

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 18, 2014
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 17:1-15
Psalm 66:1-8
I Peter 2:1-10
John 14:1-14

Recently, a man who was struggling with some issues in his life sought help from a psychiatrist. During one session, he opened his heart and unburdened his soul.

He said: “Doc, I’m really anxious and afraid about the future. The threat of terrorism is all around us. The polar ice cap continues to melt at an alarming rate. Seismologists tell us that a major earthquake is going to hit the West Coast, and that it’s not a question of *if*, but merely *when*.”

Crude oil just hit \$105 a barrel, and people are struggling just to pay the rent and put food on the table. Our economy is in serious trouble. The cost of living keeps rising, but wages do not. Many people are only a paycheck or two from being homeless and on the street. These are uncertain times, Doc, and it is a scary time.”

When he had finally finished his litany of fears and anxieties, and looked at the counselor and said, “Well, what do you think?”

There was a long pause. Then the psychiatrist stood up from his chair, walked over to the man on the couch, and said: “move over.”

Indeed, the times in which we live are troubling, aren't they? If you watch the evening news or read the papers, it's hard *not* to be anxious and afraid. If you're a senior citizen on a fixed income and you have to decide between buying medicine or buying food, it's hard *not* to be anxious.

If your son or daughter is halfway around the world serving in the military, it's hard *not* to be afraid.

If you become disabled and are unable to work, it's hard *not* to be stressed.

And yet, these words of Jesus come center stage, and will not go away: "Let not your hearts be troubled."

These are his words to his very troubled disciples in John 14. "Do not fear," says Jesus. Do not fear the future, as uncertain as it may seem to you. You trust God. You must also trust *me*. Trust me when I tell you that you always have a place in the Father's house. You always have a stake in what God is doing. Your place is with the Father, and I will take you there, because I know the way. In fact, *I am the way. I will lead you home.*

We are steadily making our way through the Easter season, following along with Jesus as he makes his post-resurrection appearances. In these latter weeks we prepare for his ascension to the Father.

This is precisely what Jesus is doing with his disciples in John 14. This material is part of what is known as the "Farewell Discourse" by Jesus to his

disciples. It occurs in Jerusalem, just after the Last Supper and just before the trip to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is arrested.

These words from Jesus are not targeted at the general public, but are specific words to his disciples. By extension, they become a message for the Church.

The primary thrust of our Gospel lesson today is to soften the blow of Jesus' announcement of his departure. Think about it for a moment. If you were a part of the group of these early disciples, Jesus' sudden departure would be a major crisis. So here in John 14, Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving them. But he assures them that he is not leaving them *alone*.

Jesus says: "Let not your hearts be troubled." You believe in God; believe also in me."

These are such comforting words. Such powerful words. Such reassuring words. They are words we might readily hear in a funeral sermon. And indeed, of the many sermons I've heard from John 14, most of them have interpreted Jesus' words in a *personal* or *individual* sense. That is to say, Jesus assures the individual believer that he is going on ahead to heaven to prepare a place there for the one who trusts in him.

And that's probably true as far as it goes, I suppose. But the pronoun "you" in this passage is in the plural, not the singular. Jesus is speaking to a group, to a

community, and by extension to the Church. This is not a promise to individual believers that their mansion in heaven is under construction. It is a promise to the Church that her relationship with God will not be severed just because Jesus physically leaves the scene.

Jesus plays on the word “rooms” or “dwelling places” here to show this. The word “rooms” or dwelling places” (or “mansions” in KJV) is the noun form of the verb “to abide.” The two words are almost identical in the Greek. They are the words “meno” (to abide) and “monai” (room or dwelling place).

As you know, the concept of “abiding” is a key one in John’s Gospel, and it has to do with *relationship*. In chapter 5, Jesus says, “you do not have his word *abiding* in you, because you do not believe him whom [the Father] has sent” (5:38). In chapter 6, Jesus says, “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide in me*, and I in them” (6:56). And in chapter 15, Jesus says, “*abide in me, as I abide in you*; as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (15:4).

I don’t want to shatter our long held image of Jesus preparing our “mansion just over the hilltop” as the gospel song puts it. But I want to supplement that image with his words here by saying that his promise *extends to the Church*. And even though he is physically gone, the Church has an abiding place with God that keeps us connected with him.

I think Peter alludes to this in today's epistle with the marvelous images of the Church. He calls the Church a "living temple," with Christ as the capstone or the cornerstone. We are a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices up to God which are pleasing in his sight. We are a chosen race, a holy nation, God's very own people. That relationship did not end when Jesus ascended to the Father. In fact, Jesus' departure is what really made that relationship truly possible.

In connection with that, look with me at verse 12, which reads: "the truth is, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, *and even greater works*, because I am going to be with the Father."

Did you catch that? If you did, do you believe it?

I'm not sure how much I actually believe that statement. The thought of exceeding the works of the Son of God while he was on earth is tough to accept.

But think about it for a moment. Our struggle to accept this is because we go back to reading it through personal and individual lenses.

But we should note that in the next two verses (13-14) Jesus says that this promise is for "those who believe and who pray in his name." And again, the pronoun "you" is plural here. When Jesus says "you can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it," the promise is for the community of faith, not just the individual.

When I think about me as an individual believer doing greater works than Jesus did, it seems a bit preposterous. But when I think about the Church doing such, it becomes a little more plausible. After all, Jesus was here a limited time. He was only in one place at a time.

But the Church now permeates the world. And as she ministers in Jesus' name, persons are healed, saved, forgiven, changed, just as they were when Jesus was doing it in person.

And so, Jesus promises to sustain the Church and to empower her to do even greater works than he did while he was here.

Seeing this in a communal sense may also spare us from grossly misinterpreting verse 13, one of the most abused verses in the New Testament. It says, "You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son brings glory to the Father."

I like Fred Craddock's comments about this verse:

Praying in Jesus' name is not merely a formula for closing a prayer. To use Jesus' name as authorization for one's petitions to God implies that those who do so know Christ, abide in Christ, and make their requests from that relationship rather than making selfish requests imported from another value system. To pray in Christ's name means, among other things, to be thoughtful about one's prayers, and to pray about what to pray. (Preaching the Christian Year, A, p. 274)

Both as individuals and as the church, we can embrace an uncertain future and the anxiety that comes with it, because we have a stake in what God is doing.

We have a place in God's house. And the one in whom we place our faith has promised to lead us home.

The hymn writer Katarina von Schlegel said it very well:

*Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide; in every change he faithful will remain.
Be still my soul, thy best, thy heavenly Friend through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake to guide the future as he has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.*

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to bring your fears and anxieties about the future with you. Bring them to Jesus. And in these gifts of bread and wine hear his words to you: "My child, let not your heart be troubled. Don't be afraid. Just trust me. Let me lead you home."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.