

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Father's House

John 14:1-14

Though it has already been said in a variety of ways during today's service, welcome back to God's house. After three months of having your house serve multiple purposes—home, office, school, gym, as well as worship center—it's good to return to the familiar space of our church sanctuary, albeit under very different circumstances.

And along with familiar surroundings we have some familiar words from our Lord: "Let not your hearts be troubled" (v. 1a). For centuries, Jesus' words have consoled believers in all kinds of threatening circumstances, especially experiences of death, loss, and separation. These words have been the calm hand of comfort reaching out to take hold of the trembling hand of grief. "Let not your hearts be troubled." No matter how many times we've heard this, Jesus still speaks to us, reassuring us that whatever distress we face, including a pandemic, we don't face it alone. True, some of the COVID-19 numbers and trends have improved, stay-at-home orders have been lifted, the economy has begun to reopen, and progress has been made on therapeutics and vaccines, but there are many risks and dangers still with us, and that will be with us, for a long time. As others often say, we're inhabiting a new normal.

But Jesus' words are more than simply words of reassurance. Jesus is doing more than just giving a hug or a pat on the back, which he really wouldn't be allowed to do right now anyway, because of social distancing. In our text, Jesus is getting his disciples ready for his departure. And he knows that they'll need more than just consolation. They'll need empowerment and strength. So when Jesus says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled," he's not just handing them a verbal tissue. He's actually urging them on as well. You see, Jesus' suffering and death are near. And while he knows that words alone will not keep his disciples going as they see him arrested, tortured, condemned, and nailed to a cross, Jesus does sit them down and tell them where all this is heading and how they can stay the course.

The disciples are distressed about the prospect that Jesus will be leaving them. And what's worse, his way out of this world will pass through painful, bloody territory. So naturally, they're frightened and worried. That's why Jesus tells them, "Stop letting your hearts be disturbed. Keep on believing in God, and keep on believing in me" (v. 1b).

Time and experience have worn down some of the impact of this statement. Jesus is making a radical claim. Put simply, Jesus is calling them, and us, to take the trust that we place in God and place it in him as well. Jesus is telling us to put our faith in him the way that we put our faith in God. Why? Because Jesus, as the Son of God, has a unique relationship with God, a relationship that makes them one. True, they are still distinct as Father and Son. But they are so united in will, work, and

purpose, and God is so present to the world in Jesus, that Jesus can tell us, "Trust in God; Trust also in me."

Our confidence in the relationship between God and Jesus helps us look at Jesus' crucifixion, which appears to be another case of evil, injustice, and death having their way, and actually see God carrying out his saving work, overcoming sin, injustice, and death, offering us forgiveness and eternal life. And eternal life means participating in the life of the world to come, living in unending relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

This eternal relationship with God is what Jesus is stressing in verses 2 and 3 of our Scripture passage. Some of us are familiar with the King James translation of Jesus' promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions." Within Jewish tradition, the "Father's house" was often a way of talking about a heavenly dwelling place. The Father's house was not only God's dwelling place, but also a place where the faithful would permanently abide with God in the life of the world to come.

Here in John's Gospel, Jesus uses the image of the Father's house to communicate the special relationship he has with God. In fact, from the opening lines of John's Gospel, we've been told that Jesus has always shared a residence with God. "In the beginning was the Word..." And where was the Word? "The Word was *with* God," says John. In fact, says John, the Word was God. Then, to make sure we get it, John repeats it: "He was *with* God in the beginning" (1:1-2).

According to John, if you want to know who Jesus is you have to know where Jesus is. And not only where he is but where he comes from and where he's going. Jesus has come from the Father into the world, and now, as he gets ready to leave the world and return to the Father, he reassures his disciples that there's plenty of room in God's house. It's incredibly spacious.

During the coronavirus pandemic, having more room around you has become much more important. This has been especially true for residents of crowded cities. In fact, large numbers of Americans have considered, or have already made the decision, to move to less densely populated areas. They're looking for homes with more square footage, more privacy, more outdoor space, more grass.

"My Father's house has many rooms," says Jesus. "There's plenty of space." But let's not get hung up on the specific dimensions of the picture. One of the dangers of the traditional translation, "In my Father's house are many *mansions*," is that we can get caught up in speculation about the square footage of heaven or the style of furniture in each room. This only distracts us from what Jesus is trying to tell us about why he has to return to God.

The story is told about a pastor who read John 14:2 to his congregation one Sunday morning using a modern translation. His version said, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." Immediately an elderly lady stood up and said sternly, "Young man, I want you to read that Scripture again—from *my* Bible. I've lived in old, run-down houses all my life and I am looking forward to that mansion!"

Actually, the pastor's translation was more accurate. The word rendered as "mansions" is a noun that means "dwelling place." Like the expression "Father's house," it often appears in Jewish literature as a reference to heavenly dwellings for the faithful. But here in John's Gospel, it takes on an additional meaning. The noun

is derived from the verb that means “to remain” or “to dwell.” John uses the word to describe the mutual, reciprocal relationship between God and Jesus. Later in this morning’s Scripture, Jesus says that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. He says, “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living [dwelling, remaining, abiding] in me, who is doing his work” (v. 10b).

So when Jesus tells us that his Father’s house has many rooms, his primary point is about relationship, not architecture. He’s not trying to give us the floor plan for an eternal residence. Rather, he’s offering us the blueprint for eternal communion with God. Jesus is reminding us that what makes this dwelling heavenly is the presence of God.

Jesus’ disciples were understandably distressed that he would be leaving this world in order to take up residence with the Father. After all, Jesus was their point of access to God. He was their flesh and blood way of knowing God and having communion with God. What would happen once he was gone? What would this mean for their connection to God? But Jesus wanted to help them, and us, see that it’s actually for our good that he suffer, die, be raised, and eventually return to the Father. It’s for our good because Jesus wants to bring us into the bond that he shares with God. He wants us to be with him in the Father’s house. He gave himself for us in order to secure space for us in the Father’s presence.

Today you’ve returned to this space where we gather in the Father’s presence. True, we can’t get too close to each other. But though separated by at least six feet, we’re still united with each other, because we’re all united with the Son, who’s united with the Father. That makes us family. We’re God’s children, and our address is the Father’s house. That’s the home that lasts.

The *Wall Street Journal* once included an article describing a trend away from open floor plans to more walled off spaces. Instead of a big central space and exposed kitchens, architects and builders were starting to focus more on one-person internet alcoves, locked-door away rooms, and his-and-her offices on opposite ends of the house. One person with the National Association of Home Builders noted that by offering so much seclusion, these types of homes are “good for the dysfunctional family.” In one particular case, the house included an escape room, where, as the father of the household put it, “Any family member can go to get away from the rest of us.”¹

During weeks of living under stay-at-home orders, I assume there have been moments when you bonded more closely with others in your household, as well as times when you just needed to get away from one another. And as for the family of God called Grace Baptist Church, we have our own dysfunctional moments too. But I hope that during our time apart, you’ve experienced a renewed sense of how much we need one another, and need to be with one another, together, in the Father’s presence. For health and safety reasons, we’ve even had to sit in separate rooms today, with some of God’s children in the sanctuary and some of God’s children in the fellowship hall. But it’s still all the Father’s house. And this regathering is a foretaste and sign of the family life that we, along with all those who believe in Christ, will share together in the life of the world to come, made possible by the gift of the Son.

¹ June Fletcher, “The Dysfunctional Family House.” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 26, 2004).