

“Space for You”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts
Fifth Sunday of Easter • 14 May 2017
The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

Text: John 14:1-14

¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my *Abba*’s dwelling there are many abiding places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the *Abba* except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my *Abba* also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the *Abba*, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the *Abba*. How can you say, ‘Show us the *Abba*? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the *Abba* and the *Abba* is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the *Abba* who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the *Abba* and the *Abba* is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² 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, because I am going to the *Abba*. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the *Abba* may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

1

Shortly before my tenth birthday, our family went to see *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, a movie made from the Morris West book of the same title. The central story follows Kiril Lakota, a Ukrainian bishop, once imprisoned in the Soviet Union and now unexpectedly elected pope as the world faces a hunger crisis. The movie made a strong enough impression that as the credits rolled I announced my intention to become pope, myself. My parents were not the sort to squash any childlike aspirations, though my mother said it might be difficult, since we weren’t Roman Catholics. Not a problem, I said: “I’ll switch.” Then the deeper concerns surfaced. My parents informed me that were I pope, I could never be married. This one took me longer to resolve, but within seconds I worked it out: “I’ll be pope, then I’ll quit and get married.”

Who knows what appealed so powerfully to a young boy’s mind, more than four decades ago? It might have been the gorgeous pageantry, or the suspense and drama of the election, or the surprise as the college of Cardinals elected a man who was on the margins of power rather than well-practiced in church bureaucracies. It could have been Bishop Lakota’s confession that he stole a loaf of bread. Or maybe that remarkable scene when the pope, wandering incognito through narrow back streets of Rome, had come into the room of a dying man. He began to pronounce last rights, the extreme unction, making the sign of the cross on the man’s forehead, when the man’s friends interrupted to explain that he was Jewish. The pope stepped back from

the bed, replaced his hat on his head, and in fluent Hebrew began to chant the prayers for the dying.

2

Would that every man and woman of the cloth were so fluent in more than one language of faith.

I say it as one who is simply and utterly confident that for me, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. For most of you, too, I am sure that is the case, and it is beautiful and wonderful to know there is a wide company of men and women and children who adore Christ above all, and in all. In this life we have opportunity after splendid opportunity to know God through the workings of God's Spirit and the Risen Christ. In the peace that comes after this earthly life is over, we have the astounding assurance of space for abiding: a space sized for each of us. Not a brand-new abiding space, but one utterly familiar. Not one-size-fits all, but a space sized for each of us. And perhaps most importantly, this is not a house of brick or wood or stone, nor are there limits on the number of tenants, nor is there a single zoning restriction. There is simply space for abiding for each and every one who desires union with God, whom Jesus called *Abba*, which means Papa. Each abiding place exactly what we need: none too small or too large, none with lesser or more desirable views. Just a deep abiding in the heart of belonging and of peace.

The image from the movie, of a pope who is secure in his own faith — yet recognizes God's presence through other faiths — may seem like pie in the sky. Just consider the full title that man carries:

"Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ,
Successor of the Prince of the Apostles,
Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church,
Patriarch of the West, Primate of Italy,
Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province,
Sovereign of the State of the Vatican City,
Servant of the Servants of God."

The full title suggests something of the intricacy of the institution. Maybe there's a problem when the Jesus movement becomes a large organization. To paraphrase from the great theologian Mae West: "The church is a great institution. I'm just not ready for an institution yet."

The gospel for today seems to draw a line in the sand between faithful and infidel. The lesson from John's Gospel records Jesus saying, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). There is more than one way to understand that verse, and figuring out which speaks most powerfully to you makes a difference.

One interpretation takes the phrase as it stands, expressing a simple and unalterable truth: that no one knows God, whom Jesus calls "Father," except through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus did not say, "I am one way among many"; he said, "I am the way."

But it matters when Jesus said it, and why. He spoke to his disciples when they were experiencing maximum fear and anxiety, longing for maximum support. Jesus was on his way to the end; the disciples knew it and they were scared. Moreover, John wrote his Gospel between sixty and seventy years after the resurrection, when it was possible that no one who actually

heard and saw Jesus was still alive, and those following in his way were under attack. Once again, followers of Jesus lived with terrible anxiety and looked for a word with power sufficient to hold their fears at bay. In such context, only an uncaring teacher would say, “I am one way among many.”

