

Sermon – May 10, 2020
“Show us the Father”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 14:1-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Christ is Risen!

Type in those responses!

Good morning to everyone and welcome again to the Northumberland Charge live stream from Afton UMC in Ophelia, Virginia. Thanks to everyone for stopping by this morning. I would like to thank the musicians who have blessed us again this morning. If you have been blessed by the gift of music, could you type a word of thanks into the comment line? And thanks also to the behind the scenes workers who make this live stream go so well.

It is Mother's Day and I would be remiss if I did not take a moment and give thanks and praise to God for my mother and for all of the mothers who have lived, loved, and cared for children, friends, and family across the ages. Praise God for mothers!

Over the last few weeks, we have become witnesses with the disciples and followers of Jesus to appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. We have been at the empty tomb, in the upper room, on the road to Emmaus, and by the sea with disciples when Jesus appeared. While these encounters with a risen Lord provide needed insights for the disciples and for us as believers, they also caused the disciples to look back and to reinterpret what Jesus told them before his resurrection. We often read the scripture with full knowledge of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples did not have that advantage, and so, as Jesus is appearing, they go back and look at key moments of Jesus' teaching and come to a new understanding of what he was telling them at the time in light of his resurrection. This morning's scripture is an example of such a moment. It was a time when Jesus is gathered at a table in fellowship with his disciples and has just told them he is leaving and they cannot go with him now. Their hearts are troubled and his words cause a great deal of uncertainty. I don't think the disciples grasped what

Jesus was telling them at the moment, but after the resurrection, as they began to recall and experience more of Jesus' words, they looked back at these key moments and wrote down what they learned that others might benefit from their experience. This is the teaching of the apostles.

The point where we enter the scripture this morning is just after Jesus has told his disciples plainly that he will be leaving them and that where he is going, they cannot yet come. Their hearts are troubled at this news Jesus shares, and it is to their sorrowful hearts that he speaks, telling them "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He goes on to give them encouragement to sustain them through the trials they will face, telling them to "Believe in God, believe also in Jesus." And then, very surprisingly, he tells them in his Father's house there are many dwelling places and that if it were not so, if there were not many places for them there, he would not have told them that he goes to prepare a place for them. And even better, he goes there to prepare places for them and will come back and take them to himself so that they may be with him. We need to look carefully at the word "dwelling" in our translations. The Latin Vulgate used a word that was translated in English as the 17th century word mansion. That word in the 17th century did not mean a large palatial home, but a humble place to dwell. So, Jesus is not telling the disciples we will be receiving a waterfront home on the crystal river that runs from the throne of God. Instead, Jesus is telling us we will have a place in heaven to reside or dwell with him. In John's Gospel, this is the virtue that is above all others, that we are able to remain with Jesus. Even death will not prevent us from abiding with our Lord. Jesus tells this to his discouraged disciples to prepare them for the trials they will face. We also have this same promise. Jesus has prepared a place for us to dwell with him. Whenever we are struggling in this life, we need to recall that this promise applies to us as it did to the disciples. This knowledge should change our approach to our earthly homes. They are not our permanent dwellings. We need to realize how temporary they are and to invest our time, talents, and efforts not into making our homes grand palaces. Instead, while joyfully looking forward to the dwelling place that Jesus has prepared for us, we are to work to see that as many people as possible are included in similar heavenly dwellings. We need to keep the idea that our earthly homes are temporary homes forefront in our minds. Yes, our homes need to be maintained to provide us shelter, but our focus and desire should be the permanent home we will occupy in heaven in the presence of the Father and Jesus. We, as those who know a risen Jesus, know that he has gone away and prepared places that are not temporary homes but lasting homes, eternal dwellings. In light of

this knowledge we should strive to change our now focus to a future focus, the joy of dwelling forever with Jesus. We need to meditate on what it means for us to have been told by Jesus that he will come again and take us to himself so that where he is, there we may be also. Paul tells us that what our eternal dwellings will be like has never entered the mind of humankind, yet we have been given this awesome promise of dwelling forever with Jesus. Jesus' resurrection gives us hope that this promise is being realized. The witnesses that speak of his return give us eyewitness accounts that speak to the realization of this promise of a forever home with Jesus. Such knowledge should be a source of comfort and great joy in our lives as well as a reprioritizing of our thoughts and desire for our earthly homes.

