

Lessons:

John 14:1-14

We begin this morning talking about the end -- Actually, it’s the beginning of the end.

Here in Chapter 14 of John’s Gospel -- Jesus is giving the first of what are called the Last Supper Discourses.

It is as if Jesus has gathered his disciples around him -- like a dying man might summon his family around his deathbed.

And you and I join these 12 disciples to listen. -- Might we hear some famous last words?

Can Jesus top Oscar Wilde who, upon his deathbed,
-- looked around his bedroom declared:
‘Either this wallpaper goes, or I do!’

No, nothing but business this morning-

The experts who study these things, say our Gospel reading follows perfectly the genre of something called Testamentary Literature -- in the ancient world a person’s last words were always very special.

Biographers, like St. John, would take great care to ensure they contained the most important things that future generations should learn.

The writer of Deuteronomy 33 tells us how Moses did it-

We have other Old Testament images of how the 12 Patriarchs did it-

And so you and I begin this morning, with this image of Jesus on his death bed -- bequeathing possessions and property to his progeny.

Of course, Jesus has no riches or land to dispense -- instead he unloads a lifetime of wisdom and blessing and good will upon those brave enough to join him-

Tidbits of important advice for His beloved, which, of course, also includes you and me.

Jesus begins with these famous lines you and I often hear at funerals -- it starts-

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled’

As we’ve noted in the past, this is the most frequent advice that Jesus gave his followers -- don’t worry.

Have we come here with a heavy burden and concern this morning?

Are we bogged down with fear of the known or unknown, as these first disciples were?

Then Jesus wants us to leave it go

-- to ‘believe in God,’ and to trust that everything will be ok.

“Easter V”

RCL-A, Sunday, April 20, 2008

Of course these words would be a bit more believable if Jesus had actually followed them Himself.

Ever think about that?

The exact same Greek word used here for ‘troubled’ is actually used three other times in this Gospel:

- In Chapter 11:33, Jesus’ heart was troubled at the tomb of Lazarus-
- In Chapter 12:27, when Jesus first declares that he will be leaving the disciples -- his heart was troubled.
- And in Chapter 13:21, when he announces that one of his disciples will betray him, the text says Jesus was ‘troubled in spirit.’

Worrying is very human -- Jesus was very human.

Of course, this is not divine permission for us Worry-warts to continue on with business as usual

Instead, it is for those of us who have a hard time finding peace in our lives -- to know that Jesus did to.

We have a hard time

- actually falling asleep before the kids get home safely
- wondering if our retirement savings will hold out
- worrying about our health as we get older

You and I can never forget that this was the very first piece of deathbed advice that Jesus would give -- a piece of advice He knew darn well was very, very, tough to take:

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled.”

Jesus continues, in our text, to tell us that in the Father’s house there are many dwelling places -- what does that mean?

This text has been interpreted very widely -- some people say it opens the door of salvation to those of other faiths -- some have even used it to prove that aliens can get to heaven -- If they can get onto so many tabloid front pages, movie posters, and cereal boxes maybe they have a shot.

Perhaps it means, as C.S. Lewis liked to analogize -- that it is an image of Christendom:

- Each denomination has its own room in the house
- The Catholics like the kitchen so they can bake Communion bread
- The Baptists like the library where they can debate doctrine and look up the law
- And the Episcopalians like to adjourn to the drawing room where no problem in the world can ever go unsolved -- when properly addressed over the right vintage of sherry.

Interpretations over the ‘dwelling places’ vary, but we do understand that these are places where the Lord has gone ahead of us.

We are faced with an image of love and care and concern -- from a God who knows the very number of hairs on our head.

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Not long ago I was talking with a lovely young woman -- And she was sad because she had just been let down.

She had applied for a new job -- and although she was eminently qualified -- she did not get it.

And she had a very hard time seeing God in the midst of her pain -- co-workers had been telling her that ‘There’s a reason things didn’t work out’ -- ‘God has a bigger plan ahead’.

