

¹Do 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." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Theological Perspective

The deep irony of John 14:1-7 is that words meant for comfort ("Do not let your hearts be troubled," v. 1) have been used recently for anything but. While they continue to be read as part of many funeral liturgies, they also crop up in many religious debates, especially those centered on the topic of who is in and who is out ("No one comes to the Father except through me," v. 6). What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples about the way forward and the nature of God, and how might we both benefit and be challenged by this?

The first point to make is to set this passage in context. The reader and teacher and preacher must remember that these are Jesus' parting words to his disciples. More specifically, Jesus has just told his followers that he is getting ready to go somewhere, the cross, where they cannot go, at least for now (13:36). So, naturally the disciples' hearts would be anxious regarding "the way." Like children about to be left by their parents, or students about to be abandoned by their instructor, the disciples need to be reassured that the future and *the way* to the future are still reliable, even after their leader leaves. This is *not* a passage exploring the possibility of other leaders and other paths. This is a passage for followers of Jesus who must now learn to trust in him, as they have all along been called to trust in God ("Believe in God,

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In this wonderfully comforting passage in John, Jesus assures his disciples that God has a home for them being prepared for their future. Furthermore, Jesus reveals that he is going back to his heavenly home to work with God in preparing this special place that has room for all.

In today's world, "home" is big business. There are numerous television programs, books, magazines, and social media sites that focus on home design, home landscaping, home furnishings, home location, even vacation homes in exotic parts of the globe. A range of educational degrees and certificate programs prepares persons to design homes, to build homes ranging from the most modest of dwellings to those costing millions of dollars, to assist home owners in renovating their existing properties, and to guide home owners in decorating any and every room in the house. The exterior of the house and the land surrounding the home are now considered as important as the comfort, efficiency, and beauty of the home's interior, and of course the "location, location, location" of our homes is perhaps the key consideration in home ownership.

What does the word "home" mean to you? To many people, home goes beyond just a physical place. It has come to represent an environment of safety and security, a place that promotes creativity

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John 14-17 comprises the Farewell Discourse, whose genre is testamentary literature. Recall the patriarchs on their deathbeds, bequeathing belongings and wisdom to their progeny (e.g., Isaac in Gen. 27 and Jacob in Gen. 48). Jesus has no material goods to dispense; instead, he gives his disciples peace (14:27) and the power to do even greater works than Jesus himself did during his earthly sojourn (14:12).

Using the second-person plural in 14:1, Jesus moves from personal conversation with one disciple (Peter, 13:36-38) to address the whole group. Notice, though, that they share only one heart: "Let not your [plural] heart [singular] be troubled" (the NRSV misleads here by incorrectly translating heart [*kardia*] in the plural). Like it or not, John insists that we are all in this together. The same sentence appears at 14:27b, forming a contained unit.

Why would their collective heart be troubled? Because, despite having heard Jesus repeatedly indicate that he was going to be lifted up on the cross (3:14; 8:28; and 12:32), the disciples cannot imagine life on earth without the earthly Jesus. They cannot, for the life of them or by the death of him, see how his departure could be good in any way. So Jesus says what he always does in John: "Trust me." Believe or trust language (*pisteuō*) occurs ninety-eight times in John, always as a verb, never as a noun (*pistis*).

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Jesus' assurance to his disciples, as he prepares to leave them, is complicated because it includes two key statements (vv. 2-3, 6): one perhaps the most comforting, and the other perhaps the most controversial of all Jesus' sayings.

On the one hand, Jesus' promise—that his Father's house has many dwelling places, that he goes to prepare a place for us, and that he will come again and take us to himself so we may be where Jesus is—is the hope by which many commend themselves and their beloved dead to God's care and commit their bodies to the grave.

On the other hand, some Christians, fearful for the eternal salvation of people either not baptized or whom they deem to believe incorrectly, wield Jesus' declaration, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6), to subdue Jews, Muslims, and especially other Christians into theological submission. Other Christians, trusting God to use countless ways to disclose God's very self to all the people of the world, are embarrassed and even alarmed that Jesus made such an apparently exclusive claim.

Approaching this passage as a "farewell discourse" further complicates preaching when it leads the preacher to look for formal argumentation and reasoning. Rather than cognitive, linear logic, we find

John 14:1-7

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believe also in me," v. 1). John 14 is no more meant to be a passage on religious pluralism than was Calvin's doctrine of predestination. This is a family conversation, a locker-room pep talk, a word of comfort and challenge for those who are *already following*.

