

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, May 10, 2020
The 5th Sunday of Easter & Mother's Day
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

Creator God, you have shaped a place for us
even as we worship this morning distant from one another.
Your place for us is filled with the whispers of the ancients
who followed you and sculpted our faith.
Breathe into each one of us this morning
that we may know your way, your truth, and your life.
Even though we are separated by physical space this day
help us remember we are never separated from your sacred space.
Amen.

A Prayer of the People

Holy One, we come before you, knowing that our world is hurting.
We want to believe you have great compassion for all your people.
We want to believe you have created a safe place, a refuge, for those who need it.
We pray that you guide them to that safe place,
even though right now it may be only in kairos time – your time,
not chronos time – calendar time, in this time of pandemic.
We believe there is a place for those who mourn and for those who hurt,
a place of comfort and a place of healing:
for those we have lost to illness, and those we have never known.
We believe there is a place for those who hunger and thirst,
a place of banquets and grace
for those who have lost their jobs and their businesses,
for those who are wondering if and when they can buy groceries,
for those who long to be with loved ones who are ill with this vicious virus.
And we pray for those who would deny the present reality
that they come to understand we are all in the same terrible storm,
but not in the same boat.
We pray in the name of the one and the many you have sent
to show us the way to renewed life even in this time of pandemic chaos.
Amen.

A Reading of Scripture – John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me also. 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. 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. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 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’? 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. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

John 14:1-14

A sermon based on John 14:1-14 “many dwelling places”

Pray with me. Ever available God, even if we are blind to your presence in our midst, remind us that the doors to your house are always open. Show us the rooms you have available for each of us, no matter who we are, or where we are on life’s journey. Amen.

It’s tough to say goodbye, isn’t it? Whether it’s goodbye after a nourishing visit with family and friends – that we can’t really have at the moment – or goodbye at the end of a marriage or relationship that has ended for difficult and painful reasons.... whether it’s goodbye at the graveside of a parent, or a sibling, or even more troubling, the graveside of one’s own child or grandchild. And especially now, in the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic, there have been far too many goodbyes.... from a distance.

Goodbye is not a word we like to say. Usually when I leave someone, I don’t say goodbye. I say, “I’ll see you later!”, not wanting to break the good connection I’ve established with whomever I’m leaving in that moment.

Our passage from the Gospel of John this morning is the beginning of what is known as Jesus’ “Fairwell Discourse” which starts in Chapter 14, verse 1 with the words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me also.” The Discourse ends with Chapter 16, verse 33 with the words, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

In these three decisive chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus offers his first disciples words of comfort in the midst of their current circumstances, assurances for the future, and the promise of a safe haven with God forever. He tells them, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6-7)

Jesus says goodbye to his disciples in many, many words, according to the Gospel of John – and they don’t get it. They remain locked in a literal room, with spiritual misunderstanding. They wonder how they can ever know the way to the place Jesus says he is going. And all the while, Jesus is trying to tell them of a spiritual home where there’s no need for a map for the journey, and where there are enough dwelling places – read rooms in some translations – for one and all to share.

The Gospel of John teaches that “through Jesus, life with God can be known, the truth of God is made available, and the life-giving powers of God are realized. Jesus’ work has been to witness to God’s way, truth, and life.”^[1] Part of that witness is to say goodbye, but for Jesus, “goodbye” is also “welcome home.”

Welcome to the home where there are more than enough places at the table, more than enough places to rest one’s weary head, more than enough places to find hope in one’s fallen spirit.... and peace in one’s broken heart.

More than enough.... cups overflowing, abundant life for one and all – such is the message of Jesus, as the Christ, as the Son of God.

BUT, there’s one verse in particular in our passage for this morning that has created much, I’ll call it “interpretational” havoc over the centuries. It is the verse just after Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Then he says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

For some Christians that says it all – clearly and succinctly it means for them that unless you are a Christian, and a Christian who believes that the Christian faith is the only way to God, the only path to heaven, as it were, then you’re not going to get there. The text reads, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

For the gospel writer, John, “these words express his unshakable belief in the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, decisively altering the relationship between God and humanity.

[For John] these words affirm that Jesus is the tangible presence of God in the world and that God the Father can be known only through that incarnate [meaning in the flesh of a human body] presence. Humanity’s encounter with Jesus the Son makes possible a new experience of God as the Father.

Yet the very clarity and decisiveness of [John's] conviction in these words have turned them into a weapon – with which to [beat over the head one's brothers and sisters who might not agree. These are the ones who do not share exactly the same interpretation and understanding of what it means to be in relation with God.]

These words are used as a test for Christian faith in many conversations and debates within the contemporary church. They are taken by some as the rallying cry of Christian triumph, proof positive that Christians have the corner on God and that people of any and all other faiths are condemned.

These words are seen by others as embarrassingly exclusionary and narrow-minded. They point to evidence of the problems inherent in asserting Christian faith claims in a pluralistic world, that's a world of many religions."^[2]

How are WE to interpret the central claim of John's gospel – his words that Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) I have to admit that I have had problems with these words – because I've met many wonderful, truly faithful people who don't consider themselves to be Christians, either because they profess another faith tradition or because they don't want to have anything to do with the Christians they've met!

The important point to keep in mind when considering this text and any text from the Bible is, I think, that we dare not try to make the words say things the writers of the words themselves never intended.

In the context of the words of John we heard this morning, that means we need to understand to whom John was writing. "Jesus' claim that 'no one comes to the Father except through me' is the joyous affirmation of a religious community that does, indeed, believe that God is available to them decisively in the incarnation, the in-the-flesh, of Jesus....

The claims made in this verse of John's gospel express the particularities of his knowledge and experience of God. Membership in the faith community for which he writes and which he envisions does indeed hinge on this claim....

