

Lauren Baske Davis
Sermon on John 14.1-4
First UCC Northfield
5.9.21

John 14:1-4

14 *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*

Sermon

Before I went to seminary, I worked as a Unit Director and Education Director at the Boys & Girls Club of Rochester, MN. While much of the point of the club was to be a place for kids to go that was safe, it was so much more than that. Our Executive Director would routinely tell us that we weren’t a “place.” We were a building a community that helped kids develop competence, usefulness, and to help kids gather their own sense of power and influence. But most of all, we were a community that gave kids, no matter who they were and where they came from, no matter what their story was, we provided a community with a sense of belonging.

As I helped kids go over what homework they had each afternoon, and was there to work through it with them, I’d overhear lots of conversation. But there was one sentence I never, ever heard: “where do you live?” The kids never asked each other, “Where do you live?” It was always, “where are you staying?” Even if some kids had stable, more permanent homes, other kids didn’t. A good portion of the kids there were residing in places that were temporary. So the language, the culture, expanded to be inclusive of everyone’s lives—so that no one felt less than. They *made room* for each other and the variety of lives they were living in that one phrase: where are you staying.

Now, it is important to name that the phrase “where are you staying”? as a sign, an expression, the result of years of institutional, systemic, and economic oppression, and racism—a product of white supremacy in America—something we must dismantle. Kids shouldn’t have to say that kind of phrase, ever. But the kids turned it and made it a phrase that meant, “we’re in this together. Some of us have more stability right now, some have less. We all have it in different ways and to varying degrees. But we are not going to judge one another’s living situations.” It was as if, in that one phrase, they were saying, “We are in this together, everyone belongs.”....

Another story for you: an article came out this week in *The New York Times*, that talked about the play between misinformation, social media, and societal change. It was titled, “‘Belonging is Stronger Than Facts:’ The Age of Misinformation.” The author, Max Fisher, wrote that people become prone to misinformation when “people feel a greater need for what social scientists call ingrouping—a belief that their social identity is a source of strength and superiority, and that other groups can be blamed for their problems.... In times of perceived conflict or social change, we seek security in groups, and that makes us eager to consume information, true or not.” By seeking approval from like-minded folks, especially online, humans bond by grouping up, then yelling at the other group. “In an ecosystem [social media]

Lauren Baske Davis
Sermon on John 14.1-4
First UCC Northfield
5.9.21

where that sense of identity conflict is all-consuming, ‘belonging is stronger than facts.’”¹ That tells us a lot. We have two examples, one positive, one not so much. For today, I think this one can tell us how powerful it is for humans to experience belonging.

Now why am I talking about belonging? Jesus didn’t mention it in the scripture today, does he? Let’s explore that. On the last night of his life with the disciples, Jesus had dinner with them, and began what is known in the Gospel of John as the “farewell discourse.” For those of us in Minnesota, we might know it as a Minnesota goodbye in that it’s remarkably long and drawn out. For five chapters, Jesus talked to his disciples at this last supper, which we hear part of in today’s passage. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said. “In my [Parent’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? ³ 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.”

“There are many dwelling places,” Jesus said. ...I go and prepare a place for you. Whether it is the Boys & Girls Club kids asking each other, “Where are you staying?” or the more negative example of social ingrouping and belonging over facts and change in *The New York Times*, all of these stories are about carving out a space.

What is interesting, is though it sure seems like Jesus is talking about a mansion in heaven as it’s commonly read, Jesus isn’t necessarily talking about a place. He’s talking about a space to dwell with his beloved disciples. What Jesus is trying to say is more about staying with one another in ways that are beyond physical space. It is about belonging, abiding, presence. Like the kids at the Boys & Girls Club, Jesus is saying, “I see you. I feel for you. You matter, and you belong. Especially—*especially*—when times are hard, or life is uncertain.”

We often read this text in the Easter season, but maybe more frequently, we read it at funerals. Jesus’ words are a message for the sorrowful, the traumatized, the vulnerable, the marginalized, the worried and anxious. I can’t say that I know *anyone* who isn’t carrying around some kind of pain or trauma, whether they talk about it or not.

So know this: at the height of his own sorrow and impending trauma and death, Jesus tells the disciples not to lose heart, to not be troubled. To take heart, in fact. He knows the disciples are about to experience drastic loss and disorientation. And in anticipation, Jesus gives them a state of mind or presence of heart—he’s giving them everything he can that they might need—despite the fact that the Romans are coming and there is a cross with his name on it. Change is coming for Jesus and the disciples, but the belonging, the love, the sense of abiding presence isn’t going to change, Jesus says. I am with you, I feel for you, you matter, and you belong and there is space for that. Even in hard and uncertain times.

Jesus words of love and comfort and belonging are not isolated platitudes. These are instructions for “when our dreams don’t come true, when the directions that we are following change, when doors are slammed in our face, or new doors opened.”^[2] These are words that

¹ New York Times, “‘Belonging is Stronger Than Facts:’ The Age of Misinformation” by Max Fisher 7 May 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/07/world/asia/misinformation-disinformation-fake-news.html>

Lauren Baske Davis
Sermon on John 14.1-4
First UCC Northfield
5.9.21

Speak to us in the in-between times in our lives or anytime we ask, "What now?" Do not let your hearts be troubled. I see you. I feel with you. I am making a space for you.

God's dwelling with us isn't about a place, though it's poetically told this way in our scripture. It's about abiding *with*. It's about expanding. Including. Just like the kids at Boys & Girls club changed the way they spoke to include those who would feel the most vulnerable. To abide with, to make another's heart a little less troubled, a bit more encouraged is to say, you have a place, I see you, I feel for you. You, in your questions, you in your in-betweens, you in your uncertainties, you in your pain, *you* belong.

And in this inclusive expansive belonging, it's not just for us. We have that kind of care within each one of us to share. We have the power of that belonging, that presence, that care in our community. Where there is love, compassion, the seeking of justice then we are expanding that dwelling space. That's what Jesus is saying in the scripture when he says "don't lose heart, I'm making a dwelling place for you." He's saying, "there is space for you, I see you, I feel for you. You are loved, always. You belong." It may not be a physical space, but it is most certainly a way to be.

I cannot think of a better scripture for a Sunday where we give thanks for the people who have been mothering or parenting in our own lives. I cannot think of a better scripture for a Sunday where we have expanded our community by two new members and two new confirmands. We get to dwell with God and one another, sharing in the love, compassion and justice of Jesus. We get to stretching the boundaries of community by making room for each other and making promises of love, support, belonging to one another. We get to do that, knowing that each person here has the capacity and power to grow that sense of welcome, support, relationship and belonging, no matter what the circumstances around us. May it be so. Amen.