

Texts: John 14: 1-14 and Acts 7:51-60

We have to forgive the disciples their obtuseness. If you had a person stand in front of you, a person you know

Gets hungry, like you do

Gets angry, like you do

Gets tired, like you do

Needs to take an afternoon nap sometimes, like you do

Needs to go off by himself once in a while, like you do

And one day gets down on his knees and washes your feet . . .

If this person said to us “Now because you know me you also know God”

Maybe we too would be a little confused

Maybe we too would have a few questions

Maybe we too would find it hard to let go of ideas we had grown up with

Ideas of what “God” is like.

The disciples probably had pictures in their head, like we do, of what God is like. Jesus doesn't fit that picture. To use the word “Father” for God had actually been very rare in the Hebrew thought of the OT. We hear it so often now, that maybe we can't believe that it hasn't always been there. But it was not the common way to address God, and the way Jesus conveys a sense of warm intimacy with Holy God with the use of “Abba” (Daddy?) It was just ... uncomfortable, I guess.

Maybe we too would be like Philip and Thomas, as they are described in this passage, saying: “We do not know what is happening here. How can we know? Show us more; show us more clearly!”

Isn't it interesting that after all Jesus' years of companionship with them, after three solid years of being with him, seeing bent women straighten up, and lame men begin to walk, and hearts broken open, these disciples still find it hard to wrap their minds around what is happening, and how Jesus, the one talking with them, can be the way, the truth and the life.

So we get this so interesting conversation, which sounds almost like an argument.

Jesus: “You know the way”

Thomas: “We do not know the way. How can we know the way?”

Jesus: “But you have been with me! How can you say you do not know?”

Part of the confusion may arise because Jesus talks about a “place”: “In my father’s house are many dwelling places” and “I go to prepare a place for you.” The disciples, like many of us, are literally minded. We think of brick and mortar, doors and window openings, on a street, maybe a pearly street, preferable with gold somewhere. What if Jesus is thinking not so much of a geography, but a relationship, as in John 1: 18 : “It is the Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known.” Another way to translate it would be “close to the Father’s bosom.”

In this bosom are many places to dwell, many places to abide, much room for communion.

Jesus is saying: “YOU ARE WELCOME into this bosom.”

I wonder why it’s so hard for those disciples, and likewise us, to believe that we are indeed welcome into this place, near the bosom of God.

Evidence of how little we understand this welcome is how we have treated and used the words that come next: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

We have just heard the most incredible invitation: to come close to the bosom of a loving God.

And we know that over and over again people of Christian faith, having just been welcomed into this most incredible place, have turned around and acted as if we somehow own that place. We have taken this invitation, which we do not even understand, and used it against others we deem as not suitable to join us. The words “No one comes to the Father except through me” have become a weapon used to judge and exclude people who are not like us, people whose lives don’t look like ours. I am speaking now in a confessional way about what I have experienced both in myself and in some of my brothers and sisters in faith.

I’m going to be bold and say, also in a confessional stance: *How little do we know the bosom of God.*

These words were not intended to be used against people. Jesus is talking to his disciples who have been raised in Jewish faith. He is talking about the God they have worshipped. He is not teaching a world religions class. It would be more helpful to hear this sentence as: “*None of you* disciples, who have walked with me for 3 years now, will know the Father if you cannot see the Father in me, in the way I have lived and taught, in the way I have stretched out my arms and longed to gather unto myself all the lost and abandoned and excluded ones. What you saw me do: that is what God is like. If you can’t accept what I have done as the work of God, you cannot know the Father.”

It is sobering for us in the church, when we are tempted to judge and exclude those not like us, to remember that the group of people Jesus had the harshest, excluding words for were those very conscientious ones who carefully separated out 1/10th of everything, even the herbs growing in their back yards, the cumin, and the mint, but neglected mercy and justice.

We simply do not know how Jesus would have answered our, 21st century questions about world religions. If we plucked him out of 1st century Palestine and brought him here, regardless of what anyone said they “believed”, I suspect Jesus would ask some questions about how we love, how we forgive, who we include and who we exclude.

It was Jesus’ humility, his complete identity with the outcasts and his forgiveness, after all, that was the part the disciples and crowds couldn’t get their minds around:

When children wanted to come to Jesus, the disciples tried to stop them.

When Bartimaeus the blind beggar called out to Jesus, the crowds following Jesus told him to be quiet.

When Zaccheus was invited to come down from the tree, the crowds interested in Jesus were incensed.

When Jesus let a sinful woman touch him religious leaders were affronted.

What did the disciples then make of him praying for the forgiveness of those putting him to death?

Jesus simply burst everything they had been taught about what righteousness should look like.

Which brings us to the story of Stephen, post-Golgotha, post-resurrection. Stephen confronts his own people with both their culpability in resisting God’s chosen one, and the good news of Jesus. Let’s hope it was done in an inviting tone! In the end, his listeners are enraged, and put him to death. With his last breath Stephen imitates Jesus, praying that this sin not be held against them. However much Stephen has grasped, he has grasped this: God in Christ, is the only one permitted to judge, even those who murder.

And there we have it, the utterly unique and challenging nature of the Christian faith: it both pins us to the wall with our own culpability *and* invites us in. We could just as well be that crowd Stephen addresses: In the way we have used Jesus’ words as weapon, we too are stiff necked and uncircumcised in our hearts. We too oppose the Holy Spirit and persecute the prophets. There is every reason to “cast us out.” But at the same time as we are pinned to the wall, we are also invited into a house where all are welcome, even those who betray and murder the Righteous One, the One who cannot come in wrath, the One who cannot kill. And if we want to go into that place, to squeeze in beside whoever else wants to be there, we are welcome.

The gospel is both far more loving and far more painful than we probably want to admit.

And it is life, abundant. And we do know the way. Praise be to God.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

By (Rev) Cathy Stewart