Unfortunately these words are only helpful once the wound has closed -- but while it’s tender, we’re in pain, and we need kinder words.

Consolation, not advice -- we all know the difference.

So in her anger, this young lady said,

‘Oh, God doesn’t care about little things like jobs
‘God has bigger things to care about.’

Well, of course the Lord does.

But the Lord is not limited like you or me-

If we think we’re good at multi-tasking -- let’s just trade places for a day with the Lord.

The Lord can talk on the cell phone while driving, -- and clip his toenails -- and read three newspapers -- and answer the prayers of millions of people who are on their knees begging.

This God who has gone ahead of us and prepared a place for us is wholly other than we are. -- This God is able to love each one of us intimately, personally and completely.

Here’s another deathbed confession:

Poet Henrich Heine said this:

“God will pardon me, that’s God’s job.”

God can love us, pardon us, out multi-task us, go ahead of us, and prepare a place for us -- that’s God’s job.

Jesus then goes on with his address -- until he gets to this famous, famous phrase:

“I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

Now, here I am going to quote liberally from an excellent article by Dan Clendenin that has been included in today’s bulletin -- which you can take home and read later -- because this is an important question in our pluralistic environment.

In our politically-correct culture, few opinions generate more hostility than that of supposed Christian exclusivism. (Dan Clendenin)

This verse joins Acts 4:12, Peter’s address in which he says about Jesus,

“There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved“

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And these words not only provoke controversy -- but also questions.

The World Christian Encyclopedia identifies 10,000 distinct religions in our world. -- 150 of them have one-million or more followers.

Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus is the only way -- and that 9,999 religions are totally false?

If so many billions of people actually doubt the words of Peter and Jesus here -- what's a Christian to think?

That's one reason why many people favor some sort of pluralism -- believing that no one religion is superior to another.

This is what you and I often hear in the popular culture -- in movies and over the water cooler when someone says:

“Don't all religions really teach the same thing anyway?”

We want to agree because we want to get along -- We want to see all roads leading to the same city.

But under closer examination, the way of pluralism may be like a Lite Beer commercial-

“Taste great, but less filling.”

Here are some conclusions that need consideration as we ponder this notion of Christian exclusivism.

First, not all religions are equal. -- We all know this.

David Koresh has no religious parity with Mother Teresa.

Aztec human sacrifice doesn't compare with Buddhist almsgiving.

Hindu widow-burning, female infanticide, and phallic worship as practiced by the Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Indians, Japanese, and some Native Americans strike us all as badly wrong.

Second, the claim that all religions teach the same thing is patently false -- this is precisely what religions do not do. -- When we take a look at the historical and theological particulars of religions we find drastic differences.

Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in one God.

But Shinto and African traditional religions are polytheistic.

Therevada Buddhism is non-theistic-

And the scientific materialism of folk like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens is atheistic.

It is patronizing to say that a Bahai person believes the same things as a Rastafarian.

Sure, they can all be false -- but how can they all be true?

Another important consideration is that Christians need not reject everything about other religions.

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In Christian love, we can acknowledge areas of both agreement and disagreement -- and even struggle over the latter.

When you and I come across contradictions in life, we don't usually throw our hands up and say, “Oh well, they're both true!”

No, we study hard, make an informed choice, and remain open minded.

The Christian traditions of toleration and inclusion are critical here.

Another thing to consider is that the conundrum of relating 10,000 religions to each other is not a “Christian” problem.

It's an equal opportunity problem that confronts all religions.

Dismissing the Christian approach as wrongheaded doesn't make the problem go away.

Another consideration, this one put forward by liberal Jewish writer Michael Kinsley -- and he says it's not wrong or intolerant to try to convert other people.

If we think someone is wrong on some issue -- it's entirely reasonable to try to change their mind.

What are Barack and Hillary and McCain trying to do?

Christians should vigorously protect and promote the right of every person to hold any faith -- or no faith at all -- and extend to every individual and culture unfailing courtesy and kindness.

