

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Building Blocks”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Easter 5—May 14, 2017

Lessons: 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Let your Gospel O God come to us not in word only but also in spirit and in truth and with much assurance. Amen.

In a world where there is too much suffering, where too many are sick and struggling in our world and in their families, the words of Jesus today speak to our deepest need. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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.* I have read those words, most often using the King James Version, at nearly every memorial service or funeral I've led. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

But I will tell you a secret. I usually stop there. I don't go on with the reading as I did today. I don't usually use the next lines in a funeral: *And you know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

For many people that verse is somewhat problematic. It sounds so exclusive. Does this mean that only those who embrace the Christian faith can be related to God? Does it mean that only those who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior can be saved? Does this mean that Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and everyone who came before Jesus or doesn't know Jesus is outside of God's realm? Does this passage doom to failure our continuing attempts to reach out to other religious traditions and to learn from them? We've talked about this at our Tuesday Bible study and I don't believe this is as exclusive as it sometimes seems.

Any interpretation of this verse must be done in light of the rest of Scripture beginning with this gospel where Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” We need to remain open to people who look, act, live, and even worship differently from us. They may be among those “other” sheep.

My friend Gene McAfee suggests that we should go further back in John's gospel: “to get a clearer understanding of who Jesus is for John, we turn, not to the fourteenth chapter of his gospel, but rather to the first, and its opening verses, which say this:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”

“That eternal, uncreated Word of God – which John identifies not only as being with God but actually being God – that infinite, eternal reality, for which John uses the Greek word *logos*, that is what John takes as the subject matter for his gospel, and he writes about it in its incarnate form, whom we know as Jesus. And it is that form of God – that eternal, infinite, divine truth, knowledge, love, and wisdom, all made flesh in Jesus the Christ – who is speaking in John's gospel whenever Jesus speaks.

“So this morning's text, a verse used for over twenty centuries to divide Christians from everyone else and to give us our sense of religious superiority to all other faiths, does, in fact, nothing of the sort. It does not say, as Christian theologians and preachers have so

often said, that you must be a Christian in order to be saved. It says, rather, that if you wish to come to God, you must do so through God. God is not simply the end, God is also the means – the only means – or, as John puts it in Jesus’s discourse, the eternal Word of God-in-Flesh is the way, the truth, and the life.”¹

The problem with many interpretations of this verse is that people have tended to assume that *we* are the ones who have come to God through Jesus and thus people of all other faiths—people who are different from us—have to believe the way we do if they want to be in communion with God. We’ve tended to interpret this verse in a kind of “my way or the highway” approach. But that is to claim more knowledge than we actually have. The Study Catechism which was approved by our Presbyterian General Assembly in 1998 says that “The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God.” It goes on to say: “How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world.” Jesus may be the “way, the truth and the life,” however the more time I read this passage, the more I wonder frankly if we ought to be feeling so smug after all. For how many of us actually live up to the call placed on us by Jesus?

Frankly, as we proclaim this verse, we should recognize that we have a long way to go as followers of Jesus. Frankly, when it comes to faithfulness, service, generosity, and a disciplined love for God, there is much we could learn from people who are different from us. Maybe in our dealings with people of other traditions we might show a greater humility that recognizes our own shortcomings, and that recognizes that we are, as Peter suggests, still infants in the faith, leaving room for discovering God’s presence already present with those from other traditions. Surely there is room for them in the Father’s house with its many dwelling places.

Alongside these famous words of Jesus in John’s gospel, we also have some lesser known words from the first letter of Peter. Peter speaks to a people who are displaced and dispossessed spiritually, religiously, socially, politically, economically, and yet for whom God is creating a new place. These are words that we need to hear over and again. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.... Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” We actually are the building blocks that God is using to create a whole new kind of house. That is something we need to hear today. So many voices in the world try to tell us that we aren’t good enough, smart enough, rich enough, dedicated enough, thin enough, successful enough. You can add to the list. From the perspective of faith we aren’t faithful enough either, yet God sees us an entirely different way. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. Can you believe it? That is who we are. We actually are the building blocks God is using to make God’s new house. Without you, it might fall down.

¹ Eugene C. McAfee, An Inclusive Christ, sermon preached at Faith united Church of Christ, Richmond Heights, OH. May 18, 2014

The church where I grew up started without a building and eventually had the challenge and joy of building a new church. The floors and the wall behind the communion table are brick and in my mind it is some of the most beautiful brick work I've ever seen and there is a reason why. When the builders were laying brick, every so often they would throw a brick away because it was badly shaped. They called these "clinkers." My father watched this one day and got to thinking about the kind of house that God would build. There would be room in it for the funny shaped people along side the seemingly perfect ones; there would be room for the wonderfully shaped, and for those with a bulge here or a divot there, and so he persuaded them to include those clinkers instead of throwing them away. The result is a magnificent brick wall, unlike any I've known. Whatever your shape or size, whether you are a clinker or not, you're a building block in God's house. We may not be faithful enough or good enough, but God is using us to build a house for all God's people.

Desmond Tutu tells a story about students who don't know the answers to exam questions but give it a try anyway and come up with what he calls "howlers." "Once in a scripture exam the students were asked, 'What did John the Baptist say to Jesus when He came to be baptized?' Well this chap did not know the answer but was going to have a shot at it and wrote, 'John the Baptist said to Jesus 'Remember you are the Son of God and behave like one!'"² Well, remember that you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Behave like one.

Let us pray: Gracious God, for limiting the reach of your grace forgive us. Help us to grow into salvation, as building blocks in your house for all people. Through Jesus Christ our savior we pray. Amen.

² Desmond M. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* © 1984 William B. Eerdmans