

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on John 14.15-24

Anytime we're dealing with John's gospel, it is necessary to remind ourselves, again and again, that he is intentionally using mytho-poetic language – language that is highly symbolic, not meant to be taken literally, but which invites us to consider greater spiritual truths that we have to be wrestled with from within oneself.

Such truths cannot merely be told to us, for if we are not embarked on the quest for greater wisdom, we'll never see them – even though they are spoken to us clearly. This is why Jesus' true disciples, those who are on their own venture for obtaining spiritual truths that impact our whole lives and the lives of others, will learn Jesus' lessons while those who hear the same words will not understand.

It takes not simply the sincerity of listening to truth, but the authenticity in pursuing truth, to grasp the spiritual realities which Jesus has tried to teach us. One who does not go through the inner struggle of trying to understand, the soul work of dealing with truths we'd rather not hear but need to know, and the committed diligence to learn even when faced with the paradoxes and conundrums of life rather than take the easy way out by adopting truisms rather than truth, will not be able to understand Jesus' words.

To follow Jesus requires work. It is a cross of struggle we have to bear to be true to the divine image within each of us; perpetually choosing the sacred over the prudent, banal, or profane. It requires that we don't take the easy way of literalism, but engage in the far more difficult process of obtaining true understanding by yearning to decipher the deeper, and often times, multiple meanings which come from gaining wisdom.

Verse 15 is a case in point. Reading it superficially, it seems to imply that Jesus may be an authoritarian who demands we obey him: *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* Taken literally, it not only sounds counterintuitive, but wrong. We may ask: 'Isn't true love when we have egalitarian relationships rather than ones of superiors and subordinates? Isn't this counter to everything Jesus has said elsewhere?'

But Jesus' point is not that we need to obey him in order to love him. Rather he is pointing out the deeper truth that if we do in fact love him, which means loving his ways, then we will necessarily keep his commandments because loving his ways will necessarily mean keeping the principles that he himself exemplified. In other words, when we inculcate his own virtues and values into our own character, then it is inevitable that we will appear to be obeying his commandments; when, in fact, we have simply adopted his same spirit. It can't be any other way. Character and spirit are what make us who we truly are; and if that is who we are, then we cannot be any different. The choice has already been made; and we have already determined the parameters of our freedom by our choices. We can no longer choose differently; for it is engrained in us (i.e., written on our hearts, as scripture tells us).

This ancient understanding of what it means to have character or virtue does not always coincide with our less rigorous understanding of being who we are. Today, people say they are who they are based on whatever they choose in the moment. But that is not how the ancients understood character, for that would be too wishy-washy – allowing us to deceive ourselves as to who we really are by equating what we want in the moment with the eternal values that we manifest by our repeated practices. The two are not the same; which is why Jesus said you will know people not by what they say they believe, but rather by the fruits of their works. Character and spirit are enduring qualities; personality and desire are ephemeral.

It is this worldview that John's gospel presumes; and it is why moderns (like secularists of that time), with a different worldview, often don't get what Jesus is really saying.

When John talks about the Parent (i.e., Father) who is God, this implies to Jewish thinking of that day that we, the children, will be like our parent – i.e., we'll have the same character and spirit. Jesus, whom they have all seen as one who has the virtues and values of God by how he treats others, has been declared to be the child of God. What the disciples have yet to understand is that because they have witnessed and followed Jesus, they, too, are the spiritual children of God – i.e., those who can also live by the same virtues and values. They don't need Jesus' physical presence with them any longer, he is trying to get them to see, for an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the inner passion they have for obtaining truth and wisdom, will live in them just as it did in Jesus. In other words, Jesus is trying to get them to see that it is not about him, but his way, that is important. The Spirit can abide in anyone who is faithful to that Spirit and nurtures and sustains that Spirit so that it will abide within themselves.

Jesus makes clear that the "Spirit of truth" is not seen by the world, but is seen by them. He tells them that they know God, and that God abides within them. This runs counter to their lower estimation of themselves, so it is hard for them to believe; but Jesus here emphasizes how the sacred that they have witnessed living in him already lives also in them.

Despite their fears that they will be orphaned without a leader when Jesus is taken by the authorities, Jesus instead claims that they will be accompanied by the same Spirit, the Advocate, that they have witnessed in him. Jesus will symbolically come to them through this Advocate; for in that they share the same spirit, his presence will be always with them.

Literalists have assumed that the physical Jesus is to return in a 2nd Coming to the world. They imagine that the one and the same Jesus, in body and personality that lived 2000 plus years ago, will magically reappear to save the world. But John is trying to make clear that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit that can live in each and every one of us, is the way Jesus will return to us. We are to adopt his same spirit, and live by his same character. That is how he is present to us at all times, and in all ways.

By keeping his commandments, that is living by his virtues and values, we show we have the same love that was in Jesus. We show that the spirit of Christ lives in each of us. We show that the physical death of one of us with that Spirit does not imply the death of that Spirit which can live in all of us.

Love, the manifestation of the Spirit of truth, is what ties us all together in sacred community. All who love both know God and abide in God. All who love are spiritually interconnected to one another. This is what Jesus is trying to get across in this passage from John. We are all unified by the same Spirit. God, Jesus, and us all can have that same Spirit living within us.

And it is that mytho-poetic truth that leads John to speak of Jesus and God making a home within the disciples. Love and truth are shared by all in the same dwelling; that is not a physical place, but a spiritual reality: *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Parent will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."*

Commandments are fulfilled when character does naturally what they imply. Love is shared, given and received, by all who share the Spirit of truth. The Parent and the children, they all love one another, and live in the same sacred reality. Together, they create a spiritual home. While in the material world they may have "no place to lay their head," in the spiritual realm they all have "rooms within the same dwelling place."

Verse 24 is Jesus' reminder to the disciples that they can tell who lives with this same Spirit and who does not – by whether they love him, God, and one another. If people don't love, then the Spirit of truth is not in them. If they do love, then the Spirit of truth unites them all as one.

John's gospel offers us a powerful way of seeing our connection to God and Jesus in that we can have the same Spirit in them within ourselves. Love is the evidence of this Spirit at work in us as it was in Jesus.

And if we are not loving others, then we reveal that this Spirit does not abide in us. By this understanding, how do we measure up? Is the Spirit within us? Are we still trying to get it to live in us? Or are we convinced it never can? What is John trying to tell us is the faithful way of looking at these matters? How does the Advocate live among us? Where is our true home?

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/9/2023*