

## John 14: 1-20

1 [Jesus said:] "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In [God'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? 3 And 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.

4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the [God] except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know [God] also. From now on you do know [God] and have seen [God]." 8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us [God], and we will be satisfied." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen [God]. How can you say, "Show us [God]"? 10 Do you not believe that I am in [God] and [God] is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but [God] who dwells in me does [God's] works. 11 Believe me that I am in [God] and [God] is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to [God]. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that [God] may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask [God], and [God] will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees [God] nor knows [God]. You know [God], because [God] abides with you, and [God] will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in [God], and you in me, and I in you."

### *Exuberant Being*

A sermon preached by  
James F. McIntire

#### **Texts:**

John 14: 1-20

**May 10, 2009**

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pascha



#### **Hope United Methodist Church**

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)

Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)

Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

I was with some church folk one evening talking about church growth when the conversation turned to the question: What do we mean if say that a goal of our congregation is “to be a witness for Christ in the neighborhood”? It’s a valuable question as we’re beginning to talk about how we can grow Hope UMC into this new century.

Does being a witness for Christ mean knocking on doors and handing out scripture tracts and pressuring people into claiming their salvation whether or not they truly mean it? If so, then that’s where we lose most anyone who might otherwise volunteer to do evangelism. It takes courage for many people to just invite a friend or neighbor to worship on Sunday. Knocking on doors is simply beyond the question for most Christians in America today.

One man had come to the church growth discussion that evening having first stopped at Starbucks to treat himself to a latte. He pointed to the near empty paper cup on the meeting table and said something like, “Whenever I stop at Starbucks and pay my \$4 for this extravagance I think about the fact that today probably 40,000 children died from hunger. What kind of witness for Christ am I being? Should I be spending my money on something so extravagant when poverty is so rampant?”

After some discussion about it, I said, “You know, I don’t think the point of the Gospel is to make us feel guilty about buying a \$4 latte at Starbucks. But maybe the point is that to witness for Christ we need to keep in front us the reality that life is not all about living solely for ourselves. Maybe the witness that we need to be making is simply knowing that what we do makes a difference.” Maybe following Jesus means that the next time I buy coffee, I make sure it’s fair trade coffee and that I’m not contributing to the intentional injustice that exists in our world. Or making sure that my sneakers are not made by 12 year old little girls in a Nike sweatshop in Vietnam. Or refusing to shop at WalMart until it begins treating American employees justly and with respect.

John wrote his Gospel in the midst of oppressive domination in his political world and orthodox pomposity in his religious world. The Emperor and Rome controlled the world; elitist Judean leaders controlled Judaism. John’s community made it a point to let people know that there is another way – an alternative to the empires that keep us repressed. John’s community was a movement of people claiming authority in Jesus and promoting the fact that the Jesus way of life is available to anyone who will accept it. John’s Gospel announces a “realized eschatology” – fancy theological jargon meaning that John preaches that Jesus has brought about God’s reign *now*. The reign of God is not some far off distant event but rather it is realized in Jesus who is God-with-us and God’s reign is realized in our living our lives following the Jesus Way.

For John, the resurrection of Jesus is anti-climactic. From the very beginning of this Gospel, Jesus can be everywhere and do everything. Remember how it begins? Jesus is with God from even before the creation of the world – “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God ...” We need not rely on God’s resurrecting Jesus from the dead to realize that God reigns in this world and that the empires of the world are nothing compared with God’s reign.

In this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter, John has Jesus telling the listeners, readers, and us that through Jesus they – and we – can be and do everything as well. Listen closely. “*The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to [God]. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that [God] may be glorified ...If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*”

John’s early community of Jesus-followers is what we might call a high-walled community. It protects itself from the dangers of the outside, the dangers of the empire. It protects itself from the dangers of the political empires – not just physical dangers but the influence of Roman and Greek culture which could easily absorb

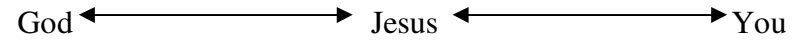
them and cause them to forget the words and works of God through Jesus. And it protects itself from the danger of the religious empire – in the part of Christian history’s first century when John’s community is together (remember John is writing at about 90 CE), these Jesus-followers were initially still worshipping in the Jewish Temple and then in local synagogues after the Temple falls in 70 CE. They are still Jews – a sect within Judaism – but they don’t want to be negatively influenced by the religious elitism that exists around them.

