

Homily 5th Sunday of Easter Gospel John 14:1-12

(Note: A portion of the content in this homily comes from a reflection by Elisabeth Johnson a Lutheran pastor and missionary in Cameroon)

- The Gospel passage we just read is frequently read at funerals, and for good reason. It contains promises that are profoundly comforting in the face of the death of a loved one. When we experience the death of a loved one, we come face-to-face with life's really big questions.
- Right from the start, Jesus knows death troubles us...causes us sorrow, fear, and anxiety. Jesus addresses this up front. He tells us, "Don't be troubled." He reminds us that we have a gift – Faith. We know God loves us; wants what's best for us. We know He is always near and won't leave us. This is our Faith.
- Then Jesus gets to some of our big questions: Is there really something else after this? Heaven? Jesus tells us "Yes!" He describes it as "a place" and says He is going there and will come back to take *us* there. (And notice He's firm about it. It's like He's saying "Would I lie to you?")
- So we ask: What is Heaven like? Another big question... Jesus doesn't tell us exactly. Its beauty and immensity is beyond our understanding and imagination, but He uses an example we *can* understand. He talks about a huge house, with room enough for everyone. It's no accident He chooses this word *-house*. A *House* is a *home*. It's a place to rest, relax, and be ourselves. It's where we belong. Jesus says Heaven – is where we belong. It's our true home.
- Will we see God there? Are our departed loved ones with God? Jesus, God, second person of the Holy Trinity, tells us specifically: "I will take you to myself; I want you to be with me." So, how can we be sure that we will get to heaven? We want to be with God and those we love who have gone before us. Jesus answers us in today's Gospel.
- The challenge for us as we reflect upon this Gospel passage is to understand that this text is not only about life *after* death, but is a text that has everything to do with our lives *here and now*.

- The setting is Jesus' farewell address at his last supper with His disciples. Jesus has washed His disciples' feet and has explained to them what this means (13:1-20). He has foretold his betrayal by Judas and Judas has slipped out into the night (13:21-30). Jesus has told His disciples that He will be with them only a little while longer and where He is going, they cannot come (13:33). He has also foretold Peter's imminent denial (13:36-38).
- No wonder the disciples are troubled. Their beloved teacher is leaving them, one of their own has turned against them, and the leader among the disciples is said to be on the cusp of denying Jesus three times. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their feet. Everything they know and hoped for is changing.
- Jesus responds to the anxiety of His disciples by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1). Jesus calls them back to this fundamental relationship of trust and assures them that He is not abandoning them. Rather, He is returning to His Father, which is good news for them.
- In speaking of His ascension to the Father, Jesus assures His disciples that this is also their destination. There are many dwellings in His Father's house, and He goes to prepare a place for them, so that they will be with Him and dwell with Him in His intimate relationship with the Father (14:2-3).
- When Jesus says that they know the way to the place where He is going (14:4), Thomas, like most characters in the Gospel, takes Jesus quite literally. He wants directions, a road map to this place (14:5). Jesus responds by saying that He Himself is the way: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6).
- This statement by Jesus is a promise, a word of comfort to His disciples. Jesus Himself is all they need; there is no need to panic, no need to search desperately for a secret map. Jesus adds, "If you know me, you will know my Father also" (14:7a). So that there can be no misunderstanding, Jesus adds, "From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (14:7b).
- This time it is Philip who is not quite convinced. "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (14:8). Jesus' response contains perhaps a hint of exasperation: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

- This is the whole of Jesus' mission, to make known the Father, to reveal who God is. Jesus, who has come from the bosom of the Father and is now returning there, is the fullest revelation of the person and character of God. If we want to know who God is, we need look no further than Jesus. All the words that Jesus has spoken, all the works that He has done, come from God and show us who God is (14:10-11).
- This passage has everything to do with our life here and now because Jesus entrusts His mission, to make God known to the world, to His disciples (each of us!!) by our words and actions!
- Jesus tells us all we need to do is follow Him. But what does it mean to follow? (That's the most important of the questions.) In another part of the Gospel, Jesus gives us the answer. He says: "Love God with all your heart and love others." He also says "What you do for others, you do for me". That's what it means to follow; that's what it means to continue Jesus' mission; that is the way home!
- Notice Jesus tells us: "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (14:13-14).
- But what does Jesus mean when He says His disciples (including all of us!) will do "*Greater* works than these?" Greater works than healing the blind and raising the dead? And you will do whatever we ask in your name? We have all known the pain of praying for healing that did not come, of feeling powerless in the face of disease and death. How can these promises be true?
- Perhaps our problem is that in hearing these promises, we expect to do these greater works in the *same way* that Jesus did them - with miraculous power that instantly solves the problem at hand. Yet even miracles are not guaranteed to produce faith. Many in John's Gospel who witness the "signs" that Jesus performs have trouble seeing the work of God right before their eyes.
- Jesus promises to be with us through the power of the Spirit, to work in and through us to accomplish his purposes in the world. This does not necessarily happen in easily visible,

spectacular ways. In fact, God often works through us in very quiet ways, often unknown to us.

- St. Therese of Lisieux wrote “Grow where you are planted” and “Perform simple acts with great love”. Wherever there is healing, reconciling, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God. Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus’ presence in our midst.
- “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (1:18). Jesus has made known to us the heart of God, and he has entrusted this mission of “making God known” to us. So this week let’s ask ourselves: Where might we see Jesus’ work and presence in our midst? How might we show others the very heart of God?

Amen.