

John 14:1-14
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Do not let your hearts be troubled.

I wonder how many people needed to hear that verse this week. I know that many Roman Catholics are still troubled over the issue of clergy abuse and the church's accountability. A new report came out this week which blamed the sexual revolution for a rise in sexual abuse by priests, saying clerics were swept up by a tide of "deviant behavior" that became more socially acceptable in the 1960s and 1970s. The report also said that the Catholic seminaries did a poor job of preparing priests "to live a life of chaste celibacy." Advocates for victims of child abuse expressed outrage that the report stressed social factors instead of human responsibility and church accountability for its priests, which they saw as an attempt to shift blame. Small comfort for those who were abused.

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I wonder whether Maria Shriver finds any consolation in this verse after learning of her husband's scandalous behavior with one of the family's employees.

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I wonder whether the Irish people some satisfaction in this verse when Queen Elizabeth offered "sympathy" not apology to all who suffered as a result of the troubled relations between England and Ireland.

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I wonder whether the recent college graduates feel any solace in this verse. A new survey of college graduates from the last five years finds that the Great Recession has hit them hard, forcing them into low paying jobs often unrelated to their educations and leaving half of them expecting less financial success than their parents.

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I needed to hear those words this week. More bad news about my brother's health and marital issues with one of my siblings has made me a bit forlorn. As a minister, I have read this passage many times to persons who were grieved or dying. This passage has always been meant to be a source of comfort to the mystery of this life and the afterlife. Why is it that we at times find no comfort in it?

This sent me into some deep introspection of my own. Where does my comfort come? As I was pondering this, I remembered the first time I was presented with grief and death and how I moved through that time. I was fifteen years old when my paternal grandmother died. She was the first significant person in my life who died. It troubled me. Where did grandma go? Is this the end for her? I didn't turn to this passage from John but to an organ piece, entitled Psalm-Prelude, No. 1 by Herbert Howells. It is almost seven minutes long. The piece directed my thoughts with first a reflective theme (a time to voice my memories), then a longing theme (a time to voice my lost), then a growing and ascending theme, (a time of considering the mystery of death and the translation to glory), then back to a reflective theme (which brought me peace not that the world gives but what God gives). The piece based on the Psalms was what I needed to live with grief and move through grief---grief which I did not understand. What is so beautiful about the Psalms in the Bible is that they express to God every human emotion: joy, grief, anger, you name it. That is why I like to read, sing and listen to the Psalms. They are food for the journey of faith.

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When Jesus offered these words to the disciples, he sensed they were troubled over his impending death or maybe death in general. I don't know whether these words were any comfort for the disciples at the time. Yet, Jesus took the time with them to explain the concept of grief and death, and the peace and comfort that follows. Allow me to speak to some of the phrases of this passage.

First, "In my Father's House there are many dwelling places." The early church Fathers struggled over the interpretation of whether there are

particular levels in heaven. I think Jesus was simply trying to say that there is room for all in heaven. Don't worry about being kept out or even left out unlike what our friend Harold Camping predicted this past week. While it is true that an earthly dwelling can hold just so many guests; a hotel can hold just so many travelers, but heaven has more square footage than any architect can comprehend. In other words, people may shut their doors on you, but in heaven you will never be shut out. There are many rooms.

Second, "I am going to prepare a place for you." In this verse, Jesus is basically naming himself as the forerunner. He is the one who goes before us, and as the Easter hymn states, "Christ has opened paradise." Alleluia! There is a very practical illustration here from which we get our world forerunner. In ancient Greek times, we are told that the harbor of Alexandria was very difficult to approach. So when the ships came in, a little pilot boat would guide them along the channel to safe waters. That is what Jesus did. He blazed a trail to heaven so that we may someday follow his footsteps. He was the forerunner who prepares a place for us.

Lastly, Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth and the life." In Jewish thought "the way" was spoken about a lot. Deut. 5:32-33: "You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you. Psalm 27:11: "Teach me your way, O Lord." These are but a few of the verses which reminded the Hebrews to walk in the way of God. Jesus said, "I am that way." How many times have we asked for directions and some guy says, "Cross at the square, past the church, take the third street on the right and the road you want is the fourth street on the left." Lot of us would have been lost before we got past the church. On the other hand, suppose someone says, I will take you there. In other words, this is the person who not only knows the way but shows you the way. Jesus may give advice and directions but also leads us, guides us. Jesus not only tells us about the way; He is the way.

Jesus said, "I am the truth." The book of Psalms, chapter 86, verse 11, it says: "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth." Many may have told us the truth but nobody has embodied it like Jesus. There are some occupations where a person's character does not affect his teaching, e.g. geometry or Latin verb conjugation. But if a person teaches moral truth, his or her character makes all the difference in the world. You

would catch on very quickly if a domineering person taught the discipline of humility, or the hoarding person who teaches the value of generosity, etc. Moral truth cannot be conveyed by words only; it must be conveyed by example. Jesus embodied truth. He lived by what he said.

Jesus said, "I am the life." Proverbs 6:23 says: The commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light; and the reproofs of discipline, the way you respond to the commandments and its teachings, are the way of life." In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, verse 18, a rich young ruler asked Jesus, How must I do to be saved, another way of saying how do I live a godly life? Jesus told him to direct his life in a way that it loves God and neighbor. The Apostle Paul said, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." It is safe to say we all are looking for that which is life-giving; the things that give us purpose and well-being. Sometimes the meaning of life comes from keeping the commandments.

To cite example, I think of the movie, As Good As It Gets. The Helen Hunt character asks the Jack Nicholson character, "Why do you love me?" And he says, "Because you make me a better man." Now you can snicker at that remark because a lot of smooth talkers have used it but love does bring life, the love of God and neighbor that is. The two greatest commandments. That is what Jesus does. Life with Jesus is life indeed.

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I don't fully understand why some people don't find comfort in these words of John 14. Is it that we are not bathed in scripture enough for these words to make any sense to us? That we don't know this person Jesus well enough to trust the words he says? Are we so caught up in this world of getting things now that we forget the relationship of the one who is leading us through the trouble of the day? Those victims of clergy abuse, Maria Shriver, the people of Ireland, college graduates or even me or you will never find the complete comfort from the situations which trouble us here on earth. However, those words of Jesus are meant to move us to where Jesus is. When it comes to matters of comfort from grief, death, abuse, or whatever in this life, I personally am banking on Jesus when I am called to

believe that which I cannot prove and to accept that which I cannot understand.

John Calvin, the Father of Reformed thought said: "It is one of the leading articles of faith---that our faith ought to be directed to Christ alone, that it may not wander through long windings, and that it ought to be fixed on him, that it may not waver in the mist of temptations. And this is the true proof of faith: when we never suffer (allow) ourselves to be torn away from Christ and from the promises which have been made to us in him."

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In the name of the one who created us, redeemed us and the one who sustains us in this life of faith be glory and honor, forever and ever.