

A SIMPLE GOSPEL A SERMON ON JOHN 14:1-14

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Lent begins on Wednesday. Historically, this season has been a time of fasting and preparation. The preparation came in the early church, when prospective members would make this season the time for their last preparations before joining the church. The practice of fasting and other acts of self-denial during this season is designed to remind us of the self-denial of Christ during his earthly ministry. During this season, as we prepare for the celebration of Easter, we will focus on a very special part of Scripture. Chapters 14-17 of John's gospel give us the Last Discourse and High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. This is the special conversation Jesus had with his disciples as they were traveling from the upper room to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew that this would be the last time he would talk with his disciples before the crucifixion. He gave his disciples a message of hope and of challenge to carry them through the tough times and to prepare them for His victory through the resurrection and glorification. During this season of Lent, we will explore these four chapters of John's gospel as we prepare for Easter.

First, let's put ourselves back in time and place. Jesus and his disciples were in the upper room celebrating a quiet Passover meal. The disciples had just been arguing about who would be greatest in the kingdom when Jesus began to wash their feet. After this uncomfortable moment, Jesus gave them the command to love one another and then told them that one of them would betray him. As this chapter starts, Jesus has just predicted that Peter would deny him three times. Now we saw last week that chapter 13 communicates the command to love one another — love through action, love by receiving love, and loving the unlovable. However the events of chapter 13 undoubtedly left the disciples feeling uneasy and embarrassed. After all, they've just been shown that they're not the spiritual giants they thought they were. Their pretensions and pride have been exposed.

That's why Jesus starts this passage with these words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." Jesus is comforting his disciples. He's comforting because they know they've failed. They know they've blown it.... again. And they have no idea how bad they're about to fail. But Jesus does. Remember however, that Jesus doesn't measure us by our performance. Remember Ephesians 2:8-9 — "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no-one can boast."

Like the disciples, we too fail quite regularly. Although it is most painful when we fail in big and obvious ways, we also fail in all the subtle ways: engaging in gossip under the guise of “keeping people informed”; judging others by drawing conclusions about their motivations without ever asking them; blaming our problems on other people so we don’t have to face our own shortcomings. Yes, we too, fail regularly and we too need the comfort that only Jesus brings through trusting in him and his words to us.

The comfort that Jesus shows his disciples is that the life of discipleship is much simpler than we want to make it. Look at verse 4. Jesus says, “You know the way to the place where I am going.” Not “You will know the way” or “Eventually, the way will become clear to you” but “You know the way.” Presently, right now, you know the way. These disciples have been with him for three years, they’ve seen the miracles and heard the teachings. They’ve come to believe that He is the Messiah. Jesus says that they’ve got everything in their hands they know the way.

I love the response here. Good old Thomas pipes up. Remember when we saw him last? It was right before Jesus returned to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus was going into the heart of danger, where enemies plotted his destruction. Thomas’ bold response was “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas’ straightforwardness is refreshing and honest and real. In verse 5, he says, “Lord, we don’t know where you’re going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus clarifies by saying “I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the father except through me.” The way has been in front of you for three years, Thomas. The way isn’t about something you do; it’s about a relationship you have. By knowing Jesus, we automatically know the father. We cannot ignore this statement — Jesus says he is *the* way, not a way, but *the* way. This is in agreement with what Jesus says elsewhere in the gospel — look at John 3:16-21. I know a lot of people are uncomfortable with such language. There are those who feel like if we really teach this then we’re being judgmental. Remember that God said it, I didn’t. Let me try to ease your hearts — first, God alone is the judge. It is not our place to determine if someone really loves him or not. Second, the Bible is God’s message for us — it primarily challenges our own hearts. We need to ask ourselves, “Do I believe this, and do I believe it enough that it affects how I live?” Third, our job is to share what God has done in our lives and point people to the Scriptures. Our job, in terms of our core values, is to Witness to the great things God has done through Jesus. We don’t have to figure out where someone is in his or her relationship with Jesus, we simply are told to share our story and proclaim the good news that through faith in Jesus, we can have a personal and loving relationship with God.

The disciples, like most of us, have a hard time believing it's that simple. Simply believe in Jesus Christ and love him and that's it? This time it's Philip who jumps in with "Lord, show us the father and that will be enough for us." Jesus says to Philip, "You've been with me all this time, surely you get it by now — if you know me you know my Father. You heard my words and you saw my works — believe based off of them." It's the same for us today — we have a record of Jesus words and a record of Jesus' works — these are the basis of our belief. Can it really be so simple?

Yes, it can and is that simple. And look at the promise that comes with such simple faith — verse 12. Jesus promises that anyone who has such a faith will do greater things than Jesus himself. That is, anyone who has faith that is grounded in the words and works of Jesus as attested to in the scriptures. But what are these greater things? Certainly not miracles, that is obvious. But remember that every word Jesus said and every work he did was to proclaim the kingdom of God. The greater works we do will be to proclaim the kingdom of God across the whole world. Jesus, in his earthly body, was limited by time and space. However through his body the church, Jesus is able to stretch around the world. We have the privilege of watching hearts be changed, of helping people discover grace and freedom, of sharing the story of what Christ has done in us and what he can do in other people. The greater things are that we are able to proclaim the simple truth of Christ and watch the kingdom expand in greater ways than Jesus and his disciples ever saw.

Next week we'll look at how God works in us to expand his kingdom. Next week, we'll find out about the Holy Spirit: how he lives in us and what he does for us. Until then, let us contemplate this very simple truth — that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Let us bear witness to that truth in our inner and outer lives this week. Amen.