His words say, 'This is who we are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ.'....

His claim becomes problematic when it is used to speak to questions that were never in his vision. To use these verses in a battle over the relative merits of the world's religions is to distort their theological heart.... The Gospel of John is not concerned with the fate, for example, of Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, nor with the

superiority or inferiority of Judaism or Christianity.... These verses are the confessional celebration of a particular faith community. [And this community is] convinced of the truth and life it has received in the incarnation of Jesus.

John's primary concern is the clarification and celebration of what it means to believe in Jesus. The faith vision he expresses points to the distinctiveness of Christian identity. It is as people shaped by this distinctiveness that Christians can take their place in conversations about world religion."^[3]

In other words, as Christians, we can truly believe in Jesus as the incarnate, in the body presence, of God, without demanding that all others must have the same experience of God in Jesus that we have.

Much of what I have said here are not my original thoughts. If you want to read these words again, I have them footnoted in the written copy of my sermon which I have sent out this morning in my "Sunday words." They are the thoughts of many people who have studied, pondered, reflected and deliberated over the on-going debate that exists in the church regarding the interpretation of the gospel message of John and the other gospel writers.

To put what I've said in concrete, and immediately relevant, terms for us, it would be like our saying, "Living on the midcoast of Maine and worshiping as we do in the Federated Church of Thomaston offers the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus as the Christ." I could certainly affirm that statement. For living here and worshiping with you is that for me. But I don't have to believe that EVERYONE must live here and worship with us to know what it means to be in good relation with God.

My sermon title today is "many dwelling places." My theme could be "Where is home? What is refuge?" Home for those of us who consider ourselves to be Christians is in Jesus' words, his deeds, his way of living, and in his dying and resurrection.

Our refuge is in God, as we know God through Jesus. But ours need not be the home and refuge of every single person in the world.

In this extremely difficult, challenging and fearful time in which we are living right now, can we find comfort in Jesus' words as they are told in the Gospel of John, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." (John 14:2) We are all invited. Come and dwell in God's house this day and always.

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Eve Anderson, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... and all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus. *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 10, 2020

from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church

This prayer was written by Rev. Magrey R. deVega, Senior Pastor of Hyde Park UMC in Tampa, FL. Shared by Beth DiCocco, Conference Director of Communications

Knowing that COVID-19 has made it impossible for many of us to be with our mothers in person on this Mothers Day, we offer this prayer:

God of Provision and Unconditional Love,

On this day when we acknowledge the importance of motherhood among us, we first give thanks that you are a loving parent to us all. From your being all life was born, and in your bosom all creation is nurtured. You have formed us in your image as your children, and gathered us together as a brood under your wing. You have united us as kindred members of one human family, and we are grateful to be your offspring together. We celebrate your divine love, reflected in human expressions of motherhood.

We give you thanks for the mothers among us, and ask that you strengthen them in their daily tasks. Grant them wisdom in the lessons they teach, patience in the discipline they foster, and persistence in their promotion of decency and compassion, both by word and example. May they be given the honor and thanks they deserve but often do not receive.

We thank you for all motherly figures: grandmothers, aunts, sisters, wives, step-mothers, foster mothers, guardians, babysitters, teachers, health care providers, neighbors, friends, loved ones, and many others, who practice self-sacrifice and embody compassion to all who are privileged to be in their influence. Grant them vigor to carry on their work, and the satisfaction that the holy privilege of their task affords.

We acknowledge to you, O God, that even amid our grateful celebration, many of us come with restless spirits, reluctant to name the difficulties of this day.

For some, this day brings the sorrowful awareness of their own inability to conceive biological children. Draw your tender spirit near their feelings of self-betrayal,

impotence, and grief, and remind them that those who struggle with infertility have always shared a special place in your heart. We pray for those who have suffered miscarriages, those fatigued by fertility treatments, and those struggling through the process of adoption. May they remember that in your power and through your church, they can still leave a lasting legacy beyond themselves.

For some, this day is marked by loneliness and grief, as they spend this first Mother's Day as a widower, an orphan, or a parent who has lost a child. To those who today live in the wake of the death of a loved one, grant glimpses of the resurrection. Bring to them a steady restoration of their broken hearts, allow them to live into their future with hope, and empower them to carry out the legacy of lessons instilled within them. For some, this is a day that surfaces ongoing tensions that exist within our personal relationships and family dynamics. We ask for healing from the wounds of our past, a path of forgiveness for wrongs both experienced and committed, and the rebuilding of trust forged in honesty, authenticity, and love.

We give you thanks for the wide spectrum of motherhood represented among us today: new mothers and young mothers whose children are in their most tender years; mothers of grown children who transition into empty nests and a new chapter of self-discovery; mothers and grandmothers of advanced years, whose twilight of life is marked by frailty of body but a potency of spirit. Theirs is a cumulative reminder that though our lives are marked by transition and change, your nurture and affection for all your children remains the same.

Therefore, remind us to live with a child-like faith, curious to every wondrous mystery, attentive to your every instruction, obedient to your every command, and willing to share with every one of your children. We give you thanks, O God, who is a loving Mother and Father to us all, and in whose name we pray, Amen.

A Benediction

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) for next Sunday, May 17, 2020

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Words to ponder today about mothers.....

"Life doesn't come with a manual, it comes with a mother." ~ Unknown

"All I am I owe to my mother." ~ George Washington

“Most mothers are instinctive philosophers.” ~ Harriet Beecher Stowe

“I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet, there would be no more wars.” ~ E. M. Forster

*“My mother had a great deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it.”
~ Mark Twain*

^[1]*The Whole People of God Weekly Worship Resources* for April 28, 2002, p. 39.

^[2]*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol IX, 1995, p. 743.

^[3]*Ibid.*, p. 744-745.