

May 10, 2020 5th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 31:2-5, 15-16

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1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

Abiding in Questions

1. Grace and peace to you all this morning. A quick word of thanks before I share a few musings - I'm grateful today both for the opportunity to sit in today's Gospel message together, but also for your having welcomed me into the community for this school year. It's been a gift, and there is no place I'd rather have been for this whirlwind of a year. This morning we consider John 14, a rich text full of various angles from which to consider: banishing troubled hearts, belief, the way truth and life, dwelling places, recognizing God... it's a beautifully interwoven chock-full fourteen verses, a scene of Jesus and the disciples immediately following the footwashing, the last supper, and Judas' departure in John 13, immediately before his arrest and crucifixion, a section that we dub the Farewell Discourses, Jesus effectively saying, "May it be well with you". They are words of comfort and hope, promise and plain speech, and little mincing of words as to what's soon to take place. Jesus is preparing to depart, fortifying them while knowing full well that things are not about to fare well.

2. Well, at this present moment in time, I would wager that collectively, we also are not faring very well. In this moment, Jesus' promise of a prepared dwelling place, although including many rooms, is seemingly far away and separate from this reality, and that disembodied House of my Father does not necessarily bring me abounding comfort and peace. Instead, I practically want to cheer for Thomas and Phillip, two unbelievably relatable characters, the champions we all need right now, to speak for us and say - We do not where you are going. We cannot see what you are seeing. Truthfully, I respect the heck out of that honesty. These days I am absolutely craving people to just tell it like it is.

3. This week I read an article called "What to ask instead of, 'How are you?' during a pandemic"
 - a. *"Every conversation I have these days with someone who doesn't live in my home kicks off with a brief, awkward, accidental meditation on mortality. "Hi!" I say. "Hi!" the other person says back. "How are you?" I ask next, out of habit.*

*And then we both spend a long moment gazing directly into the abyss... *nod if that sounds at all familiar”*

- b. How are we? People are sick and dying in alarming numbers all around us. Maybe we're lucky enough not to be sick or dying, but any of us could be soon. The whole world has screeched to a halt, although somehow magically our country still seems rife with injustice?. Our entire financial futures are in jeopardy. We are separated. The article says, *This moment has laid bare the extent to which “How are you?” is a mere pleasantry and not an honest inquiry in search of an honest answer. We need better questions to ask.*
4. And in this vein, this deep desire I continue to have for brutal honesty, I adore Thomas and Phillip for asking the hard questions of Jesus. Because they're brave, genuine, and under no pretense of divine knowledge, yes. But also because the asking of good, hard questions makes space for the patient answering, for wrestling with the Way, for deeper Knowing of God, for engaging in a community that does not shy away from grief, confusion, and peace-seeking. Thomas and Phillip do not get it: but they also do not leave. They persist in relationship. They abide.
5. To Jesus, relationship is synonymous with the concept of abiding, a consistent theme that emerges in this discourse. Because following is chapter 15, last I Am statement (the Vine, abide in me and I in you).

We also see the theme of abiding in today's Gospel text:

- a. *2 In Abba God'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?[b] 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.*
- b. Image of hospitality, of togetherness. In these verses, Jesus draws upon an Old Testament understanding that the “house of the father, or the house of the mother” meant a ‘permanent house, or abiding place”
- c. The translation often reads: “ a house with many rooms”, but it uses the same Greek root that has been used consistently -- *meno*, “many menes, biding places” In other words, in Abba's house, aka wherever God dwells, there are many biding places.

