

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
Sixth Sunday in Easter – May 17, 2009
The Farewell Discourse in John, specifically John 15:9-17

Abiding in God

Our Scripture reading today comes from the middle of Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples. This speech highlights a unique feature of John's Gospel. In John's telling of the Jesus story, Jesus wraps up his public ministry in chapter 12, even though the story of his passion does not begin until chapter 18. Instead, John moves into slow motion to give us glimpses into the private, behind-the scene conversations between Jesus and his followers, as he tried to prepare them for what was to come and his departure from them.

The scholarly name for the six chapters in between chapter 12 and 18 is "The Farewell Discourse." That sounds fancy, doesn't it! But I like the way Fred Craddock puts itⁱ. Rev. Craddock likens this scene between Jesus and his disciples to children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see their parents putting on coats and hats. Their questions are three: "Where are you going? Can we go? Then who is going to stay with us?" We hear all three of those concerns in this long goodbye conversation between Jesus and his disciples: "Lord, where are you going?" Thomas asks ... "Why can I not follow you now?" asks Peter... "I will not leave you orphaned," promises Jesus.

I love that parallel that Craddock draws because it speaks of such intimacy and relationship. It reminds me of conversations I had with my own parents, as well as conversations shared with my children. "Why do you have to go?" "Who is going to take care of us if Daddy is going with you?" These occasional conversations always bring tastes of heartbreak mixed with the sweet realization of just how much space we occupy in each other's heart and the responsibility that comes with it.

It is like those goodbye conversations shared between long-time friends who only see each other occasionally. "Make sure you email or call. I hate not knowing what is going on with you." "I promise. But you have to do the same." Or like those moments of tear-stained goodbyes in hospital rooms. "Dad, I love you with all my heart and you can let go whenever you are ready," as the breathing becomes more labored. Or like the words that flow when a graduate is sent off into the world. "Please call to let me know you got there okay." "I will Mom. And Mom, I love you." These kinds of goodbye conversations are always mixtures of heartbreak and sweetness because of just how much space we occupy in each other's heart and all that entails.

And the knowledge of how those conversations feel from both the perspective of the one leaving, as well as the one who is left, makes this conversation between Jesus and his disciples even more powerful. For we see such intimacy and depth of relationship in Jesus' words to them. "Do not let your hearts be troubled...And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... You did not choose me, but I chose you." You hear Jesus' words to his disciples and you begin to grasp just how much space those fallible, bumbling, occasionally delightful, disciples occupied in Jesus' heart.

And when we pause and breathe that reality into our imaginations, we are stunned by the sweet saturating smell of it. Jesus, God-with-us, the fullest and most complete revelation of God's center, the face of the Almighty, took those disciples, takes us, into his heart so deeply and completely that he empties himself out for them, for us, indeed for this world. Nothing held back.

And as I consider Jesus' words, I wonder how often we really let that sink into our souls. How often do we sit with the reality that in God's great love for us expressed in Jesus Christ, we have been given space to occupy in God's heart? A space that is there forever. A space in which we can abide, make our home, forever.

But that is exactly what Jesus was trying to get through the disciples' thick skulls that day. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. **You** are my friends... I have called you friends, because I have made known to you **everything** that I have heard from my Father."

Just like he did with his language of vine and branches, Jesus was constantly trying to show how the disciples have been woven into him and how he is woven into the Father and how the Father, then, is woven into the disciples. With his words, Jesus was trying to paint for them a picture of an interrelated web of intimacy and heart space. Of love and joy and friendship. And this picture of such an intricately woven web of relationship between our triune God and humanity astounds me.

It astounds me as I wonder how our lives might change if we lived out of this awareness that we occupy space in God's heart, right here, right now. I know we often speak of God's love and we pray to know God's presence. But that still emphasizes only the transcendence of God, the above and beyond character of God. I think in his goodbye to the disciples, Jesus is trying to get us to focus on the other side of the coin that claims us too--- the immanence of God, the nearness of God, the in us and around us, as close as our next breath, character of our God. **That** focus is what I hear in Jesus' call to live out our occupancy in God's heart. And I wonder how that focus might change our lives.

For example, would our prayer life change? If we took seriously our occupancy in God's heart, would we pray the same way? I know in my own prayers I often speak with God as if God does not know my need, as if God has no clue as to what is going on with me. My prayers can sometimes be like a hard drive data dump that computers do when messing up, just trying to get rid of all the information I have stored up. Perhaps you can relate.

But if our prayers were centered in the reality that we occupy space in God's heart, then perhaps we might discover the freedom to speak a lot less and listen a whole lot more. For that is what we do with people who have space in our hearts, isn't it? We sit with them, listening, talking if needed, loving them through whatever is happening. If we can do that for one another, just imagine how much more God does that with and for us. Jesus promises we have space in God's heart. Might our prayers reflect that promise?

