

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 7, 2023

V Easter, John 14:1-14

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.ⁱ *Amen.*

Before seminary, I served as the “Lay Assistant to the Dean and Chaplain to the Cathedral School” at Saint Mark’s in Shreveport, Louisiana. Despite those *very* fancy titles, Missy and I were 23-year-old newlyweds, and, while I was a willing member of that staff, I was entirely inexperienced in full-time, parish ministry. Among my new responsibilities, I called on the sick every week. In those days, the parish’s Receptionist would call the front desk of each hospital, ask for the list of Episcopalians (and would be given that list!), and then type – as in, on a typewriter – an index card of names and room numbers. I would tuck that card into my breast pocket and make my way about town.

On some summer day at the old Schumpert on St. Mary Place, I stepped into an elevator with a man I recognized immediately from billboards and Friday-night sportscasts as the Senior Pastor and head football coach [not an unusual combination in those parts] of a local congregation and its attendant, “Christian Academy” high school. He wore an enormous suit – very much in the 1990s style – and a jeweled, gold cross pinned his tie close against a pressed Oxford. He combed his hair back taught, luxe with enough pomade that my striking a match in our close quarters might have ended us altogether.

Just before the elevator shut, an obviously distraught woman about my mother’s age shouted, “Wait!” and threw out an arm. The heavy, silver doors automatically reversed direction and reopened. As she ran toward us, her purse had fallen into the crook of her elbow and then down to her wrist, and she dragged the open bag across the threshold’s tracks. I had glanced at her long enough to notice her puffy cheeks, and, as she found a place next to me, I could hear her stifling more tears. Avoiding eye contact, I stared at the floor and into her purse, which overflowed with Kleenex, a hairbrush, a stick of deodorant.

When the elevator lurched upward, the pastor spoke: “Ma’am, you are distressed. Can I help?”ⁱⁱ

“My father is in the ICU,” she replied weakly. “We have made the decision to remove him from life support.”

The pastor paused a half-beat before setting a hand on her shoulder and responding with an unflinching confidence: “Sister, there is nothing more I can do for your father, but I do care about your salvation. If *you* died tonight, do you know that heaven would welcome you? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”

Still looking down, my eyes widened and my stomach clinched, but I said nothing. Forgetting entirely where my index card directed me, I left the pair as soon as the elevator next opened.

Today we read from the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel, an expanded selection from that passage we often hear during our burial liturgies. When I arrived at Trinity, I was surprised to learn that, during funerals, our parish customarily omitted the second half of Jesus' response in the sixth verse. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," we would read; "No one comes to the Father except through me," we would not.ⁱⁱⁱ

I confess, the purposeful omission offended me, for, from my seat, the practice fundamentally changed the sense of the pericope. The omission also conjured my old ghosts [my *stuff*], implying credibility for the cherry-picked readings of my Deep-South, Bible-Belt neighbors who would claim of this verse Jesus foreknowingly excluding from salvation the world's other religions: "See now, 'the way' refers to Buddhism; and 'the truth' refers to Islam; and 'the life' refers to Hinduism. Jesus is saying, 'It's Christianity or damnation' – that's why there's but a *stairway* to heaven, and *highway* to hell."

Aware of such readings, yet not governed by them, let us encounter the passage in its wider context and open ourselves to what we might find. I invite you, therefore, to turn in your pew bible to the Gospel of John ... "Somewhere towards the back," as I always hear *The Simpsons'* Reverend Lovejoy helpfully note.^{iv}

Getting broadly oriented to the scene, flip forward in John to Chapter 12, verse 12 (I believe it begins on page 81 in most of our pew editions), where Jesus approaches Jerusalem. As we remember from Holy Week, Jesus enters the city just before the Passover festival. He teaches briefly, prophesies his own death, and then gathers for supper with his friends. Turning to the next page, we find Chapter 13 and our familiar Maundy Thursday lesson, when Jesus washes the disciples' feet and gives them a new commandment. At verse 33, notice how Jesus introduces that commission: "*Little children, I am with you only a little longer,*" he says, before continuing, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."^v

From our middle-school math class, let us note the transitive property that Jesus introduces here: If $A = B$, and $B = C$, then $A = C$ [remember that rule?]. *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another – for, if you do, then my Love, for all of you, will endure.*^{vi}

Missing most of the point, Simon Peter responds to the news that Jesus is leaving rather than to the promise of God's Love. At verse 36, he asks, "Lord where are you going?"^{vii} Jesus answers patiently, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards." Unsatisfied, Peter asks again, "Lord, why can I not follow you now?"^{viii} Then Jesus continues with what opens Chapter 14: "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? 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 also be."^{ix}

See, as today's appointment begins, Jesus is answering Simon Peter's two earlier questions. Jesus' response begins with reassurance ("Do not let your hearts be troubled") before he offers a reiteration of his unity with "the Father" ("Believe in God, believe also in me").