Second, the main move Jesus makes is to remind the disciples that their future dwelling place is already here, *in his person*. This is the move the Johannine Jesus never tires of. Looking for water? I am here (John 4). Looking for bread? Here I am (John 6). Looking for a dwelling place, a mansion with room enough for all, maybe even a few who are not of this flock? Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (v. 6). No one comes to the Father except through *me*, *me* right in front of you, *me* now talking to you, *me* who makes the Father and the future known to you. The constant move of Jesus in John is to recognize our fears regarding the *future*, then ask us to overcome those by abiding in Jesus' presence with us *now*. Martha, unlike Thomas, trusted in Jesus' power for resurrection *in the future* ("I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," 11:24). Both Martha and Thomas are challenged to trust this possibility *in the present*: "I am the resurrection and the life. . . . Do you believe this?" (11:25-26).

Third, and maybe most important, if the church would use this passage to talk about Jesus' relationship to those who do not explicitly claim him as "their way," the church must do so only on the basis of its own experience of the nature of Jesus' presence. As Jesus both comforts and challenges the disciples not to fear, but to trust, so the church should refrain from beginning its conversations by stoking rather than assuaging others' fears. As Jesus gives space and time for all who misunderstand his purpose and his promises, so the church must live out similar patience toward all with whom it comes in contact. As Jesus challenges the disciples to stop worrying about his absence *in the future* in order to experience his way and life and truth *in the present*, so the church should stop trying to judge who will be out and who will be in *in the future*, and comfort and challenge one another with signs of God's presence *now*.

This seems to me to be the wise and appropriate approach of two recent documents in the life of the denomination to which I belong. In response to a debate about Jesus as the "unique" versus "only" Savior of the world, the first says:

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith,

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and growth, that encourages the deepening of relationships, and that allows you to be your true self.

In the book *Spirit of the Home: How to Make Your Home a Sanctuary*, author Jane Alexander notes:

This almost desperate interest in the external trappings of home—the newest colors, the latest furniture, the best cooker, the freshest curtains—disguises a more profound longing. In our hearts we want to come home to a real home. A real home is a place that nurtures us on every level. It gives us the creature comforts that make our bodies feel relaxed and comfortable. It provides the safety and serenity that allows our minds and emotions peace and security. Above all, it nourishes our soul.¹

Think about your own home and what it means to you. Ask yourself if and how your home nourishes your soul.

We assume that the home being prepared by God and Jesus is a home for the spirit, a home that will nourish the soul. Do we have to wait until Jesus comes back for us to have a place where the soul can grow and mature? Can we design an earthly environment that also cares for body, mind, heart, and spirit? Jesus has told us that the kingdom of heaven can begin for us while we are still on earth. Let us start by thinking what our heavenly home might be like. Can we envision a home that offers warmth, safety, security, love, hospitality? Will our spirits be nourished by rest, serenity, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, generosity, the overflowing of the presence of the Spirit? How can this vision of our heavenly home be translated to today as we live on earth? What can we do in our current lives to invite God to live with us and among us?

Spend some time in thought, meditation, and prayer concerning what you hope for in both your heavenly and earthly homes. What will allow your soul to grow and bring you to a closer relationship with God? What if God and Jesus took you in as a partner and consultant in designing the many rooms being prepared for all? What would be your contribution to the preparations? How would you design a space that would be uniquely yours, to reflect the special person God created you to be?

Alexander quotes psychotherapist Robert Sardello, who says, "The home is more than a box in which to live; it is a soul activity to be retrieved from the numbness of the world of modern objects. Each

1. Jane Alexander, *Spirit of the Home: How to Make Your Home a Sanctuary* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1999), 1.

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Trusting is a dynamic process. Any of the following meanings is tenable for verse 1b:

1. Trust in God and trust in me (in this case Jesus issues a command).
2. You (already) trust in God; now trust in me also.
3. You (already) trust in God, and you (already) trust in me.

Not only do the disciples share *one* heart; they also share *one* home (*oikia*), God's home. *Oikia* (4:53; 8:35; 11:1; 12:3) and the related word *oikos* (2:16-17; 11:20) occur frequently and significantly in this Gospel. John routinely invokes the language of home, of family, of radical intimacy. In fact, every relationship humans consider primary is alluded to: parent (2:3); spouse (4:16); bride, groom, and friend of the bridegroom (3:29); sibling (11:1); friend (15:15); child (8:35); and teacher (13:13). There is *one* house.