“No one comes to the Father except through me.” Another way of reading the verse remembers that before Jesus, we have only scant record of referring to God as “Abba,” or “Papa,” as Jesus did. Jesus may have been telling his friends, “No one comes to the understanding of God that I have to share, except through me.” Jesus could have been saying — I believe he was saying — that he offers us a new understanding of God and a renewed relationship with God. Not the only way to God Almighty, but the only way to the Abba God, Papa God. Jesus offers intimacy with God: a way marked by devotion, joy, wonder, and the yearning for justice.

No one comes to union with Abba God except through a deep, active relationship: an intimacy that requires all of who you are.

Faith is not a destination, after all: it is a way. You will find it not on a map, but by stepping out on your own path. As a great poet wrote:

Caminante, no hay camino. Hacemos el camino al andar.
[Wayfarer, there is no way. We make the way by walking.]

Jesus came to teach not facts about the Creator whom he called *Abba*, but instead to demonstrate and invite us into a living relationship with his Papa.

As though it were yesterday I recall the first time I attended a Roman Catholic mass. I knew little of what to do, but fortunately a priest sat next to me and gave gentle guidance. It came time for communion. I did know that the sacrament is reserved for adherents of Catholicism, so I made no move to go forward. But the priest next to me saw, and understood, and quietly said: “If you’re comfortable, go right ahead.”

It remains one of the most gracious moments I’ve experienced in church. The priest was declaring what Jesus declared: there’s room for everyone here.

3

Earlier in our service we heard a setting of “The Call,” with words written by George Herbert, the 17th century poet.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a way as gives us breath,
such a truth as ends all strife,
such a life as killeth death.¹

There is a clue for us, here, for understanding God’s word in the gospel. According to St. John, Jesus told his followers, “I am the way, the truth, the life,” using the definite article. In Mr. Herbert’s passionate rendering, the article gives way to the adjective: “my Way, my Truth, my

¹ George Herbert, “The Call,” in *The Poetical Works of George Herbert* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1857), 199.

Life.” This is pure Jesus: personal, not doctrinal. A relationship, not a rule. God expressed through intimacy, not through an institution.

Yes, we may boldly claim and joyfully insist that truth exists: not a truth, but the truth. We will never know this truth fully, in our life on earth. By God’s grace our understanding of the truth deepens as we study and serve and worship God in the world. The church is not the guardian of the truth; the church is but a gathering of faithful who seek to follow the truth. For us, there was one who was truth incarnate and so we follow him. Along the way we find any number of persons following other visions of God’s truth. We have nothing to fear, from those who are discovering the source of love and justice and righteousness through other messengers.

But a note of caution: it is folly to jump from one religious path to another, without faithfulness to one’s own. God reveals truth to us through deep commitment to the way through which God has reached us, not through a series of casual encounters. So the one who is deeply committed to a Christian identity and the one deeply committed to a Jewish identity and the one deeply committed to a Muslim identity can understand and appreciate one another, because deep speaks to deep. They can even read one another’s scriptures and literature, and in so doing increase their awareness of God’s multi-faceted beauty.

4

I believe that we best understand this scripture not as a comment on any person outside of the Christian faith, but instead as an invitation to us who have already met Jesus: to enrich and deepen our faith. An invitation to invest ourselves in the relationship with God whom we are coming to know in Christ. An invitation to put that commitment first in our lives. First we make that commitment; then we live into it, give ourselves, and over a lifetime discover just how much richness is there.

Sometimes you and I might think we’re ready for an institution. But Jesus comes to say, “No, not that.” God wants us in a relationship of honesty and intimacy, of laughter and mutuality: God wants us to give all that we are, so that with God we can be all that God made us to be.

And we even get our own abiding place: one that fits us personally and perfectly.

5

We receive an abiding place of our own from the one to whom we have given our heart. It is the beginning of our journey, and it will be the end of our journey, and it is our rest along the way. God supplies all that we could ever need. As perceptive a poet as George Herbert knew both his own limitations and the overflowing abundance of God’s grace:

Whereas if the heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supply the want ;
As when the heart says, sighing to be approved,
“O, could I love!” and stops, God writeth, “Loved.”²

² George Herbert, “A True Hymn,” in *The Poems of George Herbert*, Ernest Rhys, ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1886), 175.

May it be so for you and me, too. Amen.