

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER-YEAR A

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5,15-16, I Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

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FAMOUS LAST WORDS—OR PROMISES, PROMISES

Here we are, five weeks on this side of Easter, and the lectionary thrusts us back to Maundy Thursday. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, Judas has left the table, and now Jesus tells those remaining that he is going to be with them only a little longer and that they cannot come where he is going

Thus begins what has come to be called "The Farewell Discourse" and it continues from John Chapter 13:31 to Chapter 17:26.

Its primary concern is not so much about what events will soon befall Christ, but rather what will happen to his disciples after he is gone.

All of this is puzzling and frightening to the disciples. They are stunned and upset and pepper him with questions – where are you going? Why can't we follow? We don't know the way. What's going to happen to us?

So Jesus tries to calm their anxieties with words of promise, but also instruction. He's been with them such a short time, a mere three years and there is so much they do not understand and so much they need to know to continue his work. Likewise, the writer of the Gospel of John (probably a disciple of the great apostle) is speaking to a fearful and anxious community. He writes during the time of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, near the end of the first century, when the persecution of Christians had become vicious and was being encouraged through most of the Roman Empire. This group of followers is asking what is going to happen to us if we remain faithful to this Way? How will we be able to endure? So the writer seeks to remind his readers of the promises of Jesus.

Many of us today have troubled hearts, wondering what's going to happen to us—global warming, failing economy, loss of jobs, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, war, natural disasters, disunity in the church, powerlessness in the face of world hunger and violence. Not to mention our own personal and private struggles and suffering.

We, too, like those first believers and those in John's beleaguered community need consolation, assurance and instruction.

This assurance takes the form of three promises.*

First, there is the promise of an abiding place with God. The word translated "dwelling places" or "rooms" or "mansions" is the noun form of the verb, "to

abide”. “Abiding” is a key word throughout John’s gospel and it represents a relationship----a relationship characterized by trusting and knowing---- that same relationship that existed between Christ and God.

“Staying” or “abiding” with Jesus is the crux of discipleship. Jesus, himself, is the house of the Father. He is the new temple, the sacred meeting place with God. To abide, to stay, to reside “in Christ” is to have reached the intended “place”---- even as the journey continues.

Some of you may remember the song, “I’ve Got a Mansion, Just Over the Hill Top”. I grew up with that idea—these mansions represented heaven and I’d get there after I died.

But eternal life begins when we abide in the Son and in the Father (I John.2:24-25). What we have now –life in his name—(John 20:31) is what we shall always have. We do not have to die to know the resurrected life. This is the promise of Jesus in the gospel of John—everlasting, mutual dwelling in Christ.

To quote Frederick Beuchner—“to live eternal life in the full and final sense, is to be with God as Christ is with him. And with each other as Christ is with us.”

The second promise is that of a sure and clear way to God. For John, the way to God—whom no one has ever seen—is Jesus Christ. In following Jesus as the way, in trusting Jesus as the truth, in experiencing Jesus as the life of the Spirit, we come to a knowledge of God in a new and intimate way.

Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father and Jesus says, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. And if you can’t believe that, then at least believe on the evidence of the works that I do.”

The God of Jesus Christ is like the Jesus the disciples have known so intimately---- filled with love, mercy and justice.

The third promise is that of a power, not only to sustain his followers in the world, but also to enable them to do even greater works than Jesus did.

Aha! Here comes the challenge – and the command -- implicit in the promises.

Let’s see----he’s told us that he’s the way to know God. “If you know me, you know the father”. So what do we know about Jesus?

First of all, we know Jesus is love----love in action.

Love, healing the leper,
Love, accepting the outcast,
Love, rebuking the hate-filled,

Love, restoring the fallen,
Love, welcoming the prodigal,
Love, freeing the captive,
Love, giving new life to all.

So Jesus' words are not only an invitation to know God, but also an example of how to live our lives.

For Jesus, love was not primarily a feeling, love was expressed in actions. "You are my friends when you **DO** what I command." He says, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do."

He says. "This command I leave with you, that you should love one another as I have loved you."

So what is our greater work?

To do what he commanded, to continue that which he began—

healing the sick,

caring for the poor,

loving the unlovable,

pouring ourselves out for the untouchables of the world.

Becoming those living stones in the new temple of God's presence on earth.

God lives and works on earth in the living members of his community of believers.

Jesus abides in God; God abides in Jesus. We abide in Jesus; Jesus abides in us. Let not your hearts be troubled.

Comforting words, but also challenging words. Herodotus said, "Great deeds are usually wrought at great risk." That was surely true for Jesus; Stephen certainly found it so. And I know those first century followers found it true. Have we taken any risks?

I want to share something Roberta Hiday sent in an e-mail describing her experience at the Dalai Lama's visit to Seattle last weekend. She described the excitement of the sirens and the flashing lights as the motorcade arrived with an escort of 30 motorcycle policemen, a black SUV, a very long van and a media wagon. As she left the arena, she pondered what might it be like to live such a life? These are her words: "He describes himself as a simple, human being. But we saw him as a humble monk who risks his life on a daily basis in order to spread the message of compassion. We left the stadium that day, wondering what we were willing to risk to spread God's love and compassion to all we meet?"