

E5A 2023 John 14:1-14

One year in seminary, several of us found ourselves too far away for family Thanksgivings, so we celebrated with our own turkey dinner, in my apartment. I made the invitation partly to get rid of the free turkey I had gotten with grocery points, because it was taking up all the space in my freezer. But when we started planning the dinner, the downstairs neighbor beat me to offering the turkey that *she* had received for free as an employee of the grocery store. But she had never cooked a turkey before. So I wrote out step by step instructions, set the table, and concentrated on making side dishes. When it was time for dinner, they arrived with a beautiful, delicious turkey. My neighbor said, “Your instructions were perfect. This morning when we were ready to start cooking, we panicked, because the turkey wasn’t completely thawed yet. But then we looked at your directions, and they said, *don’t panic if the turkey isn’t completely thawed yet...* and then you went on to tell us what to do. It was like you were right there with us!”

The challenge of the Christian life is that we are called to abide in relationship with Jesus as if he were right there with us, like any other friend, coworker, and mentor, yet Jesus *isn’t* right there with us *physically* like any other companion is. I used to be jealous of the first the disciples, who did get three years of facetime with Jesus during his earthly ministry, because I thought it must have been so much easier for them to have faith in him. But the long farewell discourse in John’s gospel suggests that Jesus was deeply concerned about how those disciples were going to adjust from following him around the Judean countryside to following in him in spirit after his death, resurrection, and ascension. Multiple chapters of John’s gospel narrate the encouragement and instructions Jesus gave to the disciples his last night with them to prepare them for his departure.

Because we usually read the first few verses of today’s gospel at funerals, we may be used to thinking that Jesus is talking about going to heaven to prepare a room for each of them in the heavenly mansion where they will spend life after death. But his main concern is preparing them to live the rest of *this* life once he is no longer walking around on earth with them. The disciples have the advantage of not just having talked with Jesus, as we do in prayer, and having listened to Jesus, as we do when we read scripture, but also having walked with him, eaten meals with him, and watched him in action. Yet they are about to be in the same situation we always are, asking the same questions: *Lord, we can’t see you. We don’t know where you are going, so how can we know where we are supposed to go? How can we know your way?*

Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth, and the life...I have been with you all this time; you know me, so you do know my way.* Jesus was getting ready to leave, but he was not leaving the disciples unaware: He had taught and modeled God’s way of life to them for years. In case they hadn’t

been paying close enough attention, he spent his last evening with them spelling it out explicitly: *love one another as I have loved you...serve one another as I have served you...everyone will recognize that you are my disciples because you love the way I love.* Thomas is confused, worrying about where Jesus is going and how they can follow him there. But Jesus has already shown them the way; when they live how he taught them, they are living with him.

What Jesus is really doing in this passage is ministering to the disciples in their grief; he's just doing it before he's gone, before they start grieving his absence. Yet his words, *No one comes to the Father except through me* have often been taken not as a comfort but as a test or a barrier, as if Jesus is describing a cosmic game of Red Rover with him standing between humanity and God—*no one gets to the Father except through me!* Jesus makes his life an invitation, not a blockade. He promises that the way he has lived is faithful to God's intentions for human relationships. So, *if [we] know [Jesus], [we] will know [the] Father also*—no surprises; no finding out that God is hateful, angry, and vindictive, when Jesus is loving, merciful, and forgiving. Jesus' life reveals the character of the Father. That's comforting reassurance, not a threatening ultimatum.

Most of us first learned that the second commandment, do not take the Lord's name in vain, governs what we should and shouldn't yell when we stub a toe. But it also prohibits doing something totally inconsistent with what Jesus said and did while still claiming to do it in the name of God. Jesus tells us that if we want to know what God the Father is like and what God the Father wants us to do, then we should look to the Son of God, what he taught and how he lived. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, and our presence here suggests that we do, then we are called to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus had to give his first disciples, and by extension us, this encouragement—that he really had done things God's way—because he knew what challenges lay ahead of them. Jesus knew it would be tempting for his followers to use methods other than his merciful lovingkindness, selfless service, and peaceful resistance to try to get by in the world, even to try to make more disciples. But we can't claim we're accomplishing the Father's ends if we're using un-Jesusy means to get there.

Nobody is saying that following Jesus' way is easy or painless; after all, the original disciples were all martyred. But GI Joe taught my generation that knowing is half the battle—and Jesus promises us that we do know: We know the Father, because we know the Son. We know the way, because Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. May the Spirit empower us to follow Jesus' way, and may we travel it in confidence, trusting that we are already living with God as our home.