The one house, however, has many "dwelling places," which is not surprising, since we have heard from the beginning that Jesus is the Savior of the whole cosmos (*kosmos*, 4:42) that he helped to create (1:3) and that his crucifixion was all-inclusive: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). All (Gk. *pas*), not some. That is a lot of people, requiring many "abiding places" (*monai*, v. 2). *Monai* is a noun from the verb *menō*, to abide, one of John's favorite words (used thirty-seven times, most famously in the vine and branches speech of chap. 15). Throughout the Gospel, John invites the reader to abide with Jesus and therefore have life, eternal life, true life, which begins now (20:31). John 14:23 reads: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our abiding place [*monē*] with them" (my trans.).

Jesus prepares this "place" (*topos*) where we are all united in God's household by heading to the cross. There he births the church, God's home: "Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (19:27). After all, home is where the (singular) heart is. Church is a real place (*topos*), not a u-topia. Augustine proclaimed: "Our heart is restless until it finds rest in thee";¹ church is to be such a place.

Jesus comes and goes often in John. From the start, we know Jesus as "the one coming into the world" (1:9). His departure serves the goal of his eternal return whereby, thanks to the Paraclete, we

1. Soliloquies, 1.1.3 in Augustine: *Earlier Writings*, ed. J. H. S. Burleigh (London: SCM, 1953), 23.

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circular thought and the repetition of important themes punctuated by key words—coming, going, believing, knowing, abiding, loving. This is not a systematic treatise but the weaving together of the important thoughts Jesus urgently wants his friends to understand, because he knows that his way of being with them is ending, since he is on his way to the cross. The closest I come to this kind of speech is the rambling I did when my wife and I dropped off our daughter at college. I imagine John 14-17 as a conversation soldiers might have over dinner and drinks the night before battle, or even as the surge of energy many people experience as they approach death, rather than as constructive theology.

The key to proclamation is the imperative, "Believe . . . believe" (v. 1b), with *pisteuete* best translated as "trust." Jesus says, "Trust me," and assures the disciples that they can. The sermon should likewise assure the hearers to such a degree that the sermon leaves them trusting Jesus. Jesus overwhelms us with reasons to trust him! Jesus is intimately connected to God, whom he calls Father. Jesus knows that God's provision, which he describes as a "house" with "many dwelling places," is abundant for all who trust Jesus and follow him as *the way*. Jesus has "come again" in the resurrection; his return announces that not even death can separate Jesus and his own from God. Jesus provides a permanent place of abiding with God for all who trust him.

Our future is secure—and already underway! Jesus is so trustworthy that we can embrace a way of life marked by abiding with God in this world today, because in Jesus we know the truth and have life. His reference to "my Father's house" is to more than a heavenly residence after we die; Jesus is speaking of the relationship of indwelling between God and Jesus; Jesus assures us that his return to his Father makes it possible for us to be included and participate in the relationship that he and his Father share.

Trusting Jesus, we will not let our hearts be troubled. Jesus is not telling us not to be sad. Jesus' heart is troubled when he sees Mary weeping at Lazarus's tomb (11:33), when he realizes his hour has come (12:27), and earlier that evening, when he declares that one of his own will betray him (13:21). These instances point to agitation and disturbance in the face of the power of evil and death, rather than sadness. Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for being saddened by (the prospect of) his death, or us for grieving over our own deaths or the deaths of loved ones.

Rather, Jesus tells the disciples and us that, even when evil and death surround us and are having

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hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). . . . Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.¹

Or this from the Study Catechism:

Question 52. How should I treat non-Christians and people of other faith? **Answer:** As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord’s welcome and acceptance of me.²

These two responses seem to have gotten both the letter and the spirit of John 14 right.

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place of the house, each room, hallway, closet, stair and alcove is a distinct structure that animates different aspects of soul.²

Clues that might help us design our heavenly and early homes are experiences in our lives that currently or formerly have enriched our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls. In a recent discussion concerning “what home means to you” a group of clergywomen shared the following list: the comfort and safety of Grandmother’s house, watching Grandmother plait hair, the smell of pipe smoke, feeding the birds, the sight of an old rotary telephone, the taste of homemade biscuits, a place where you have to be taken in, the smell of bacon, finding your home within, a sense of contentment, the smell of Jergens lotion, having your own room that you could decorate any way you wanted to, enjoying art that feeds your spirit, a place to be creative, owning your own home, having a large garden, growing flowers, living with an extended family.

