

I AM in you (4Mar18 – 3Lent)
John 14:1-20

There's a scene in the movie "Three Amigos" where these three clueless, doofy white Hollywood actors walk into a Mexican cantina. The bartender whispers a message to Steve Martin's character, named Lucky Day: "The German says, Wait here." Lucky looks thoughtful, nods carefully, and remains thoroughly confused. Because it's not a message for him. It's for an arms dealer, not a pampered playful actor. He couldn't possibly know what that message meant.*

This might be your Lucky Day, having-your-own-Three-Amigos-kind-of moment. The reading says you know where Jesus is going as he prepares a place for you. Hearing that message, I can see you looking thoughtful, nodding carefully, and remaining confused. You don't know where he's going, what it means, do you?

At least you've got the benefit of hindsight, while within the story, the followers of Jesus must've been baffled. As we hear the words of Jesus talking about going away and coming back, we might figure out from context clues that this is on the night in which Jesus is betrayed. In the previous chapter, after he washed feet and loved and served, Judas, who betrayed him, went out into the night to fetch authorities to arrest Jesus. In less than 24 hours, he'll be dead. But on the third day, we happen to know that Jesus will have risen from the dead. So we might be able to piece together that when Jesus talks about going away and coming back, it might relate to crucifixion and resurrection. Thomas and Philip and the rest of the amigos would've had little clue that Jesus could be meaning this.

Maybe you're able to nod your head a bit more confidently. You might recognize this message as slightly less cryptic and confusing than you first thought, with some vague sense of what's going on here...Except the stuff of "I AM the way, the truth and the life, and nobody comes except through me" and Thomas saying "We

don't know where in the heck you're going, so how in blazes can we know the way?"

I adapted Thomas's language there a bit. I started out with it just to sound silly, but realized it can point to our usual interpretation of this passage. But this mysterious message from Jesus actually insists we redefine our understandings and outlook.

We mostly take this as being about heaven. Jesus says his Father's house has many rooms. At a funeral, you may have heard Jesus going to prepare a place as sort of the equivalent of him getting your heavenly condo ready, as a turndown service to leave a mint on the pillow, so your accommodations will be set when you get to heaven.

That's often accompanied by a notion that Jesus is your only ticket *to* heaven, that if you want to get there, then you need Jesus. This passage gets used not only as a gentle assurance that insiders have someplace good to go afterlife, but also used as a cudgel to whack outsiders and threaten they'll be left out, to exclude entire religions as unable to get into heaven. It makes Jesus into a bouncer at the heavenly hotel, waving his amigos past the velvet rope, but rejecting the bad hombres and, in the severest interpretations, telling them that not only are they not welcome, that there's no place prepared for them, but pointing them instead to the blazing fires of hell as their eternal abode.

That's nasty. But it's also a sloppy reading of this passage. It claims to understand a secret message from Jesus to mean that if you don't understand the secret message, you'll be damned. That gets it wrong, and exactly violently wrong.

To start, I notice that almost all the time the Bible refers to the Father's house, or the house of the Lord, or God's house it is talking about...the temple. Not heaven. That's also the case for the one other time the Gospel of John uses the phrase "my Father's house" as Jesus is cleansing the temple.

As we've been reminded in these weeks, the point in the Gospel of John is that Jesus has replaced the temple. If that was the place where

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb7eAG2jKA>

you could go to meet God, to be on the Father's turf, to be *chez Pere*, now we look to Jesus to meet God, to understand God, to have God revealed for us.

Of course, that's part of what Jesus reiterates in this passage—that when you've seen him, you've seen God. To know the Son is to know the Father. There is no separate surprise waiting behind the curtain. What you need to know, you get from Jesus already.

Further, when Jesus describes himself as the place to meet God, it's not something we're waiting for. It isn't post-mortem when your soul flies to the sky. John's Gospel says eternal life already begins now in this relationship. Other Gospels similarly recognize the kingdom of heaven is present now, breaking into our earthly realm. You already are able to dwell with God.

A vital characteristic of the term "dwelling places" is that this isn't isolated reserved space, but that it ties to the verb remain, "remaining places," like we heard last week amid the reflection of I AM the vine and you are the branches as remain or "abide in my love." You see, this is less a physical space than a mode of existence. The dwelling place isn't elsewhere; the dwelling place is in you, and you in him! The abundant place Jesus prepares is to abide, remain, dwell, live in his love, you and all the amigos. Not because you discerned the cryptic message and figured out a roadmap, but because the whole point is to welcome you in. That's what the way of Jesus does.

