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Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Easter
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John 14:1-14

INCLUSIVE PROMISES

Think back for a moment to those elementary school years. What part of the school day did you love the most and what part did you dread? The answer to that question may have to do with how included or excluded you felt during certain parts of your day.

I loved music. I was always chosen, and included in those select groups of singers that would stand up in front of the class, and show the others how the teacher wanted it done. That hour of music made up for the excruciating hour of physical education when the captains would select their teams for the day. It wasn't that I couldn't do the skills. It's that I had no concept of team. So, I would sit and wait and wait while the teams were selected, and it was always the same scenario. Jeffrey Spitz and I were the last two sitting on the gym floor hoping that we would be the second to last chosen rather than the last.

All of us have experienced exclusion, un-belonging, sitting and observing those who are confident and sure of themselves, insiders who know the ropes and the secret language. Exclusion does not feel good. Going back to those elementary years, when the neighborhood kids would meet to play outside, we would often form clubs. When we realized, we had not been selected for a particular club, we would form our own club, and decide who was in and who was out. This stage really bothered my parents, and I was often summoned to the kitchen table for a discussion on friendship, and the consequences of excluding people.

The Rev. Eugene Peterson has written that too often identity and worth are achieved by excluding others. The terrible price we pay for keeping others out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a **shrinkage of life**. In other words, we are the real losers when we live according to the principles of exclusion. Life somehow becomes very small and very petty.¹

This is why it is such a tragedy and a misrepresentation of Jesus' message when we take this morning's Gospel lesson, and use it for the purposes of delivering a contemporary message of exclusion, thinking that as a follower of Jesus, we are the insiders definitely going to heaven, and everyone else..... well, unless you believe exactly as I do, don't count on it.

¹ Eugene Peterson. *Living The Message*. Harper San Francisco: 1996, p 251.

This text, unfortunately, has been used to make the followers of Jesus the insiders.

So, it is crucial that we examine what Jesus was saying to these disciples, and when this discourse took place. It is also crucial that we hear what the Spirit of the living Lord is saying to us this morning through these words.

Jesus is speaking with the disciples the night before the crucifixion. This passage is called Jesus' farewell discourse.

Jesus knows that his time is short. Can you imagine what must be on Jesus' heart and mind? "What do I say to these people who have followed me, these whom I love so dearly, these who will need the strength to continue the work we have started together. What do I say to them because my time here with them, as they have known it, will come to an end?"

Jesus has washed their feet. He has foretold Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial and the disciples are distraught at all this talk. So for Jesus to say, "Let not your hearts be troubled" is just not enough for these disciples. Their hearts are very troubled. They are anxious.

So, Jesus talks to them.

Jesus speaks love language.

Jesus never slackens with his language of comfort and love and teaching even as Thomas is throwing up his hands and saying, "We don't know the way. We don't know where you are going," and Phillip is insisting that Jesus show them God.

"Yes, you do know the way," says Jesus because you know me.

"Calm down." He basically says. "Stop for a moment, and trust what you know. Trust what we have done together. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. That's how you will come to God's purposes. Focus on that. Trust that. My love for you, my devotion and my commitment to you is not leaving you even as I must leave you. You do know the way."

Have you ever needed these words, the assurance that knowing Jesus, focusing on Jesus will help us know and understand better the purposes of God? Jesus continues to show and teach us about God's desires, about what delights God, and what breaks God's heart. Jesus' commitment, devotion and love were not going to leave them, and are with us today as his followers.

There's belief language in this discourse, what we Presbyterians would call confessional language.

What defines us as Christians is that we believe that the Word was made flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the tangible presence of God in the world, and we are to follow him. In order to do that, we need to know Jesus.

Sometimes it's hard to know Jesus. The disciples found this to be very true because Jesus will challenge our thinking and our ways of doing.

As capable as our human minds and potentials are, we can't know God fully and exhaustively. We don't always understand God or what God is up to. But that does not mean that God does not want to be known to us. So we confess belief in the Incarnation. That bears the message that indeed, God wants to be known, and the way God is known to us is through Jesus.

Finally, in this discourse, Jesus gives us “keeping on” language.²

Jesus will be with the Father where there are many dwelling places. We will see the Risen Lord again, and receive the place that has been prepared for us. Where he is, we will be. You can see why this passage is often used for funerals or memorial services, and appropriately so. Jesus gives us full permission to live with that vision of many, many dwelling places being prepared for us.

This is not to say that Jesus grants permission for followers to sit back on the sofa, relax and watch re-runs until it's time for us to enter our dwelling place. Absolutely not, there is more guidance and instruction in this passage that often gets overlooked when we bask in the image of these dwelling places.

Jesus said, “When you really believe in me, you can't help but do my work.” In fact, when you believe in me, you are going to do greater work.” Greater work than what Jesus did? How is that possible?

The Rev. Tony Campolo explains that when Jesus walked this earth he could look into one pair of eyes at a time, he could heal one person as a time, eat dinner in one household at a time, teach one lesson at a time, listen to one crowd of people at a time. But when Jesus ascended to the Father after the resurrection, and returned as the Spirit of the living Lord, he empowered us to continue his work in his name. He empowered us to love. Think for a moment. This Spirit dwells in thousands at a time, millions at a time. If thousands and thousands of people go out today, and do one act of love in the name of Jesus, just imagine God's delight in these greater works, so many doing acts of love every day in the name of Jesus. It does make a difference.³

² Concept related to language of the text: Gail R. O'Day in *The Gospel of John. New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press:1995, pp. 739-745.

³ Tony Campolo. Sermon: *Doing Great Things*.

Jesus says, "I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Father will be glorified." That places a responsibility on us to learn what truly glorifies. That's the question we need to keep asking. What delights God?

Jesus is not promising chocolate cake, straight as without hard work, instant parking places or a stock market portfolio that is off the charts. Jesus is promising whatever we ask that is in accordance with God's will and purposes, Jesus will be with us to empower and inspire those acts.

We have work to do. We are called to be in continuous discernment of what it is that glorifies God. What delights God and when and where is God's heartbroken?

A few years ago, I led a Bible study for these cracker-jack residents of Collington Continuing Care Community located in Bowie. It was an election year, and they demanded practical application of scripture in how their faith could inform their decisions and their votes. Theology and exegesis were fine, but now they wanted nitty-gritty before going into that voting booth.

I was relieved to find that the National Council of Churches had produced a study called "Christian Principles in an Election Year." Its premise is that "Our Christian faith compels us to address the world through the lens of our relationship to God and to one another." These principles address war and peace, the well-being of neighbors, both local and global, advocacy for the vulnerable, stewardship of the earth and its resources, hospitality, health care, restoration rather than retribution, and continuous learning as a moral imperative. There were many scripture references and narratives studied as well as instruction on how to find a candidate's record and platform on the issues identified in these principles.⁴

It's not an election year, but I have found myself pulling this study out along with my notes and my prayers because every day we need the guidance in the Way, the Truth and the Life, and not just the guidance but the strength and the will.

This sacred text In John's Gospel does not require us to disrespect or mistrust people whose love relationship with God might be different from our own. This text does require us to continue the work of Jesus with the confidence of Jesus' continued presence guiding us in the Way, the Truth and the Life.

When we are tempted to form our own little clubs, and use scripture as a means of dividing insider and outsiders, you can count on getting called to God's kitchen table.

⁴ National Council of Churches. *Christian Principles In An Election Year*. 2004.

There, we are lovingly reminded that indeed there is a place being prepared for us, but there's work to do now. God, who is ever present with us, calls us to the work of flinging wide open those club doors, and walking through them into a world where our lives carry a message which delights and glorifies God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!