Jesus tells his disciples before he leaves them that he will come again and take us to himself, so that where he is, there we may be also. Here in Jesus' last discourse at the table in John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples plainly that he will come again and that they know the way to the place where he is going.

Do we? Do we know the way? Thomas asks Jesus the question so many of us may want to ask when we hear Jesus tell us we also know the way to this place. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Thomas is confused about what Jesus is telling them and he asks Jesus to help all of Jesus' disciples understand what Jesus means about the way to the place he is going. What is the road that they need to travel? Who will lead them to it? How will they find it if Jesus is gone? When should they go? They want to be reunited with Jesus but don't understand what he is telling them.

Jesus' answer to Thomas' question is one of the most discussed scriptures in the Gospel of John. Jesus says to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What is the "Way" that Jesus is speaking of here? Many years ago, my mother read to me a book about a Pilgrim, and I in turn read that book to our girls. I am sure many of you also have read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It contains one of the most helpful discussions about the "Way" that I have become aware of, as Bunyan places this scripture into the context of his story about a pilgrim named Christian and his progress in his pilgrimage to the Crystal City. It occurs in the story at the point when Christian suddenly encounters two fellow travelers who tumble onto the path Christian is following. They arrive not by coming in at the gate and following the narrow path Christian is holding to, but by climbing over the wall that keeps people from entering the narrow way. Christian joins with them and

asks why they have not come in at the Gate. These two men, whom Bunyan names Formalist and Hypocrisy, reply that all of their countrymen climb in over the wall as it is seen as too far to go to the Gate to enter the narrow way. Christian is concerned that the Lord of the city will count their entry as a trespass against his revealed will. These two men tell him not to worry, this has been their countrymen's approach for thousands of years and they could support what they do with testimony to its success if needed. At one point in the conversation, Christian tells these two that he walks by the rule of his Master: they walk by the rude working of their fancies. They don't bother to answer Christian but go on with him for a time on the narrow way until they come to the Hill of Difficulty. There they choose paths other than the narrow way, one taking a path called Danger and the other taking a path called Destruction. They assume these paths will meet up again with the narrow way and since the Hill of Difficulty looks very difficult to travel, they leave the narrow way for these easier paths. These two travelers are not seen again by Christian. If you have never read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, let me recommend that you find a copy and read it soon. The point is that Jesus does not show the Way, nor is it a path. Jesus is the Way. Jesus is the Truth, and Jesus is the Life. This is who Jesus is, and for us to follow him is to live in the Way that he lived. That life is the way to Jesus. God's gift to us is Jesus, who is God and fully reveals God to us, and through him God makes a way for us to come to the Father. The Way is not just belief in Jesus. It is not just us waiting for Jesus to come and take us to the place he has prepared. It is us living in the way Jesus has asked us to live. This is why we study the scriptures, that we might come to understand how Jesus asked us to live and be enabled through the power of the Holy Spirit to live so that when he comes for us, we also might be found in the Way.

There is a tension in the scripture that we need to be aware of when we begin to think about Jesus as the way to the Father. Yes, Jesus does say that no one comes to the Father except through him. Jesus does not say that he is **A** way to the Father or one of many ways to the Father. Jesus declares himself **the** Way to the Father. There may be good acts that benefit humanity done in other ways, but Jesus is the only way that leads to the Father. This claim does not stand alone. There is another part to Jesus' claim that we need to connect to his being the Way to the Father. In John 6:44 we find, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; (6:44a)." The connection we need to make is that Jesus is the way to the Father, but only the Father can draw people to the Son. So only the Father can draw or bring people to

Jesus, and only Jesus can bring people to the Father. It is the Father who gives those whom Jesus in turn brings to the Father. This drawing and bringing are open to all who hear the word. Jesus is the Door, and it is through him that if anyone will go, they will find salvation, but all people are drawn to him by the Father. The disciples do not yet understand this. They will learn it at the cross and the resurrection and the events that follow at Pentecost and beyond.