- d. This is an important connection because disciples have heard about abiding again and again, what it looks like to live into abundant life, a life of grace and truth and love. And we begin to put pieces together in John 14 that abiding is equivalent to relationship, with God, with self, with neighbor. Where God dwells, there are many biding places. There is relationship.
6. The article about how to ask questions during our COVID-19 era concluded with this thought:
- a. *However you choose to start your conversations during quarantine, perhaps the most important thing is to ask a genuine question that invites a genuine answer. One of the kindest gestures we can extend to others in a time like this is to make clear that they don't have to pretend they're fine.*
 - b. I don't read this to you to quarantine-shame you - it is so so hard to know how to distribute our emotional capacity and know how to care for each other in this season. I read it because it invites us to ask real gritty questions out of caring, it invites us to wonder alongside each other how on earth to make sense of everything, it reminds us that admitting our shared humanity opens up little pockets of truth to be revealed in togetherness.
 - c. In Thomas and Phillip's genuine asking, they receive Jesus' genuine, life-giving answers: I am the way, the truth and the life. You see me, you see God. Jesus is drawing on that entirety of what abiding looks like and what it means. He reminds the disciples that Immanuel, God with us, is a God who longs to dwell with God's people. That God incarnate, word made flesh, chose to enter into the particulars of their very lives, of our very lives, to be in relationship. God dwells with us, and where God dwells, there are many biding places. That is the Way.
 - d. Rather than hearing this through the often co-opted tone of "I am the ONLY way", as some Christians have been harmfully wont to do, Jesus extends an invitational connectedness between God the parent and her beloved boundless community. Happy Mothers day, indeed.
 - e. If we read beyond verse 6, we realize that the Parent has already come, is already present, in the life and ministry of Jesus. "If you know me" - no. Rather, "if you know me, and you do." These are words of comfort, not condition, for the disciples. There is nothing uncertain for their present or their future because of

their relationship with Jesus. Because of how he has taught them to be in relationship with one another. Of that, Jesus wants them to be sure, especially before their imminent separation.

- f. And this is what today's good news is for the season we find ourselves in: Even in their forthcoming separation, even in our literal physical separation here and now, that relationship is secure, that refuge is steadfast, that abiding persists. Jesus is not abandoning us or the disciples. Rather, he emphasizes that abiding is salvific, both in the here and now through the Way that his ministry has taught us to live, **and** in the future, where Jesus has ascended to prepare an endlessly wide table, with many biding places (menes,) enough for all. Even in the painful separations of life, we are not left alone. Abba God has already come, we are not left without refuge. Psalm 33 says "For your name's sake lead me and guide me... you are my refuge. My times are in your hands"
7. We as readers know that even after this discourse with Jesus, Thomas doesn't totally get it. His most infamous scene is still coming in John 20 upon Jesus' resurrection, in which we often write him off as doubting. What we miss sometimes though, is that Thomas makes the most elevated confession of faith in the Gospel, by proclaiming "My Lord and my God" upon touching his side.
 - a. That confession of faith does not occur in a vacuum, randomly. It occurs in a context in which he has been prepared by what he has heard. He has been prepared by unabashedly asking questions, really getting after the what and how and why, with his fellow disciples and with Jesus himself, prepared by stubbornly abiding in the community. It's what he has heard that has enabled him to make sense of what he has encountered. Those dialogues have given him language to respond. He does not come to proclaim in spite of his honest wonderings - he comes to proclaim *because of them*.
 - b. And by the proclamation of God's mighty acts, the church -- God's people -- is formed. This is what God does, calls the church into being, to proclaim Christ, and to be built up into a house of spiritual stones, as we heard in 1 Peter today: to be known into being by Christ, and to be known for its proclamation of him. As Christ is, so is the Christian.

8. In asking good questions, Thomas encounters the risen Christ and proclaims his identity: My lord and my God. In asking good questions, we can co-create abiding places in our own communities, generous in our invitation, secure in the promise of a God who dwells with us, whose connectedness to us does not go away, even amidst separation. So that even when it does not feel like we are faring well at all, we remain confident that God's will for the world is life and that promise of resurrection meets us in our spaces of death and grief. So that it pulls us forward into the Way Christ has shown and continues to work through us in life - May it call us to a brutally honest, proclamatory, abiding Easter reality.

Amen