

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on John 14.1-14*

John's gospel is filled with mystical teachings of Jesus. The language is highly mytho-poetic, and borrows heavily from esoteric thinking of that time. Some common mystical themes of that day were how all things are one, how one's name and way are one and the same in that both contain one's spirit and reveal one's character, how the power of knowing and saying a name empowered one to do what that name connotes, how children were endowed with the character and personality traits of their parents, and how the same spirit and character traits within another can live in oneself. Spirit can transmogrify itself from one person to another, and so calling on a person's name or spirit was thought to enable one to live by the other's spirit or way. (E.g., Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit).

Jesus, it seems, believed that it took more than just calling on the other's spirit to live by that spirit. It required trust; which involved not only an intellectual assent or belief, but also a commitment to the values and virtues of the other person lived out by one's own actions and practices. By trusting in another (i.e., their name, their way, their spirit, their character), one would have that other be present with them, spiritually speaking; even though there was no physical presence of that person. In this way, one would not feel alone and without the other. Moreover, if one takes on their spirit, one is also empowered by that spirit; as much, if not moreso, than if the other person was actually present. When we read this passage in this context, it makes much more sense.

These words of Jesus take place during the time of his last supper, a Passover meal, with his disciples. He has told them he will be betrayed by one of them and denied by the rest. He has told them he will be captured and killed for the values he has taught them all during his ministry with them. These foreshadowings of what is to come would have been very distressing and despairing for his close-knit disciples.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he tells them not to let their hearts be despaired. Distress and despair are what would be their natural response to his words in the previous chapter. He seeks to comfort them in letting them know that if they trust (i.e., live in thought, word, and action) in God and in him (i.e., in the ways of God and his own way), then their hearts need not despair. The implication is that they will be empowered with the same spirit that is in God and within Jesus.

Jesus' presence has been like a spiritual refuge and home for his disciples. Without his physical presence, they undoubtedly fear that they will be left spiritually homeless. But Jesus reassures them that the home they have found in him is really the home of God, the Parent who always welcomes us home as we live by God's own spirit and way.

Jesus knows he will no longer be physically present to his disciples, but speaks to convey to them that they will know the home he is going to, the home of the Parent (i.e., God), because they have already experienced living in that home with him. The home is not a spatial place, but a way of being. It is living by the same values and virtues of God, not going to some other territory (earthly or heavenly) that will be materially defined; rather, it will be spiritually defined. It will be identified by the character traits and spirit of the person, not some place where they are locatable by the five physical senses.

Jesus has been preparing a 'place' for his disciples to live in the dwelling of God's own way in all the time he has been inspiring their spirits, developing their characters, and teaching them the values which reveal God's own way. He has already inculcated these into his own being, and now he is letting his disciples know that they can do the same. They can find their way home, for everything Jesus has taught them shows them the way. Because they have learned from one who has already found a home in God's way, they, too, may follow in that way; simply by emulating Jesus' own virtues and values in their own lives.

Their home is where love, compassion, peace, justice, loving-kindness, magnanimity, generosity, gentleness, tenderness, and the host of other sacred virtues and virtues abides within their own spirit. The directions should already be clear; for it is not a physical map they need, but rather a spiritual and ethical one that Jesus has already provided.

Jesus and his disciples can all abide in the same "place" because it is not a place at all, but rather a state of being which is available to any and to all who live by the same virtues and values.

The mytho-poetic language confuses Thomas who is more concerned about Jesus' physical absence from them than his spiritual presence that will abide. He wants to be physically present with Jesus, just as he insisted on touching his wounds

in order to trust. But in wanting this, he misconstrues Jesus' real message – which focuses on the spiritual presence in which they all can abide simultaneously by living by the same virtues and values of both Jesus and God.

