care for the earth, the sunshine of hospitality, the red of the wine of resurrection?

- † Later in John’s gospel, Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:13-14).
- † Jesus laid down his life for us, his friends. So what is our greater work? To do what he commanded—love enemies, pray boldly, trust deeply, and give generously without counting the cost.
- † In other words, “Love one another as I have loved you.” By the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s very self, decorate this life with love. Amen.

Sources:

William Brosend, “Jesus Tells Us That We Can Do Even Greater Works Than His,” *Christian Century*, April 8, 2008.

Rev. Steve Garnaas Holmes, “Unfolding Light,” 4/17/08, an email devotional series.

Rev. Fred Anderson, “No Power Shortage Here” www.day1.net April 20, 2008.