So the members of John’s community maintain high protective spiritual walls – not bricks and mortar walls, mind you – but walls that protect them from the dangerous spiritual and emotional pull of the empires. “Inside we are of God; outside they are not of God. Inside is a safe place; outside is a dangerous place.” Yet this is not an exclusive community, because anyone is welcome to become a part of what’s inside – anyone is welcome to become a Jesus-follower.

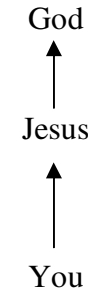
*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” says Jesus, “If you know me, you will know [God] also. From now on you do know [God] and have seen [God]. ... Whoever has seen me has seen [God]. How can you say, “Show us [God]”? Do you not believe that I am in [God] and [God] is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but [God] who dwells in me does [God’s] works. Believe me that I am in [God] and [God] is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”*

Jesus has given us the power and authority to be like him. So if we are in Jesus and Jesus is in God, then God is in us as well. We have access to God because we are a part of who Jesus is.

It gets a little confusing these 2,000 years later, but it’s really not that complicated. Imagine a horizontal straight line with God at one end, Jesus in the middle, and you on the opposite end. There are arrows pointing in both directions between God and Jesus and arrows between Jesus and you.



Today’s Christian evangelicals will tell you, *incorrectly*, that the only way to get to God is through Jesus, that the line is vertical with arrows pointing only upward through Jesus, that you must believe certain doctrines about Jesus, and that if you don’t believe you are left out of God’s kingdom. For the most part we’ve all bought into that false preaching – hence, the popularity of Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series.



But God is not exclusive. At some level we all know that – we all want to believe that. We just can’t seem to make the jump. We get hung up on Jesus saying “I am *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life” and we slip into a misinterpretation of who and what Jesus truly is.

The point that John wants us to get is that empire is evil – the Roman empire of his day, the religious elitist empire that dominated Jerusalem of the time – any empire that the world creates, even our dominant political, cultural, economic empires of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – whatever, wherever, whenever – empire is evil.

And those of us living within the protective confines of the empire benefit from its evilness. We can easily get co-opted by the comforts and safety of what the empire provides, lulled into submission, buying into what it offers us. The only way out, says John, is to be a part of *Jesus’* empire – part of *God’s* empire. And for John, that simply means “getting it” – knowing that there is an alternative, knowing that there is a different way of being in this

world, realizing that there is an alternative to the evilness that is all around us which is constantly tempting us.

It's not that you have to believe every single thing about Jesus in order to get to God, John tries to tell us. "*Believe me that I am in [God] and [God] is in me,*" says Jesus, but if you don't its okay. "*If you do not,*" he says, "*then believe me because of the works themselves.*" The "works" Jesus is talking about? Those are the works of God through him and through each of us. And, adds John at the end of the Gospel, there are many other things that Jesus did that didn't even make it into this book!

All you have to do is *be* different than the world. Just *be*. We're so busy *doing* that we don't stop to simply be. But to be a follower of Jesus, there is nothing that you must do – you simply have to *be*. And be excited about it – be exuberant about being. Don't worry so much about "doing" – that comes later in your response to your realizing how to simply be *and be exuberant about it*. Just be. Just know that you are in Jesus and Jesus is in God so you are in God and God is in you. That's what our faith is about. And it transforms us if we accept it.

Richard Cizik, Vice President for Government Affairs in the National Association of Evangelicals spoke on a recent edition of *Speaking of Faith* carried on National Public Radio (NPR). He said: "Evangelicals have never put much stock in moral theology. We jump straight from scripture to the political prescriptions without ever pausing to spend any time in the development of moral theology. And that is what is called for in these days that are so complex ... Evangelicals need to re-evaluate what it means to truly be a follower of God in this the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." [speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/evangelicalevolution/index.shtml]

That's similar to what I'm talking about here. The moral theology is where we search out what it truly means to be in this world. All you have to do is know that there is a difference between God's empire and the world's empire. We all live our

lives within the confines of a political empire. John's congregation did as well. They depended on the food and transportation and physical protection of Rome as much as we do of our American system today. The point is not to separate yourself from all that – but simply *get* that there is a difference. Get it – and you can be saved.