Jesus' response to Thomas is obviously metaphorical when he says that he (i.e., his virtues and values) is "the way and the truth and the life." Unfortunately, many Christians have fallen into the same literalism, and need for physicality, of Thomas in thinking that Jesus alone is the personification of this way, truth, and life; even when Jesus has just said that they can all personify and live in the same "house" of God – a house of sameness of spirit and character, rather than a spatially locatable place.

Because Jesus' values and virtues are like those of God, Jesus' way and God's way are one and the same. And our way may also be their same way. We simply need to cultivate those virtues and values in ourselves, and live by them day by day.

Jesus uses the language of God as his Parent (i.e., Father) to help the disciples to discern that he is speaking in accordance with cultural and religious language that should remind them that the parent and the child share the same essence/spirit/name/character/way. The parent teaches the children how to live up to the family name. The parent inculcates the values within the children so they know how to behave. The parent exemplifies virtues for the children to identify with and emulate. To be the child of the Parent, something we can all do since we are all children of God, means to take on the Parent's same spirit and character.

Ancients believed that if you knew the children well, even if you never met the parents, you could infer what the character traits of the parents were as well; for they would reflect the same values. Jesus claiming that we know his Parent by knowing him reflects this common belief. Jesus' way (i.e., his lived virtues and values) is the same as that of his Parent. To know the child is to know the parent.

Philip, like Thomas, wants life to be simplified to where all he needs to do is see things with his own eyes and believe them in his own head. But, of course, this is the opposite of Jesus' point. It is not with our eyes, but our spirit that we see. It is not with our head, but our soul that we trust/believe. We can't compartmentalize and reduce faithfulness to empirically observed experience or cognitively assented facts. Faithfulness requires our entire being. It is not simply what we think and believe, it is what we live by and trust – as revealed by our works and practices.

Jesus is discouraged in that his disciples have tried to make faithfulness an easy thing rather than a cross that they must carry. It takes decades of effort, determination, and habituation of one's behaviors to cultivate virtues and character traits. After three years of being with his disciples, he hoped that they could see that these virtues in him were recognized as the virtues they believed to be in God. But they have adopted the theology that we humans are infinitely different from God rather than essentially of the same spiritual essence – i.e., made in the same image of God. It is a theology that assumes humans can never be like God, and perpetuates this view with a piety of inferiority; the benefit of which is to believe we can never become too good, and so we don't have to put forth as much effort and work to actually become good since it is impossible anyway.

This is not merely a weak faith, but faithlessness masquerading as faithfulness. It is a belief system that requires less moral responsibility and spiritual integrity from humans. It minimizes human accountability in thinking we are inevitably sinful; a means of justifying our sinful ways rather than overcoming them. Jesus had the opposite view; trusting that we all can live virtuous lives if we simply habituate practices of love, peace, justice, compassion, etc. over the course of our lives.

In Jesus claiming that he has the same virtues and values of God, the disciples of Jesus, who had this theology of inferiority, would either have to interpret him as being blasphemous or else want to see proof of his way and God's way being one and the same. The latter could only be accomplished if God was to be seen and heard as saying that God's way and Jesus' way are one and the same. And so Philip, in asking Jesus to show him the Parent, is choosing not to see Jesus as blasphemous, but rather makes the request that, according to his view, would eliminate the contradiction.

People, of course, can only perceive the level of truth in which they themselves have experienced. The disciples, while they have listened and learned from Jesus for three years of constant interaction, have not yet experienced the level of truth that he is trying to convey to them. They don't understand what he is saying because they have not yet cultivated the virtues and values of Jesus to the degree that he has himself. And it is not because they can't, but because they won't even consider it as being a possibility in accordance with their own understanding. As Jesus tells them, they will even do greater works than he does.

Jesus tries to convince them that if they can't believe the words that he is saying to them, then for them to observe the works that he has done. While Jesus has spoken words that are consistent with God's words, they can't relate the two as being the same. Likewise, as Jesus has done works of love, compassion, justice, peace, gentleness, etc. that are identical to the works that are said to represent God's works, their theology forbids them as seeing them as equivalent. They start with different assumptions based on their own experiences and understandings of the divine, and so even though Jesus tries to make it clear in a variety of different ways, they simply can't see it.