What would you add to this list? How can past memories, present realities, and future dreams help you design your own spiritual home? Involve the Holy Spirit in your quest. Ask the Spirit what the Spirit needs to be more a part of your living environment. Tour your home with an open heart and eye to what changes might be made to have a more “soulful” place. Your home may have some interesting suggestions.

Someone once said, “Dance like nobody’s watching; love like you’ve never been hurt. Sing like nobody’s listening; live like it’s heaven on earth.”³ Living like it is heaven on earth may bring our spiritual homes in heaven and earth closer together.

KATHERINE E. AMOS

Exegetical Perspective

will enjoy immediate, full, eternal unity with Jesus and, therefore, with God.

Enter Thomas, the Eeyore of the Fourth Gospel, who first appeared at 11:16 and who assumes the practical (veering toward the pessimistic) role and asks a fair question. On the heels of Jesus’ grandiloquent locution about abiding places and enigmatic travel plans, Thomas, in a voice somewhat weary but not yet despairing, cuts to the chase: “We do not know and we do not even know *how* to know” (sense of v. 5). How often do Jesus’ disciples plead either total or partial ignorance, such that they are excused from decision making or action? They are looking for seven habits, nine steps, or ten commandments, when the answer lies in intimate, if confusing and challenging relationships, the preeminent one being between Jesus and them. Jesus, for his part, is having none of it: “You know enough because you know *me*” (sense of v. 7). Train your eyes on me, and the path will always be true and life-giving. “I am the Way; that is, the truth and the life” (v. 6, my trans.). Here the words truth (*alētheia*) and life (*zōē*) are exegetical, further describing the meaning of the Way, rather than introducing two more separate features of Jesus.

John 14:6 may raise questions about Christian exclusivism. Contemporary interpreters should be cautioned to attend first to the original context before moving to our own. First, John repeatedly insists on the universal scope of Christ’s work (1:9; 4:42; 12:32); at 10:16 Jesus declares, somewhat enigmatically, that he has “other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” To some, John is the most universalistic of the Gospels. To others, who contend that the original first-century Johannine community was forged in stressful, sectarian circumstances that led John to think in binary, exclusive, oppositional categories, John is the most sectarian of the Gospels. Second, those who see in 14:6 a verse to use to convince unbelievers that they had better become Christian or suffer eternal exclusion from the kingdom of God should note that the Farewell Discourse is addressed to those who are *already* Christian, encouraging them to eschew the excuses for inefficacy and, instead, trust that we know enough and are equipped enough to do greater works than Jesus himself did.

JAIME CLARK-SOLES

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their way, we do not need to lose heart. Trusting that Jesus is intimately connected to God and doing God’s work, we rejoice in the seemingly evil events of Jesus’ hour as the completion of Jesus’ work of driving out the ruler of this world and drawing all people to himself (12:31–32). Calling that Friday “Good,” we trust that Jesus is present and working wherever evil and death hold sway, to the point that we participate in the work that Jesus is doing.

Jesus’ “I am” statement in 14:6 describes who Jesus is for the faithful: a leader who is on the way to life and, in fact, is the way to life with his Father, because Jesus, Word-made-flesh, makes known the *truth* he received from his Father. Since our goal is to leave our hearers trusting Jesus, we dare not preach 14:6 as either a theological claim that people must accept or a declaration of Christianity’s exclusive stance in relation to other religions. Jesus’ life, glorification, death, resurrection, and return to the Father were to benefit the world by bringing us abundant life.

The church possesses and proclaims *particularity* rather than *exclusivity*. In Jesus, God’s tangible presence in the world, we know and experience God in a particular way that Jesus calls “my Father.” We know God through the way of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. We come to the Father through Jesus and make Jesus known to all who will hear of him. We proclaim Jesus to any and all who will listen as the one way to God, in that he is the way we know and trust, even as we trust the God made known in Jesus to handle the future of all who have not heard, will not hear, or have heard of and embraced another way to God.

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1. Office of Theology and Worship, “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (USA), 2002), 11–12.

2. *The Study Catechism* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1998), 12–13.

2. Alexander, *Spirit of the Home*, 8, citing Robert Sardello, *Facing the World with Soul* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1992).

3. Various attributed to Mark Twain, Satchel Paige, William Purkey, Susanna Clark, and Richard Leigh. See <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/02/02/dance/>; accessed June 2, 2014.