This exclusive claim is one that our culture and many Christians have difficulty accepting, and they struggle with the idea of how Jesus is the only way to the Father. They will ask what happens to those who have not heard, what happens to those who decide that there are other ways, like the two men in Bunyan's story who climbed over the wall to join Christian on his narrow way journey to the Crystal City. I have two comments to share on this idea this morning. First, I cannot answer the question of what happens to those who never hear the Gospel. I am not God, but I trust Him as a righteous judge to deal with them out of the depths of His steadfast love. I am not their judge. I do believe that I am to do all I can to share the Good News with those to whom I am sent. I believe this is a priority for every believer, and we should have a great sense of urgency for those whom we know who do not know Jesus as their Lord, and who are not seeking to live in the Way that leads to the Father. That they would come to know Jesus as Lord should be the cry of our hearts in our prayers. It should be our hope and desire for all whom the Father draws to Jesus. My answer in part is that God does the drawing, Jesus is available to bring them to the Father and I, as part of the body of Christ, am to be diligent in seeking the lost.

The second aspect of my response to this question comes from E. Stanley Jones's book, "Christ of the Indian Road." E. Stanley Jones was a missionary sent by God to share the Gospel with the people of India. He had many opportunities to contemplate this question as he worked among the people of India. One of the conclusions that E. Stanley Jones comes to as he encounters the challenges of sharing the Gospel in a primarily Hindu nation is that Jesus Christ is permeating everything. By this he means Christ is at work in all places through all things to bring people to the Father. How that occurs and to what extent that process is complete is different for every circumstance, but in all things, he found Christ at work transforming the world. His comments changed how I think about this question, changing it from "What happens to people who are seeking God in other ways?" to "Where is Jesus becoming visible in other ways?" and "Where I am called to be in those places to help point the way to Jesus?" Each of us

should be open to God's call in our own lives to go to a neighbor, friend, loved one, or even a distant mission field where God is calling us to go and share the Good News. It is not uncommon for someone who is sharing the Gospel in a Muslim country to be told by the person they are telling about Jesus, "so that is his name." They have already met Jesus. He has come to them in their search for God as he permeates everything in their life. God is drawing all people to Jesus and Jesus is the Way to the Father. We are the body of Christ here in this place and should be diligent in becoming prepared and in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with all we encounter and are led to by the Holy Spirit. The laborers are few and the harvest is ripe. Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send laborers into his ripe harvest.

When we hear this text, we should realize we are the body of Christ and ask ourselves, "What do we need to change to participate more effectively in God's harvest?" We need to reflect on the words of scripture we hear and look in their light into our hearts and see if we are those who are seeking to live out our lives in the Way as Jesus revealed it to his disciples. We should begin our day by opening ourselves up to be used of God for his kingdom. We are the body of Christ here in this place, and if people are being drawn to Jesus, we need to find them, love them, walk with them, and teach them about Jesus Christ that they may find the Way to the Father. Throughout our day, our constant prayer should be asking the Holy Spirit to guide us to people whom God is drawing to Christ. As we close our day, we should give thanks for having been a laborer in God's harvest and allow the Holy Spirit to identify anything in us that needs to be changed that we might be more effective servants. We should be open to allowing the Holy Spirit to identify and change anything that is keeping us from laboring in the Lord's ripe harvest. These are our daily needs for repentance, forgiveness, and openness to change that we might be laborers in the Lord's harvest.

As a church, we need to be seeking to be God's people right here right now. We need to look to the witnesses in the scripture we are blessed to have available of Jesus' life and seek to encourage each other to emulate his life. We need to become a people aware that there are dwelling places prepared for us in heaven with Jesus and to allow the joy that comes with that promise to become an outward expression all may see. As part of the body of Christ, we should be coming together in any way that our current situation will allow and seeking to grow in our knowledge of who Jesus Christ is and how he lived that we too may seek anew to live that way. Our goal should be to be known as a people who are filled with joy and ready to share the reason

for that joy. Our goal is to be those whose lives point the Way to the Father as they reflect the life of Christ more perfectly, more completely every day.

Pray with me: Jesus, I thank you for preparing a dwelling place for me to live in your presence forever. Lord, fill me with the joy that comes with that knowledge. Lord, lead me into a deeper understanding of who you are and how my life needs to change to be a truer reflection of you. Lord, give me courage to be your witness to those I meet each day. Amen.