Jesus' works are the best empirical evidence he has to try to convince them that his virtues and values are synonymous with God's virtues and values. He tells them to look at these works he has done and judge for themselves whether they reveal the same characteristics as works they would deem that God would do. If they do, then it should indicate to them that Jesus shares the same spirit and values of God. If they don't, then they can continue to believe as they have believed.

Seeing that they are not understanding him with their intellects, he asks them to trust him with their souls. And if they do trust with their souls, then they will discover that they can do the same works, indeed, even greater works, than Jesus.

How many of us are still like the disciples in this passage, where we don't believe it is possible for us to be like Jesus or be like God in our spirit and character? Have we adopted a reductionistic faith in which faithfulness is achieved if only we believe the right things, rather than that we have to put our whole being into living by God's own virtues and values if we are to be truly faithful? What will it take to convince us that it is more pious to actually be good, than to claim that we are inferior beings who are not capable of living virtuous lives?

Jesus tries to give encouragement to his disciples by saying that he'll do whatever they ask of him in his name. This has been horrendously misinterpreted as Jesus saying that Jesus will give us anything we ask no matter what it is that we desire. Again, by saying "in my name," Jesus is saying that whatever we ask for needs to be in character with his own virtues and values – with his own spirit. We can't ask for anything, but only that which accords with love, peace, justice, and Jesus' other values.

Moreover, it is not to be interpreted, even in this much narrower meaning, as a declaration that what we ask for in that same spirit of Jesus will actually come true in rearranging and transforming earthly or material reality. The words are spiritual and mystical, not physical and factual. Will our love, peacefulness, and working for justice mean that everyone else in the world will become the same way simply because we ask it to happen in abiding in Christ's own spirit. No, of course not. It is a nice fantasy, but it doesn't accord with reality.

I've prayed for world peace my entire life, but it still hasn't come. I've prayed that people would truly love one another for just as long, and I still have no evidence that we are anywhere closer to it than in the decade in which I was born. Many others have prayed the same prayers their whole lives long. It isn't because of lack of earnestness or faithfulness on our parts that the prayers aren't being answered as we'd like them to be answered. Rather it is because the prayers are intended to incite a transformation within ourselves; not take away the free will of others.

We, the ones who follow and live by Christ's way, are the ones to be transformed in our own spirits. And while the goal is always that the transformation is to be a systemic and wholesale societal one rather than just an individual one, it requires that all of us, as individuals, collectively make the same choices and have the same transformative spirit living among us. If even one person on the planet doesn't have that spirit, then it can infect everyone else. Evil is far more contagious than goodness, for it always promises an easier way than the way of truth and life. Lies spread more quickly than truth. News of corruption, violence, antagonism, and other evils travels more pervasively than news of purity, nonviolence, mutuality, and other instances of goodness. Moreover, bad news is more easily believed than good news.

But be that as it is, it doesn't mean that the transformation can't take place in each of us, one and all, if we choose to change our truths and our lives to live in accordance with the way of Christ. The way, truth, and life Jesus manifested by his life can be manifested by us as well. He made this clear in telling us that we can not only follow in his ways, but we can even do greater works than he did. If we ask to be like him, sincerely and with our whole being, then it will happen.

God doesn't parcel this spirit out to some and not others that God chooses. God, rather, has made it possible that we can all obtain this level of understanding, ethics, and spirituality if we only dedicate our whole selves, mind, body, strength, and spirit, to living by God's way. That is what Jesus is promising to us when he says that if we ask then he "will do it." It is his conviction that if we truly live by his own virtues and values, by his same spirit, that we will be as close to God as he is...that we will live in God's presence as he does...that we will manifest God's way, God's virtues and values, as he himself has done.

Do we trust him in this?

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/3/2023*