Remember the Starbucks dilemma? The man at my meeting who felt pangs of guilt as he bought his \$4 latte while many in this world starve for lack of pennies to feed them. Suppose that his congregation became an alternative to the empire where Starbucks exists. Suppose that congregation were one which said "we are different because we are keenly aware of the injustice that faces coffee bean farmers around the world and it goes against how we understand the teachings of the Jesus we follow." That simple belief – that exuberant being in response to God's presence makes it an alternative to the empire. Being is filled with grace. Exuberant being is a response to God in our lives. Exuberant being causes us to be church in an empire-dominated world.

And then once the followers of Jesus within the community get it – once they are able to "be" who they are called to be – then that community of believers – "be-ers" – can then "do" something about it. Suppose that congregation then says that to respond to the injustices "we will serve only fair trade coffee at our dinners and meetings" and then it decides that it will use fair trade coffee for after-worship coffee hour. Next it decides that it will sell fair trade coffee after church so members don't have to stop at Starbucks and risk selling out to the empire. That is church.

And remember – please hear this clearly – *this is not about Starbucks and fair trade coffee*. That's not what I'm saying here – I'm not urging a boycott of Starbucks!

What I'm asking is: Why do you go to church? Do you ever ask yourself that? Many people today are asking that question and they're not coming up with acceptable answers. Look at the empty

pews in our mainstream, Protestant churches today. People aren't going to church because they aren't sure why they should.

Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* puts it this way:

Church is the Christian community, and it exists in order to worship God and to live out the commandment given by Jesus Christ, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. The part of this equation that the apostate in me tends to scorn is that worshipping God means loving my neighbor...A Presbyterian pastor once reminded me, in an inventive take on this gospel passage, that we "go to church for other people. Because," he added, "someone may need you there." I stopped doodling on my bulletin and began to pay attention, apostate no longer but fully present.

Is that what this congregation is? Are any of our churches places where we go to worship because someone there may need us at some given moment? Sometimes we go to church because there is something for us to "do" when we get there – sell baked goods, take up the offering, arrange the flowers, read the scripture, light the candles, preach the sermon. But do we go because we think someone there may be counting on the fact that we are supposed to love each other?

If that were the reality, our churches would be filled to capacity. Jesus says that to follow means to love one another. That's how this scene in John's Gospel ends – what we hear this morning is a piece of the Last Supper when Jesus reminds us that to love one another is our new commandment.

"Love, and you are a success," says the late William Sloane Coffin, renowned theologian and former pastor of Riverside

Church in NYC, "whether or not the world thinks so. The highest purpose of Christianity – which is primarily a way of life, not a system of beliefs – is to love one another. And the first fruit of love is joy, the joy that represents meaning and fulfillment."

"Christianity is a way of life, not a system of beliefs." That's a powerful witness to the Jesus message and it is the key to John's Gospel. Following Jesus is not about a system of beliefs, but it is simply about exuberant being, about knowing that there is a difference. Acting on that knowledge – moving forward from your exuberant being – leads to love. Love is success – not by the world's standards but by God's – and love leads to joy. And joy is a pretty nice state of being to be in.

What does that mean for us at Hope?

Maybe what that means is that we don't need to be a huge, mega-church with an overly scheduled calendar and more people than fit in our building. Maybe we need to simply be – be that place where children – and adults – can feel safe when the bullies of the world strike, be that place where we can see each other through the tears that cloud our eyes on a Sunday morning. Maybe we need to exuberantly be – be that space where people marginalized by the empire can find home. We can simply be a presence in the neighborhood – and on a larger scale a presence in the world – where anyone and everyone can come and experience an alternative to what the world has to offer.

My daughter Lacey and I were at a mall one day. There is a new church at that mall worshipping in the former movie theater building. A flashing red sign on the front of the building announces its schedule and its presence. It says – "Doing church ... differently." The church was announcing to the world that it is a different place than what we normally know as church.

"There's something wrong with that announcement," I said to Lacey. "That's not really what a congregation of Jesus followers

should be saying. It's not about 'doing' church. It's about 'being' church." There's a subtle difference there. Hear it – "Doing church differently" or "Being church differently." Which better fits the Jesus message?

Being a presence. Being a community. Being an open space. Being the alternative. Being what Jesus calls us to be. Being exuberant about exuberantly being.

That is my prayer for the Church as it adjusts in our post-modern world. And it also my prayer for this congregation as we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Be a presence. Be. Exuberantly be.

Amen.