

“GOD THE ACCEPTING FATHER”

A Sermon by Rev. Richard Clewell

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: John 14: 1-7

In a sermon two summers ago I presented my “Confessions of a Recovering Fundamentalist” in which I described an overview of my faith journey in experiencing life and the numerous changes which occurred in the development of my beliefs as a Christian. I mentioned at that time that I had moved from thinking I had all the answers (a closed –mind position) to the place of many more questions in a complex life where simple solutions no longer satisfy.

As I share with you where I am today on my journey through this life, there are still many unresolved questions. However, there is a basic calmness with which I face these challenges. Such serenity is anchored in a relationship with God made possible through the revelation of divine love and unqualified acceptance in the life and death of Jesus Christ. I have long thought that God is revealed to all people in many different ways, and it is not my place to judge who is “in or out” as was previously my tendency when I saw Christ as the solitary way of salvation.

Therefore, I would invite you to consider with me today a familiar gospel text which continues to raise controversy in theological circles and often divides people. (Read John 14: 1-7). This well-known passage is most often heard at funerals providing a hopeful perspective for those who mourn one who has died and assuring their on-going relationship to God the Father. This certainly has its rightful place. But I believe it means so much more. Its import is simple yet profound.

William Barclay reflects on the opening verses (v. 1-3), “There are many “abiding places in my Father’s house” may simply mean that in God’s kingdom there is room for all. An earthly house becomes overcrowded; an earthly inn must sometimes turn away the weary traveler because its accommodation is exhausted. It is not so with our Father’s house which is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all. Jesus is saying to his friends, “Don’t be afraid. Men may shut their doors upon you but in God’s kingdom you will never be shut out.”

Jesus speaks of his relationship with the Father being available to those to whom he spoke and for whom he lived and died. He is out front as the older brother so that his disciples may follow in his steps. He uses the

word forerunner (podromos in Greek) which in the Roman army designated the reconnaissance troops who blazed the trail and ensured that it was safe for the rest of the troops to follow or was descriptive of the pilot boat which led through the channels to the harbor. So, he demonstrates a relationship with the Father which is one of acceptance and being accepted. This connection transforms one's life from fear of separation and the unsuccessful need to meet God's approval.

Christ continues when he takes three of the great basic concepts of Jewish religion and states how they are fully realized in him. (v. 6,7) Jesus talked much about "the way" in which people must walk and about the "ways" of God. (Deut. 5: 32,33) What did he mean when he said, "I am the way?" He does not just give advice and direction but takes us by the hand and leads, strengthens, and guides us personally. He is the doorway and the continuing way to the most intimate connection in relationship to the Father. The term "the way" appears in other religions as a pathway of connection to the divine or as a set of steps taken to earn ultimate degrees of divine equality or reward. But none indicate the intimate relationship with God as Father which Jesus Christ demonstrates.

Jesus further declares himself to the Truth exemplified not only in his words but by his behavior and lived out faith. In him moral truth is realized because there is no hypocrisy. His teaching, stories, and behavior ring true; his life exudes love and acceptance; his death expresses the ultimate in self-giving compassion.

Jesus also claims to be "the life" embodied in expressed love which makes life worth living. In these three qualities exhibited genuinely in Christ alone we see what God is really like in his fullness and can know his presence and relationship without fear and without shame. The uniqueness of our faith as Christians is a restored relationship where we know and experience God as Father who loves and accepts us fully each and every day. This relationship is pictured so beautifully in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Jesus calls God "abba" – relational papa.

The final phrase of the sixth verse has caused great consternation for many people – "no one comes to the Father, but by me." Christians are divided over these words as they have been used to exclude any who do not relate to God in a prescribed way of belief in Christ. This claim that the only true knowledge of God as Father is in and through Jesus Christ has become a stumbling block to many of us who live and relate in a pluralistic world. It is one of my big questions in light of this passage's context, the context of the Gospel of John, and in the overall concept of God's care and redemption of all creation. Do the "many abiding places" of verse two or "I have sheep

that are not of this fold” (John 10: 16) make room for other ways to connect to God? What about devout Jews or people of faith before the time of Christ? Where does my friend the rabbi or the holiest man in life and action I ever met, a Buddhist monk, fit in this picture? What about the man or woman who has never heard of Christ? Can it be understood in a way that is faithful to Jesus Christ and also true to the inclusive picture described by Jesus elsewhere in John and the other gospels?

I believe that this passage is teaching truth about the most intimate relationship a person can have with God, that of the accepting and loving Father, which Jesus experienced and enables us to partake through his revelation of that relationship in his life, death, resurrection and the sending of the Spirit who indwells and assures that relationship daily. It’s what Jesus meant when he told Nicodemus he must be born anew to know God fully. This text does not exclude the possibility of other ways of knowing God, although other ways may be based on human merit or fear of missing connecting with the divine. They recognize God’s existence and power without relationship. I have come to believe fully that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should have life. The reality of the relationship to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that Jesus embodied while he lived among us, and the presence of God’s abiding Spirit who leads us to recognize in Christ-like individuals in other religions or of no religion “the true light which enlightens everyone.” (John 1: 9) I accept Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life for my life in relation to God. Committed to the “way,” Jesus Christ, I remain agnostic about other ways, realizing that God is greater than the measure of our minds. I leave to God in divine mercy, love, grace and forgiveness the acceptance of others’ credentials and qualifications. I do know that I have seen and experienced people of “the way,” those whose lives are different – they genuinely love their neighbor; seek justice, show kindness and don’t presume to be God. (Micah 6:8)

What this means to me for every day living is this: through Christ I have come to know God in a restored relationship as Father. I no longer have to believe in order to escape punishment and hell. Whether I go to heaven or not is no longer of great import. But life in relationship with God makes each day fuller and more meaningful. I no longer live in fear because I know and experience God’s love, forgiveness, and unqualified acceptance. It is no longer an odious duty to attempt to serve God, but in the relationship the Spirit of Christ guides and partners in an adventure of growing faith and mutual concern for God’s people and creation that I encounter. Above all, I am thankful in seeing and knowing God in and through other persons in this community of faith, in company with other disciples, in the people I meet

along the way. Being loved unconditionally has transformed me to being more compassionate, less judgmental; to being more Christ-like, less presumptuous; to be more vulnerable, less controlling. I continue to try to be open to recognizing where the Spirit is active today in situations and persons that allow me to see God as present and transforming. I'm reminded of Edgar Allen Poe's, "Purloined Letter," where the tourist standing at the base of a well-known skyscraper asks the policeman on the corner "Where is it?" The response comes, "Look up." Or of Tolstoy's cobbler who expected a visit from Christ and failed to recognize him in those he helped that day.

Finally, I believe if we love Jesus, we will love Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, and all those different others as God does and will be eager to share with the them the best thing we know – God's relational love and acceptance.

This passage as a whole gives us words to live by and the experience of relationship to share which can transform any one's life. John states in his epistle that such love casts out fear (1 John 4:18) Be open as God's Spirit accompanies you on our journey of faith confident and assured of the Father's acceptance and love, looking to his abiding presence transforming your life and sharing that love with all others along your way.

Amen

The Rev. Richard D. Clewell, D.Min., Pastor