That leads back to the confusion about I AM the way, the truth, and the life. It's exactly the opposite of some general domineering view that this is a "my way or the highway" kind of way, that God shuts the door on you if you don't agree. Rather, Jesus is inviting you into his abundant love and life. Finding a place in Jesus is never an exclusive hierarchy, but is for sharing love. There's no discouraging backside threat to this encouragement of "don't let your hearts be troubled."

Yet that clearly subverts any usual expectations our society has. If Jesus is talking

about life on the night before he dies, we could be skeptical whether his way is the right and true way. We might figure our survival instinct would point us away from such a path.

Such resistance to it also shows when Jesus argues with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor with power to execute him, who is so confused he asks, "what is truth?" and who can't see that the kingdom of Jesus could be different than earthly kingdoms. Pilate is stuck in the lies and falsehoods of his authority: that might makes right, that the way to peace is through violence, that the strongest and biggest must be best.

But the way of Jesus subverts that. His way of offering himself in love and laying down his life cannot be understood by empire. Those fixated on appearances and stature will never be able to grasp it. It is not what ads claiming to have the way to happiness and longevity can truly offer. It cannot be marketed and it cannot be commanded. It feels questionable because it defies our norms of success, and so is risky. This way of suffering love, dying for others, loving to the end is not the way this world rules.

But it is the way of life because it is the way of God. That is what Jesus is saying here: if you want to see God, look at the love that gives itself away, that doesn't selfishly insist on its own presumed best interests. That is how you'll know God, as Jesus goes to the cross to confront oppressions of violent authorities, a nonviolent resistance, a force more powerful than the biggest military in the world, of love that cannot finally be killed, God's enduring work.

That is how Jesus invites you to live at every turn—not clinging selfishly and not to give in to hate, not persuaded it's better to avoid getting your hands dirty, not to imagine that it's about having everything you ever wanted, but to wade into the threatening lies, able to risk your wellbeing for the sake of others, to take pain and sorrow in order to transform it, to bear wounds to heal.** Jesus says that's what he's doing and that's

** see Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*, p25

how you'll truly find life, and that can never be taken away.

Now, clearly there are major ways such sacrificial love is needed around us, to keep breaking into our world. It's needed when we figure we can take away from those on welfare. It's needed against claims that our wellbeing is damaged by those with other religions or skin colors or nations of origin. It's needed when we would extract life from natural environments around us and dispose of them as expendable resources. It's needed when deadly weapons and militarized budgets come at the cost of life. For the true good, for real life that God intends, that is when we need to give up our comfort and alleged safety for this greater good.

But it's also abundant in smaller moments. This way of Jesus is daily lived out as you practice caring and sharing in your family, when you set aside your selfish desires, when you take time to listen, when you examine your budget for how it can help others, when hear Aldo Leopold's land ethic,^{***} when you prepare to resist immigrations police, when you take your turn, when you pause to help, when you teach and clean and serve and observe and on and on.

It shouldn't be surprising, that for all the dominance of violent power and selfish tenacity, that this way of God is pervasive and all around us. After all, it's part of what Jesus promises you—that his works will amplify. It happens increasingly, as he also promises he won't abandon you to this practice by yourself, because you are his amigos in love. He remains in you. God dwells in you. The Holy Spirit abides in you. You have become part of God's spreading efforts. It wasn't only once long ago, since you bear that presence now, as heaven continues breaking into this world. And through all the struggles you are embodied also to say "I AM the way, the truth, and the life."

There's really no secret in that. But there's still a lot to discover.

^{***} From the Foreword to "A Sand County Almanac," finished 70 years ago today:

There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot.

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.

These wild things, I admit had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live. The whole conflict thus boils down to a question of degree. We of the minority see a law of diminishing returns in progress; our opponents do not. ...

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten.

These essays attempt to weld these three concepts. Such a view of land and people is, of course subject to the blurs and distortions of personal experience and personal bias. But wherever the truth may lie, this much is crystal-clear: our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy. The whole world is so greedy for more bathtubs that it has lost the stability necessary to build them, or even to turn off the tap. Nothing could be more salutary at this stage than a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings.

*Perhaps such a shift of values can be achieved
by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and
confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free.*

*Aldo Leopold
Madison, Wisconsin
4 March 1948*