

Sunday, May 14, 2017 - FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: "If you have seen me, then you have seen the Father also"

Scripture Readings: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 and John 14:1-14

Note: I am using the lectionary readings for this week. Whenever I don't have a sermon series, the lectionary becomes the default method for selecting scripture readings. I mention that because with John 14 we are back to the days just before Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospel reading for this week takes us back to holy week and – specifically – to the Thursday night meal. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, he has told of his betrayal (13:21), and he has given the "new commandment" (13:34) – namely, that "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And now this teaching.

1. What seems interesting to me – maybe you noticed it too – is that the more outspoken disciples (like Peter) have faded into the background and that the disciples who speak in these verses are ones who don't say much in the gospels: Thomas and Phillip. Thomas, who appears in John 20 with some skepticism about Jesus' resurrection and is therefore remembered as "doubting Thomas," interrupts Jesus here with a question: "Lord, we do not know where we are going, so how can we know the way?" (14:5). Reflect for a minute on what Thomas is saying. To us this might sound like more skepticism, but is it really? One scholar describes Thomas as "loyal, but dull," and his misunderstandings allow Jesus to spell out more clearly what he (Jesus) means. That's possible, but another possibility is that Jesus' friends are not accustomed to hearing about life after death, which is not a prominent Jewish teaching (then or now). What was Thomas puzzled about?
2. Vs. 6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." For many years Christians have interpreted these words to mean that no one can be saved without a belief in Jesus. Just so you know, I believe that's true – namely, that a belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is essential for our salvation. What concerns me here, though, is whether or not Jesus meant to say that in these circumstances. My friend Scott Hoezee, who is a teacher of preachers, puts it this way...

So when Jesus says "I am the way" in response to Thomas' question about what the "way" was, what Jesus was telling them was that the way to life abundant was down the path he was walking that very moment, and it was not a fast track to the top! Very soon the disciples will see Jesus crossed out by the Romans, writhing on a cross of despair, pain, dereliction, and finally death. Surely Thomas was not alone in wondering across the next couple of days, "If Jesus is the way, then how can his 'way' lead to anything good?" Golgotha surely won't look like the path to the heavenly "dwelling places" to which Jesus refers in John 14. The cross was the end of any "way" any sane person would want to travel. The cross was in fact not "the way" but "the dead end."

3. Before we leave vs. 6, I want you to notice that this is another in a series of "I am" statements we find in John's gospel. In the very next chapter Jesus says, "I am the true vine." In other chapters, he tells us that he is "the good shepherd," "the resurrection and the life," "the living water," etc. "I AM" of

course is the divine name given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, sometimes translated as “Yahweh” or “YHWH.” That Jesus makes use of this name throughout John’s gospel is certainly intentional and full of meaning. Surely, the disciples heard the usage and knew that Jesus was making a claim about himself. When you hear people say that Jesus was an extraordinary teacher, but never claimed to be God, you can remember the series of “I AM” sayings in the fourth gospel. Yes, Jesus made claims about himself and was put to death – at least in part – because of these claims to be more than simply a man.

4. I can’t end these sermon questions without a reference to Jesus’ “in my Father’s house are many dwelling places” comment vs. 2. I have used these words countless times at funeral services, and I remember them myself when I am confronted with the death of someone I know or the death of a loved one. Speaking personally, I want to know more. What will these dwelling places be like? Will I recognize others there whom I know in this life? etc. But – perhaps intentionally – the Bible does not give as much detail as we would like. As much as we would like more information about the life to come, the Bible (and especially Jesus’ teachings) urges us to stay focused on life right now. It is an uneasy tension, isn’t it? But for now we must stay focused on today, this moment, the people around us, the call to live a righteous life.