And if we remembered that we always abide in God's heart, that we are that intertwined with God, would our stewardship change? And when I say stewardship, I am talking specifically about what we do with our money and our things. Would our relationship with our possessions change if we remembered that divine heart-space is where we make our home, that divine heart-space is what gives us meaning. Would we share more or need less?

In the most recent edition of the Christian Century magazine, there is an article that talks about a small Mexican town called Fortín de las Floresⁱⁱ. The town is located at the foot of the mountains in the state of Veracruz. It is also situated right next to the train tracks of north-bound trains that take migrant workers from Central America as they literally grasp on to the sides, top or back.

The people of Fortín de las Flores decided somewhere along the way that their call is to share whatever they have with those migrant workers whenever they come through. They prepare bags of food and water and toss them up to the migrants as the train rambles by. They offer warm clothing because they know the mountains get cold. Anything they have, they offer on a regular basis and refuse anything in return.

The writer of the article asked a young woman how they, people who had very limited resources themselves, could afford to give to the migrants day after day, year after year. The woman initially looked a little puzzled at the question. But then she responded, "Right now, we're eating. When we are finished, there will be a little left over. That we can pass along." The writer noted that in Fortín, people do not talk about giving away what they have, but about passing it along—as if none of it truly belonged to them in the first place. "The Bible says to feed and clothe the people," a shopkeeper shrugged.

The people of Fortín de las Flores have chosen not to live lives segmented by what belongs to them and what belongs to others. They have chosen to live their lives knowing that all of it belongs to God and it is a privilege to get to pass it along. If you ask me, they are living out of their sense of occupancy in God's heart. They are living out of the knowledge that their place in the divine heart-space is what gives them meaning, not what they own or what they do.

And, they are also living in a way that expresses the fact that they are not the only ones who have that intimate space in God's heart. Those migrant workers passing through town are just as important to God as they are. The townspeople often wave at those on the trains and blow them kisses, which the workers return. "Why do you do that?" asked the writer. "Just to say 'We are with you,'" a young woman responded.

And that takes me to my last wondering with you. If we lived out our occupancy in God's heart, do you think our relationships with each other might change? Lest we forget, all the "you's" we hear in the Gospel of John are actually "y'all's". All of Jesus' words in this long goodbye are addressed to the **community** of believers, not simply the individuals themselves. And that means that, as the people of Fortín already demonstrate, we share this space in God's heart with each other, with people we do not know, with all of creation perhaps. And that has implications for our life together.

I think it means that we have to come to terms with the fact that we cannot decide to kick people out. None of us has been given the right to act as a bouncer for God. We don't get to say to another, "You don't belong here." We don't get to say who is worthy to take up God's heart space and who is not. That is not our decision. Rather, we are given the task to learn how to share this divine heart space together. "Y'all did not choose me, but I chose y'all," Jesus gently admonishes.

Some of you might remember a sermon I preached in the early spring about our current denominational struggles over sexuality and ordination. I reported about my efforts with another clergy person to try and get conversation groups going all throughout the Presbytery for the purpose of building relationship and trust. We figured it would be good to actually get to know one another before we judged one another. I am excited to say that over 150 people all over Grace Presbytery are now meeting in regionally similar, but very theologically diverse, small groups.

My group met for the first time this past week. It is made up of pastors on both the left and the right, pastors of small churches and big ones, younger pastors and older ones, male and female. And there are just 8 of us, so that is a pretty good mix. We spent our first meeting in prayer together and then just talking about our families. That was it. It is not a complicated process. But as we heard each other's growing up story, I was again reminded how much we have in common with each other as people made in God's image, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as shared space dwellers in the heart of the divine.

And I must admit that I was once again convicted of my own sinfulness and the ways I have tried, over the years, to act as God's bouncer, a job that God has not given to me or to any of you, either. And I know that as my group shares more of our lives together, I will come face to face with that brokenness again and again.

But, my prayer for myself, for my group, and for the Church is that we will, one day, live fully out of our shared occupancy in the heart of the divine. That we will open ourselves up to reveling in and resting in that intimate and profound gift of which Jesus speaks. That we will be so rooted in our place in God's heart, so grounded in our abiding in God's love, that we will no longer have any need to push each other around, or to grasp all that we can saying 'mine,' or to tiptoe around God because we are still not really sure deep down that God has any use for us.

My prayer is that, one day, we will let the sweetness of these goodbye words from Jesus completely saturate us and our lives. So that we will indeed know a joy complete and a love beyond compare. So that when we are busy or when we are still, we will know that in Christ we have already been received into God forever, that we occupy a space in the heart of the divine, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. A God who is the very definition of Love.

ⁱ Gench, Frances Taylor. Encounters with Jesus. Louisville: WJK Press, page 106. Taylor Gench quotes Craddock.

ⁱⁱ Frykholm, Amy. "Passing It Along." The Christian Century Magazine, May 19, 2009. Ed: John Buchanan. Pages 24-27.