

“His Will and Way”

Psalm 31: 1-6; John 14: 1-14

Here is Jesus talking to his disciples at what we call the Last Supper, in the Bible verses from John. He knows it is their last meal together, before he gets crucified, but they don't.

One book I have compares these words of Jesus to a “last will and testament.” (Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, John, volume, Dennis E. Smith)

If we think of this Scripture passage that way, it is a beautiful, poetic, really lovely will and testament. It is not a dry, legal document like the ones we may have heard in our regular lives.

Jesus' words begin with reassurance—“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Or the King James Version: “Let not your hearts be troubled.” Or the Message version: “Set your troubled hearts at rest.”

What a kind and loving thing to say to this group, this bunch of rag-tag disciples, from a man who knows that he is facing death!

“Believe in God, believe also in me.” “Belief in God has new meaning in Jesus.” (The Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible). We can understand that better than the disciples, because we know Jesus as our Lord and Savior. They knew him personally, in the flesh, but had not really understood him as God's own Son.

“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? 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.” (verses 2-4)

There are different ways to understand these particular verses, and I would like to share two of them with you.

One is that “in heaven there is room for all . . . for heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all. . . in heaven you will never be shut out.” (The Gospel of John, volume 2, by William Barclay).

And oh, doesn't that sound welcoming, heaven as a place where all people can come, with room for everybody!

The other way to understand these verses is from a much different source. I am going to have to tell you, I got it off a T-shirt. Yes, I know that sounds silly. But hear me out, please.

The situation was that, several years back, I had taken a youth group to Branson for a “Young Christians Weekend.” I noticed some kid there wearing this T-shirt. I am thinking that on the back of it, there was a picture of a wooden cross, and the words: John 14: 2-3.

On the front, was written, “Don’t worry, Dad and I are fixing up a room for you in his house.”

It has been a while, but that T-shirt message has really stuck with me. I wish I had thought to find out how to buy one.

Anyway, can’t we just picture God and Jesus working to fix up a room for you, for me, for each Christian? I think of a bedroom freshly painted in just the right color, new curtains, brand new this and that, everything just so great. The idea really resonated with me, God and Jesus want me to come to heaven, and want me to feel at home there, and they are doing everything to make that happen.

Jesus also told his disciples that he was coming back to get them, so they could all be there, together. That is a welcome for you!

“So that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

When Jesus got to that part in this “will and testament,” something happened that usually doesn’t during such a thing—a question, this question from Thomas.

Yes, it was Thomas, the same one often called Doubting Thomas. He said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

To quote one author, “. . . the wonderful thing is that it was the question of a doubting man [Thomas] which [caused] one of the greatest things Jesus ever said.” (Barclay) “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

The way, the truth, and the life. That is great. It is a well-loved expression which helps us understand Jesus. In the Sanctuary in the Waverly church, there are banners with that verse hanging on the walls.

Jesus as the Way to heaven is not that hard to understand. But here is a great example of how that would look: “Suppose we are in a strange town and ask for directions. Suppose the person asked says: “Take the first to the right, and the second to the left. Cross the square, go past the church, take the third on the right and the road you want is the fourth on the left.” The chances are that we will be lost before we get half-way. But suppose the person we ask says: “Come, I’ll take you there.” In that case the person to us *is* the way, and we cannot miss it. That is what Jesus does for us. He does not only give advice and directions. He takes us by the hand and leads us; he strengthens us and guides us personally every day. He does not tell us about the way: he is the Way. (Barclay)

Jesus as the Truth may be a little more complicated than that. Jesus alone is really equipped to teach us the truth about God, about faith, and about everything, because he was and is perfectly good and moral. His whole life was one of truth.

Then, lastly, the Life. By being Christians, Jesus gives us life. Jesus gives us life eternal starting here in this world, and continuing on into heaven, forever and ever. If we think about it, that means that we are all on our way to heaven right now. No, I don’t mean that we are all going to die soon. I mean that our lives right now are blessed and tended to by God Almighty. It is not just a matter of heaven being the happy ending to the story. It is more like our lives right now, right here are good. That may sound excessively optimistic, given this rotten old pandemic we are having. It is true, though. God has a hand on our lives and is bringing goodness into them, some way, somehow.

I don’t know, perhaps in heaven we’ll find out that this pandemic was nothing compared to what could have happened.

In any event, as Christians, we do have our lives in Jesus.

Jesus’ next sentence is also pretty famous: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” “[Jesus] alone is the way to God. In [Jesus] alone we see what God is like; and [Jesus] alone can lead [people] into God’s presence without fear and without shame.” (Barclay).

Jesus kept on, but what do you know, another interruption, a request, this time from Philip! Jesus had been saying that he, Jesus, was the way to know and see God the Father.

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” (verse 8)

At this point, when Jesus answered this one, he began to sound frustrated:

“You’ve been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don’t understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act. Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, believe what you see—these works.” (The Message version of the Bible.)

That is a great explanation of Jesus’ whole life and ministry; God worked through Jesus’ life, every bit of it.

Jesus’ whole life, from leaving heaven to be born on this earth as a human baby and everything after that—his whole life was planned by God, worked and used by God.

And yes, we can see God, and what God is like, by looking at what Jesus said and did, his words, his miracles, everything!

Finally, Jesus gave his very last promises and predictions: “The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing. You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I’ll do it. That’s how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I’ll do.” (Message)

Pretty big promises! And yes, Jesus’ disciples did go on to great things. They started the Christian church, from that tiny little place in the Middle East, and it has spread all the way around the world.

So who knows what we might accomplish that is great and righteous and holy?!

Well, that is our Scripture lesson from the Gospel of John, today. Now I am going to share something this passage inspired me to do.

It is completely wacko, and so, please bear with me. On the day I worked on this sermon, I had a bit of a headache. No biggie. But, these days, even the tiniest, slightest symptom, like a bit of a headache, can alarm me.

So, in my studies and preparation, when I got to that idea of Jesus' "last will and testament," I was inspired to write one of my own. It is not official or legal, probably. I just felt like doing it.

Some of what I wrote had to do with division of and distribution of "my estate," all \$23.00 of it, and some funeral specifics. But the more important parts were about how I want to be remembered, and what I want for my "heirs."

Okay, here goes:

"I really hope people will say nice things about me, and have fond memories of me."

"I love each and every person I have mentioned by name, and I have tried to do my best by you, in all our lives and in this document."

"If my family wants to do anything in my memory, this is what I would like: Get along with each other, and live good, happy, Christian lives."

I am not telling you this for amusement, or so you will think I have really lost it.

I am hoping that, besides Jesus' words inspiring all of us to believe in him, ever more strongly, and have faith as good Christians, that besides all that, as important as it is, we can be inspired to live our own lives in ways that leave legacies of fondness, love, goodness, grace, forgiveness, righteousness and faith. That would be a wonderful way for us to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Amen.

Presented by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, May 10, 2020.