

May 7, 2023 Fifth Sunday of Easter
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
John 14:1-7
"A Place Prepared"
Douglas T. King

Some of the most intimate moments of life are those times spent by a death bed when family and the closest of loved ones gather around someone on the verge of dying. The range of emotion runs the depth and the breadth of the human experience. There can be laughter, and certainly tears, and everything in between. Any thoughts offered up by the loved one preparing to cross over our mortal boundary, are listened to intently as we seek to capture every meaning and nuance each word has to offer.

Some dying declarations have become famous. Emily Dickinson: "I must go in, the fog is rising." Thomas Edison: "It is very beautiful over there." Steve Jobs: "Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow!" Ludwig von Beethoven: "Friends applaud, the comedy is finished." The playwright Wilson Mizner (after a priest said to him I am sure you want to talk to me): "Why should I talk to you? I've been speaking to your boss." And my personal favorite, Oscar Wilde: "Either that wallpaper goes or I do."

In our legal system, a death bed declaration can be admitted into evidence in court. We expect only the deepest form of honesty in those closing moments. Perhaps we value these words so much because we recognize there are so precious few words left for this person. Perhaps we value these words because it gives the person an opportunity to share any of the wisdom they have gleaned from a lifetime of experience. Perhaps we value them because somehow we believe that someone teetering on the

edge of eternity just might be able to sneak a peek over the edge and bring us a vision from the other side.

On the night before he is crucified Jesus shares the Last Supper with his disciples, and John gives us Jesus' farewell discourse. In the three chapters of scripture that encompass this parting message, Jesus is preparing his followers for the storm that is to come in the days ahead. He teaches them of service and humility by washing their feet. He nourishes them with his body and blood in the bread and wine of their meal together. He warns them of the treachery and turmoil that are to come. And then he offers these words of promise, words of promise so strong they are virtually words of protest, challenging the ultimate authority of all that stands against them.

There is a tombstone in a graveyard in New England for a woman who was survived by her husband. The husband had the following inscription placed upon the stone; "It is fearful to love what death can touch." The disciples are about to have the taste of bread and wine in their mouths replaced with the taste of fear, the fear that comes when you realize you are about to lose someone who has been central in your life. Jesus brings them these words "Do not let your hearts be troubled," or perhaps a more accurate translation of the Greek would be "Do not let your hearts be shaken."

Their world is about to be turned upside down with chaos and violence. Jesus provides them with this rather odd message that even though in the hours to come he will appear to have absolutely no control, he is still in control of all of the outcomes. He may be dragged away,

imprisoned, beaten, and crucified until death, but that is only the beginning of his journey to prepare a place for his disciples and for us.

Jesus makes this journey to his death, as each one of us and everyone we love must. Yes, it is a fearful thing that death will touch us and everyone we ever have or ever will love. Many of us have had that experience of being gathered around a bed waiting helplessly for what is to come, as a parent, or a spouse, or a loved one slips away. We know the vast powerlessness we have in the face of death. Too often it feels as if the person who is dying is on the precipice of a lonely abyss of nothingness and we often feel not too far behind with the realization that all our relationships in this world of ours are temporal.

But Jesus goes before us to prepare a place for us. It creates a picture in my mind. An Uber slows to the curb outside a brightly lit home. As you step from the car, your baggage in hand, the door swings open revealing smiling faces and outstretched arms. The heavy bags in your hands are whisked away and you are enveloped in welcomes and hugs. Your bedroom is sparkling clean with fresh flowers in a vase on the bureau, newly laundered sheets on the bed, and your favorite books and magazines on the nightstand. In the living room you are escorted to the most comfortable seat in the house where you are offered your favorite drink and hors d'oeuvres, as you sit by a roaring fire. The evening is spent sharing old stories and laughing as you feel the weight and stress of your long journey lifting from your shoulders. Your insides fill with a warm glow that comes when you are safe and in the midst of those who both truly know and love you, some of whom you have not seen for a very long time.

The first visit home from college perhaps. Or possibly a vacation to visit old friends. Many of us have memories such as these; of a time when we have been invited somewhere in which a place has been prepared for us; a comforting and joyous time indeed; especially when it is God doing the preparing and you never need leave. Imagine an eternal time when fear and death are flimsy and fleeting in the midst of dwelling within the loving glow of God.

Jesus has done all that can be done to prepare his disciples to live in this sometimes very scary world. He has loved them, and listened to them, and taught them. They have watched him bring healing and preach justice wherever they went. In these final moments together he is explaining his greatest gift to them, the gift that will conquer the forces of death for us all. The gift of the greatest freedom we have ever known. No longer will we need to deny the existence of death by seeking immortality in worldly prestige. No longer will we need to run and hide from death in a flurry of busyness and self-importance. No longer will we need to fear being permanently separated from our beloved ones. If we no longer need to fear death, what is there left to fear in all the universe?

Jesus, rightly, makes no promise that the journey of this life will be easy. He makes no promise that we will not make our share of missteps along the way. Immediately preceding this text Jesus announces how Simon Peter will deny him three times. What he does promise is that when accept the invitation to enter into his story, we are being invited on into eternity. No matter what may come, our journey will bring us to the warmest, safest, most loving place we have ever known...

So let us come to the table and be fed for all that awaits us. Let us join the story. Let us accept the invitation.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Thanks be to God. Amen.