

Dazed and Confused?

John chapter 14 is one of those passages of scripture that is full of familiar and important statements by Jesus. It is a delight for the preacher and reader alike, because there is so much to ponder. John begins by having Jesus tell us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." He continues saying, "In my Father's house are many mansions." Just a few sentences later Jesus responds to a question from Thomas by saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Then he responds to a question from Philip by telling us that "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," and later "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do great works than these."

There is no dearth of theological, pastoral, exegetical or homiletical fodder in the first fourteen verses. Jesus is giving us so much to work with that we seldom if ever think about what is going on and what is eliciting these powerful statements from him. We hardly think a moment about his two interlocutors, Thomas and Philip. Instead we treat them mostly as straight men providing Jesus with suitable setup lines for his powerful and memorable pronouncements.

As I have pointed out before, context is so important when reading scripture. In this case the context is John's version of the Last Supper. Imagine being at the table with Jesus. They thought they were sitting down to a simple meal; remember that in John it is not the Passover yet. Then he washes the disciples' feet indicating his life of service and the life of service that all of his followers are called to. Judas receives the morsel of food which indicates he is the betrayer, and he leaves the table. Jesus once again predicts his death and glorification. Then he gives them the "new commandment" to love one another. Finally Peter is told, despite his protestations, that he will deny knowing Jesus before the rooster crows the next morning. I expect the disciples' heads were spinning.

Jesus begins today's passage saying, "Let not your hearts be troubled." That is like hearing the awful diagnosis or that your spouse is leaving you and then having the doctor someone say, "But don't worry about it." Their hearts had to be a little troubled? Their whole world seems to be changing, quite literally overnight.

It is not surprising then that Thomas and Philip might have some questions especially when Jesus seems to get more cryptic and enigmatic. They were used to Jesus being a little out there, but now they have been hit with so much at once. Then he begins to talk about mansions in his father's house and his going ahead to prepare a place for them. Thomas has to be forgiven for asking Jesus "we do not know where you are going how can we know the way?" Poor Thomas expecting the name of a town or a least some directions instead

gets one of Jesus' "I am" sayings. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The way is not a physical direction but the following of Jesus and his teachings. That is satisfying for us, but perhaps not so much for Thomas and the other disciples.

Philip tries to simplify things by asking Jesus to show them the Father. That is, we don't really know where you are going with all of this, but if you show us the Father we can roll with it. It is like getting confused by a philosophical argument or a math problem. If the teacher can just show you that it comes to a sensible conclusion you can accept that the intervening, but otherwise unintelligible statements, are valid and you will accept them since the outcome makes sense.

Philip does not get what he wants either. For Jesus tells him he has seen the Father all along because the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. The Father is not far off and unknowable. Rather the Father has been with them all the time in the person of Jesus.

Thomas and Philip in their hour of uncertainty and confusion wanted concrete assurances from Jesus. They wanted to see the road ahead and the Father Jesus talked so much about. We, in our present situation are not unlike them in that we want assurances that we will be safe. We want a plan for the days ahead that guarantees us when we can get out and mingle again. We want to know things will go back to normal.

We humans are not comfortable with uncertainty, but we must trust that our lives are not over and that the new normal will be OK. Instead of giving in to frustration and fear we need to do as the psalmist wrote and, "be still and know that I am God." Take refuge in God. Know that God will deliver you. Commend your spirit to God, knowing that your time is in God's hands. Just as Jesus' last days called for the disciples to be strong and steady so do our days call for strength of mind and spirit

Stop watching the news and start watching the seasons change. Stop fretting about when this will end and enjoy this time of peace. If you won't do it for yourself then do it because Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. Our neighbor needs us to mask up, wash our hands, and keep distance, because they are not strong enough to survive a bout of the virus. If we cannot do what is required of us for selfish reasons then do it for love. Love of neighbor, love of Jesus and love of God. The God who created us does not want us dying. Give God a little help by believing in his goodness and mercy, and following the commands to do justice to your neighbors near and far. There is peace to be had for Philip and Thomas and you and me. It is the peace of God that passes all understanding. Let it happen to you. Let it be.