Just last weekend a number of us went door to door in the neighborhood passing out invitations to folk to come check out St. David's

-- we were not coercive, manipulative or ungracious in our conversation-

-- we were motivated by a love in our hearts, put there by Jesus, that we believe is real.

We have found love in this Christian community and believe others might benefit too.

There is nothing wrong with being firm about what it is we believe -- as long as we understand that firmness must always be held in the crucible of love and humility exemplified by Jesus on the cross.

We also need to keep in mind that the two Scriptures from Peter and Jesus that we're working from -- are not the final biblical witness on the matter.

We must always keep in mind 1 Timothy 2:4 which says that:

“God desires that no person should perish, and that every person be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”

2 Peter 3:9 says Christ is the atoning sacrifice not only for Christians, but for the whole cosmos.

When we look at the entire biblical witness, we must open our eyes to faith.

Faith is not concrete knowing on every matter.

Faith is not knowing, but believing.

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As C.S. Lewis once wrote”

“Is it frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him?

“But the Truth is that God has not told us what the arrangements about other people are.

“We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ;

“We do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”

A final consideration on this verse takes us to the words of dear St. Augustine -- who advised that we should do our best to seek answers to difficult questions-

And having done that, he said we should ‘rest patiently in unknowing.’

-- At the end of the day, it’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me -- such as the many questions about religious pluralism

-- but at the end of the day, it’s the parts that I do understand that pose bigger questions

-- like loving God with my whole heart -- and loving my neighbor as myself.

Following this famous, famous verse, Jesus goes on to face not only a doubting Thomas, but a doubting Philip -- and then to make this amazing statement:

“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”

What could you and I possibly do ‘greater’ than Jesus’ works?

A pastor I admire tells a story about a visit to Haiti -- He was there on missionary work when he made his way to the Holiday Inn.

He got out of the cab and was intercepted by three girls -- not more than 15 years old.

The one in the middle said, "Mister, for \$10 I'll do anything you want me to do. "I'll do it all night long. "Do you know what I mean?"

He said yes, he knew what she meant.

So he turned to the next one and said, "What about you, could I have you for \$10?" She said yes.

Then he asked the same of the third girl. She tried to mask her contempt for him with a smile but it’s hard to look sexy when you’re 15 and hungry.

He said, "I'm in room 210. "You be up there in 10 minutes." "I have \$30 and I'm going to pay for all 3 of you to be with me all night long."

Then this pastor rushed up to the room -- And he called down to the concierge desk -- And he said he wanted every Walt Disney video that you had in stock.

Then he called down to the restaurant and said: "Do you still make banana splits in this town?

“Because if you do, I want banana splits with extra ice cream, extra everything -- “I want them delicious, I want them huge, I want *four* of them!

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Then the little girls came -- And the ice cream came -- And the videos came

And the four of them sat at the edge of the bed and watched the videos and laughed until about one in the morning.

That's when the last of them fell asleep across the bed.

And as this pastor saw those little girls stretched out asleep. -- He thought to himself, nothing's changed, nothing's changed. -- Tomorrow they will be back on the streets selling their little bodies to dirty, filthy johns -- because there will always be dirty, filthy johns who for a few dollars will destroy little girls.

Nothing's changed.

He didn't know enough Creole to tell them about the salvation story -- But the word of the spirit said this: *but for one night, for one night you let these three be little girls again.*

No, this pastor did not walk on water.

He did not raise a dead man from the grave-

But if Jesus was to make a decision: -- which is the greater work, walking on water or giving one night of childhood back to 3 little girls who had it robbed from them -- giving one night of joy to 3 little girls that armies had marched over - which do you think Jesus would consider the greater work?

Jesus said, "The work that I do, you shall do and greater works than these."

None of us can replicate the powerful acts of God in Jesus Christ,

But every time we perform an act of love in his name -- we are imitating a Jesus who is saying, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

What 'greater acts' can you and I do this week?

How can these hands, these feet, these minds, go out into our worlds and do the greater work of Jesus?

For, my friends, if Jesus had any deathbed wish at all -- it would be for you and me to go forth and do just that.

Amen.