

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 14:1-14

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One of the best hours of television every week is on Sunday evenings from 8 to 9 PM on ABC. Perhaps you've seen the show, *Extreme Makeover, Home Edition*. Each week, a team of designers, construction workers, and decorators join forces to completely renovate a house. The home usually belongs to a family with very special needs. I saw an episode in which a family's home was in a severe fire and the *Extreme Makeover* team razed the burnt-out house and built the family an entirely new home. In another episode, the homeowners had a son who suffered from brittle bone disease. The *Extreme Makeover* team came in and gutted their home—replacing the floors with cushioned flooring and adhering a special padding to the walls. This allowed the family to relax and enjoy their home instead of worrying about the possibility of their son falling and severely injuring himself. And not only does the team rebuild homes and make them safer for the folks living in them, they also do a bang-up job of decorating them to suit the family member's needs and tastes. And while all of this is happening to their home, the family is treated to a Disney World vacation. The show is full of people who display extraordinary goodness and kindness. It is a refreshing break from most reality television programming in which humanity's ability to cheat, lie, and steal are glorified and rewarded. In religious language, the show is gospel—which simply means Good News.

There are few passages in the Bible that I experience as being as full of gospel as I do this one from the book of John. From its very start—"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.", it sets the soul at ease. Perhaps that is why it is one of the earliest Bible stories I can remember. I suppose it's just a child's image of heaven—lots of really, really big houses filled with long hallways flanked with pristine, white rooms. And in the rooms I see Jesus, preparing the way for me—making the bed, fluffing the pillows, and putting a vase of flowers on the bureau—a very literal understanding of my eternal, heavenly home. But, it was an extremely reassuring one to a child, because of the familiarity of the image. And though there is some truth and comfort in that juvenile interpretation, the verses surely demand a more complex interpretation and application.

For Jesus' disciples, the intended audience of the discourse, Jesus' words come at a particularly intense time. Jesus has just predicted that one of them will betray him, that they cannot come where he is going, and that Peter will deny him. Those poor guys, they'd given up most of what they knew, their families, their homes, and their livelihood to follow Jesus—and now he is telling them that things are about to drastically change—that he will be leaving them. They must have been feeling confused and bereft. And then Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

But he doesn't stop there—he goes on to tell them why it is that their hearts shouldn't be troubled—namely, that through him, they now have an eternal relationship that extends beyond death with him, and therefore with God. He says those words that are very familiar to us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also."

In saying such, Jesus instigates an Extreme Makeover, in a cosmic sense. God—once a far off deity who the Jews worshipped and knew only through the law, is now known to them in the flesh and blood of Jesus. For us, for whom this is a relatively familiar concept, it may be hard to understand the revolutionary and extraordinary makeover of thought that such a statement as “If you know me, you will know my Father also” entailed. And so, naturally, the disciples don’t really understand. And Philip says, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” And Jesus, slightly exasperated, responds, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’” And though I’m guessing that it took quite a bit of time for the thought to sink in, the disciples must have been filled with wonder and joy when they thought about Jesus being with them in this world and the next and therefore, through him, God was present with them also. And we can render just as much wonder and joy from these words as did they.

However, there are also statements in this passage that can puzzle the modern reader--Especially those of us who have Jewish friends, Muslim neighbors, or Hindu colleagues. Many would use parts of this passage as a means of condemning our brothers and sisters of different faith traditions. After all, isn’t it clear—Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Now for some Christians, for whom the scriptures are pretty cut and dry, this passage may not elicit any questions or concerns. We’re saved, they’re not—end of story. But for others, our understanding of God as compassionate, loving, and merciful does not allow us a belief that offers such a black and white response. After all, are we really just that lucky to have been born into Christian families, raised in a nation that favors Christianity above other religions, and afforded the opportunity to make ourselves the judges over all other people of faith. Are we somehow a better candidate for salvation because of geographical or cultural advantage? I don’t think so.

Years ago, before I started seminary, I was really struggling with this question. Although I felt a strong call to ordained ministry and embraced my identity as a Christian, I couldn’t imagine becoming the champion of a faith that denied all others. In quite a spiritual quandary, I sought the help of the husband of a former minister—John Daniels—a noted New Testament scholar and member of a theological think tank known as the Jesus Seminar. I went to him, Bible in hand, with this very passage marked. I explained that my heart and head were at odds—my head understood the passage and took it to be truth while my heart wouldn’t allow me to believe it, to believe that the majority of the world’s population was damned. In his explanation that followed, he spoke the good news to me—he let not my heart be troubled. He explained that the passage is not so much about the denial of other faith traditions, but rather that it is about the uniqueness of Christianity—namely that Jesus taught us to understand God as a loving parent—thus the wording, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” It does not say that no one else can come to God—but rather that the view of God as a heavenly parent is unique to the Christian tradition.” And so the most ideal parent/child relationship between us and God is just one of the promises Jesus offers in this passage to those who believe in him. He also offers the promise of eternal life, an abiding presence

in this world and the next, and that anything we ask in his name, he will do for us—meaning that he will answer our prayers.

But along with the promises, come the challenges. Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the work I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these . . .” Kind of makes me want to deny my belief in Jesus if it means I have to do the kind of work Jesus did—eat with the tax collectors and prostitutes. In our times, this would be the equivalent of inviting telemarketers and identity thefts over for dinner. (At least if the telemarketer were over for dinner he or she wouldn’t call in the middle of it . . .) Another important part of Jesus’ work was healing people. Now we don’t have the cosmological powers to do the kind of healing Jesus did, but we certainly have the resources to help people to heal by listening to them, offering them financial resources for treatment, proposing health care reform so that all people can afford the treatment and medications they need, and by praying for those with mental and physical illness. And Jesus also gave up his very life to do the work of God. Now most of us aren’t faced with that kind of risk—deny our faith or deny our own life. But, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we would realize that there are people all around this world of ours who face the dilemma everyday—people in China, the Sudan, the Middle East, and other pockets and corners of the world where Christianity is not accepted or tolerated. What would it look like if we continued the work of Jesus by helping these folks practice and defend the faith. I’m not sure—and I’m not sure I’m up for the challenge. I enjoy my relatively safe and predictable life in Northern Michigan. And yet, I know that that is not enough for God.

However, I do know that I am enough for God. Just as I am. And that somehow, if I am open to the spirit, I can continue Christ’s work in this world. But, not alone. That’s why we need the church, because together we can do so much more than we can individually. And, that’s how we become like the Extreme Makeover, Home Edition team. We blend our unique gifts and talents—when Diantha plays the organ, and Howard works on the building, and Shirley does the CROP walk, and Pam tells stories about her time in the Middle East, and Corey writes a check, and Connie organizes a Sunday School workshop and Pat prays—when we each do the things we’re called to do, well then we can begin, with the help of God, an Extreme Makeover, Cosmic Edition. We can be co-creators of a world in which no one’s heart need be troubled. We can be co-creators of a world that mirrors the image of our heavenly home where all are welcome, all are encouraged, all are loved, and all people have a place that has been especially prepared just for them. After all, we pray for it all the time . . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And what better time to start than now—to celebrate Earth Day—not just by recycling something or planting a tree, but by using who and what you are to bring about an Extreme Makeover, Cosmic Edition.

Let us pray.