Thomas, hearing this exchange, joins in Simon Peter's mis-prioritized curiosity. The disciple asks, "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"^x

In verse six, Jesus repeats the pattern of his earlier reply to Simon Peter: he responds first with reassurance – *Thomas, I am the destination, the way; love me as I love you, and we will always remain together.*^{xi} Jesus then continues with another reiteration of his unity with God: "No one comes to the Father except through me[, and] if you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."^{xii}

Here, Jesus returns to his theological application of the transitive property – *I am in the Father, and the Father is in me; therefore, if you are in me, then you are in the Father.* Jesus aims the force of his "No one" claim as encouragement, to reassure the disciples that their companionship with him, is companionship with "their Father in heaven."

After this, *Philip* joins the chorus of confusion, and *he* asks of Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."^{xiii}

Once more, Jesus repeats his pattern, responding first with reassurance, albeit with a little bite – "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" that is, *My friend, you have all that you need for a faith as strong as my own* – and then he continues with yet another reiteration of his union with the God: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."^{xiv}

Jesus then finally cracks and expresses understandable incredulity – "How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"^{xv} *I mean, this is like the 27th time I've taught this lesson, man – first to all yall when I centered our life together in Love ... then when we broke bread and I washed your feet and then to Simon Peter ... and then to Thomas, literally like two seconds ago.*

So, Philip, let's take a deep breath, and let's give this one more go: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works."^{xvi} *Now, if that feels like too great a leap of faith – that knowing me is to know God – then do not attempt that distance all at once; instead, simply believe in what you see and know: believe in me, your friend standing right here before you, and believe in what we have done together,* "the works themselves. [For, v]ery 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 Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."^{xvii}

Reading just past the fenceline of today's passage, in verse 15 Jesus brings this section back to his commission to Love and offers a final reassurance of their continuing companionship: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments"^{xviii} – and I believe we know the *mandatum* he means. Then, ahead a bit: "I will not leave you orphaned. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live"^{xix} – there's that transitive property again, and once more – "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me."^{xx}

I suspect many of us can look back over our years and recognize inflection points, events that altered our life's course. In some measure, I have lived a lifetime in response to that pastor's selfishness, that daughter's grief, my silence ... all from a chance intersection 25 years ago. While I do not believe a theological argument between hospital floors would have been helpful, I do regret that I did not say *something*, do *something* to support and shield that poor soul, her life and her toiletries spilling out before us.

So, as it can be, let us, you and me, do something now.

Though I smoothed the approach for our learned New England parish when I misread scripture in my affected Southern accent, be certain that our avoiding difficult passages makes us no more righteous or wise than literalist interpreters who impose their cultural assumptions upon the texts. When we do not lean ourselves into such readings, we concede authority and the Christian voice to those who believe their own salvation depends upon "winning others' souls;" those who believe in a Jesus who excludes, rather than binds; a Jesus who angers, rather than reassures; a Jesus who condemns, rather than loves.

If we believe better, then let us *be* better! Let us *do* better – for my elevator companion those years ago, and for all of us who been bullied by Christian fearmongering. Let us announce the good news of John 14, that this passage has absolutely nothing to do with who Jesus is sending to hell – that whole idea is a *non sequitur*. Instead, Jesus labors – over and over and over again – to make clear his essential union with God, the Creator, and, by their Love for one another and for the whole world, to celebrate their essential union with all people. Jesus invites us to recognize that there is a place in God's house for us and for everyone, and that our glad stay begins as soon as we consent to *be* loved, as soon as we love God and one another as God has loved us.

That we would love so well,
I pray with gladness and singleness heart;
Amen.

ⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱ Parcel to the embarrassment I feel about this encounter, I remember admiring the pastor speaking so boldly into the awkwardness his first question.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 14:6.

^{iv} "Bart's Girlfriend." *The Simpsons*, Gracie Films, 1994.

^v John 13:33.

^{vi} John 13:34-35.

^{vii} John 13:36.

^{viii} John 13:37-38. Providing continuity with other scriptural accounts, Peter continues, “I will lay down my life for you.” And Jesus responds once more, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

^{ix} John 14:1-4.

^x John 14:5.

^{xi} John 14:6a.

^{xii} John 14:6b-7.

^{xiii} John 14:8.

^{xiv} John 14:9a.

^{xv} John 14:9b.

^{xvi} John 14:10.

^{xvii} John 14:11-14.

^{xviii} John 14:15.

^{xix} John 14:18-19.

^{xx} John 14:20-21a.