First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

May 7, 2023

Heartburn

John 14:1-4

**14**“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. **2**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? **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. **4**And you know the way to the place where I am going.” **5**Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” **6**Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7**If you know me, you will know[d] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”**8**Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” **9**Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? **10**Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. **11**Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe[e] because of the works themselves. **12**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, because I am going to the Father. **13**I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14**If in my name you ask me[f] for anything, I will do it.

When I was in Salt Lake City, recently, I had dinner at one of my favorite Italian restaurants. Whenever I’m in Salt Lake, I make a point of eating at this restaurant and anyone who knows me, knows how much I enjoy Italian food. So, you’ve probably guessed that I had been looking forward to eating at this establishment for quite some time. After I had been seated, and the waiter had taken my drink order, I started scanning the menu looking for something I hadn’t tried on previous visits. I settled on the Linguine alla Vongole, which I’ve enjoyed in other restaurants, so I thought, “What the heck?” “Let’s see how this place does it.” HUGE mistake. I don’t know if the clams had gone slightly bad or if the chef had added a non-traditional ingredient, but let me tell you after that meal, I had the WORST heartburn I have ever experienced! Now, I have a bit of a reputation for having something of an iron stomach, and I don’t experience heartburn very often, but on this night, I could not get to the antacids fast enough. I’ll go back; it is my favorite place to experience Italian food after all, but I think I’ll skip the clams next time.

 In today’s reading, I imagine that Jesus’ disciples must have been experiencing some heartburn themselves. And, as often is the case with the Lectionary, we’ll need to widen our view a bit, to understand why.

You’ll notice that I read beyond verse 4 and no, I didn’t have a senior moment. There’s some really important stuff that the Lectionary leaves out this week, and I figured y’all can handle hearing a few more verses.

The setting is Jesus’ farewell address given during his last supper with his disciples. At this point in the narrative, Jesus has washed his disciple’s feet, and explained to them what it means (13:1-20). He has foretold Judas’ betrayal, and Judas has slipped away into the night (13:21-30). He has told his disciples that he will be with them only a little while longer, and that where he is going, they cannot come (13:33). He has also foretold Peter’s imminent denial (13:36-38). No wonder the disciples are feeling some heartburn. Their beloved teacher is leaving them, one of their own has turned against them, and the stalwart leader among the disciples is said to be on the cusp of a great failure of loyalty. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their feet. Definitely a situation that would give anyone heartburn.

Our text picks up the story with Jesus response to the anxiety that must have been overwhelming for his friends, by telling them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” He then goes on to tell his friends that, “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?”

Now, after Jesus has made it clear that he is going to prepare a place for them, verse 4 tells us that, “…You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas, like most characters in the Gospels, takes Jesus’ words literally. He wants directions to this place where Jesus is going; he wants something that he can plug into his GPS to make sure that he gets there.

In verse 6, Jesus’ responses that he is the way, the truth and the light, and that no one can come to the Father except through him. This verse has too often been used as a threat to tell people that they’d better get with the program and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, if they want any hope of being saved. To interpret the verse this way is to rip it from its context and do violence to the spirit of Jesus’ words. This statement by Jesus is a promise, a word of comfort to his disciples. Jesus himself is all they need; there is no need to panic, no need to search desperately for a secret map.

Now, verse 6 is one that I personally struggle with, and one that often gives me heartburn, in a metaphorical sense, because of the way it has been used by Christians against Christians. Bloody sectarian violence has been around since the very beginning of the Christian Church. Entire nations have gone to war over the wording of the Nicene Creed. Entire denominations have been founded because of strongly held disagreements about how to interpret Jesus’ words. Even today, we live in a world where some followers of the risen Christ demonize fellow Christians, proclaiming loudly that their particular version of “Church” is the only path to heaven. Too often, when we disagree with another Christian, rather than honor the differences and acknowledge our shared faith, we retreat into our own corners and throw theological bombs at each other. Folks, I can only imagine the heartburn this causes God.

For me, this type of in-fighting is foolish, at best and, at worst, prevents us from fully living into our call as people who follow the teachings of Jesus. If we’re so busy fighting among ourselves, how can we love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with God?

 Let me share an analogy that I find helpful when I’m confronted with “my way is the only way.” Picture a mountain and at the top of this mountain is where God dwells. We call it heaven. Now, there’s a bunch of different paths that’ll get you to the top. There’s the Presbyterian path, the Catholic path, the Mormon path, the Baptist path, etc., etc. The thing about all these different paths is that they lead to the same place. They all get us into God’s presence, and isn’t that the goal?

Here’s the thing, I believe that God doesn’t care about the path we take to come into God’s presence. Which denomination we belong to, or how we understand the Trinity, or what constitutes a Sacrament, along with a host of other things that we’ve used to divide ourselves into separate camps, won’t matter when we stand before God to account for our time on earth.

What will matter, is how we showed love to those who society deem unlovable. What will matter, is how well we followed Jesus’ exhortation to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and to liberate the oppressed.

We are not called to proclaim the rightness of a particular iteration of Christianity. We are not called to throw theological bombs, or denigrate fellow followers of Jesus, or anyone else for that matter. Instead, we are called to throw open the doors to the many dwelling places that exist in God’s house and welcome all who would enter. AMEN