

Disciples' Questions: Where Are You Going?

John 13:33-14:4

John Breon

Last week, on Easter, we looked at the last two chapters of John's Gospel. Now we're going back a ways, into chapters 13-16. We skipped this part as we were going through the Gospel. But I want to go back to it. There's rich and deep teaching from Jesus in these chapters. They include words of Jesus to his disciples on the night before Jesus goes to the cross and dies. But in a way, these are the words of the risen Jesus to his church in all times and places. This would have spoken to the Christian community John wrote for in the late first century. It's spoken to Jesus' followers through the centuries. And the Lord still speaks these words to us today. So we'll spend a few weeks in this part of John's Gospel.

Today, in a little while, we're going to ask the girls being confirmed some questions. I'll ask them on behalf of the church. They're questions about commitment to the Lord, about deciding to follow Jesus, being disciples of Jesus, about becoming members of the church.

But disciples have questions too. During Confirmation Class, I tried to answer some of the confirmands' questions. You'll have a lot more questions through your life as Christian believers. It's o.k., it's good to have questions.

In this scene in the Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are in the upper room, sharing a meal together. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet. Judas has gone out into the night. Now Jesus shares with the remaining disciples what we call his "farewell discourse." Jesus is dying tomorrow. He has this last opportunity to reinforce what he's been teaching his followers, to make sure they remember and to prepare them for their new way of life without his physical presence. Four times here disciples interrupt Jesus with a question or request. They respond to something he says by asking a question, then he responds to their questions. We'll hear from Peter, Thomas, Philip, and Judas—not Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, but another disciple named Judas. Today we'll consider Peter's question and Jesus' response.

Jesus speaks of his glory, then he says, "I am going and where I'm going you can't come." Then he moves on and tells his followers: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

These are some of the most beautiful and challenging words ever spoken. What Jesus calls a new command is a new interpretation of the old command to love your neighbor as yourself. He elevates the standard. We're to love, not just as we love ourselves, but as Jesus loved us. Humility, self-sacrifice, concern for the good of those we love are all in this command.

But Peter is like a student who asks about something the teacher said earlier after the teacher has gone on. You who are teachers, have you had a student do that? You've made a point, you've covered part of the material, and you've moved on. Then a student raises their hand and asks about what you thought they already understood. How many of us have been that student?

All Peter heard was Jesus saying, "I am going." It keeps echoing in his mind—"I am going. I am going."—and finally he blurts out, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus tells Peter, "You can't follow now, but you will follow later." Jesus is going to die. He'll return to the Father through death. Someday Peter will follow his Lord in death, as he's martyred for following Jesus. But now, Peter can't go.

Peter's question/interruption really has two parts. Now he asks, "Why can't I follow you now? I'll lay down my life for you."

And Jesus answers, "Will *you* really lay down *your* life *for me*? Do you remember what I said about the shepherd and the sheep? *I'm* laying *my* life down *for you*. In fact, before morning comes, before the rooster crows in the morning, you will deny me three times."

Peter makes a brash self-confident promise of what he thinks he's able to do. It what he wants to do, what he really intends to do. What brash promises do we make? They can be hard to keep. Jesus knows what we can really do. Peter still needed the power of God's Spirit and he had to stop

depending on his own strength and ability. His failure would make him realize how much he needed help to follow through.

We'll ask those being confirmed to make some promises. Whenever we profess our faith or join the church or renew our commitment, we make promises. We take vows. It's a little like getting married. We make lifelong promises when we really have no idea what our lives will be like in a year or ten or thirty years from now. We may fail to keep our promises like Peter did. But we ask God to forgive us, we renew our commitments, and we trust God to help us go on.

The ritual we use for baptism and confirmation has changed over the years. When I was baptized and joined the church, there was a different ritual with different questions and promises. It was similar, but there have been some changes. One of the questions I was asked was, "Will you then obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of your life?" And I answered, "I will, by God's help." I was twelve years old when the pastor asked me that and I gave that answer! What did I know about God's holy will and commandments? But I keep learning and I keep making that commitment fresh. I keep learning what it means to rely on God's help.

You will promise to reject evil, repent of sin, and receive Christ as your Savior and Lord. You'll promise to live as his disciples and to join all of us in serving the Lord with your prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Everyone who's joined this church has made similar promises and commitments.

Has anybody lived up to those promises without fail every day since you made them? Of course not. As we get older and learn what life holds for us and what living those promises requires, we struggle to keep living them. Or sometimes we get selfish and just want to do our own thing. Or we get tired and we wonder if keeping the promises is worth it.

Peter must have been shocked when Jesus said, "You'll deny me. You'll disown me." The other disciples must have been stunned as well.

Because Jesus goes on and speaks to all of them some beautiful words of comfort. We often use these words at funerals. I read them at almost every funeral I perform. And they are appropriate words for any time

of loss and grief. Yet Jesus didn't speak them in the context of a funeral, but in the context of a failure. "Peter, you will disown me. Hey, all of you: Don't let your heart be troubled. You believe in God, you trust in God. Believe in me, trust in me," says Jesus. "In full awareness of the reality of Peter's impending failure, Jesus calls him and us to renewed faith in the Father and renewed faith in Himself!" (Reuben Welch, *We Really Do Need to Listen* 23).

We believe in God, we believe in Jesus, we believe in the Holy Spirit. We say it every Sunday. But that believing comes to mean more as experience God more. And as we experience life more.

I'm sure I've told you this story before, but it does a good job of illustrating what we're saying here. It's a story from the days of Queen Victoria and the British Empire. The queen once visited the Punjab in India. A young prince from a minor province wished to make a presentation to the queen. She invited him in.

The young man—really, just a boy in his teens—knelt before the queen. Then he stood, reached into his pocket, and held out a small cloth bag. The queen's attendant opened the bag. A brilliant, polished diamond fell into his hand. The audience gasped and whispered about the size of the stone.

Queen Victoria thanked the young man and promised him that his gift would become a permanent part of the Crown Jewels in London.

Years later, the young prince made a trip to England. He asked to see the aging Queen Victoria. She was reminded of his gift and granted him an audience almost immediately. After proper introductions, the man asked if he might see the diamond he had given to the queen. It was brought from the vault and handed to him. He said, "Your Highness, years ago when I was still a boy, I gave this diamond to you with all my heart. Now I am a man. Now I know how much this stone is really worth. May I give it to you again, with all my heart?" (Mouzon Biggs, *Moments to Hold Close* 36-37).

We give ourselves again and again to the Lord. And with each new commitment we know something more about what we're giving. More important, we discover more and more of how great and good God is and what it means to be God's person.

After calling the disciples to fuller faith, Jesus says that the Father's house has many dwelling places, many rooms. In ancient Israel, "the father's house" was the term that described a household, an extended family. It would have been led by the oldest living male and would have included his children and their spouses and their children. Often, a household like this lived together in a compound called "the father's house." Within the walls of the compound there was a central dwelling and several other houses or dwelling places where different parts of the family lived. The goal was for the family, the tribe to be together. When Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," he's saying that as God's adopted children we belong in God's family, God's household. We live as God's children now and "our ultimate destination as the newly adopted children of the Father is the family compound!" (Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden* 39).

Here's another angle on what "the Father's house" means. Earlier, Jesus referred to the temple as "my Father's house." In the life of Israel, the temple was the place where heaven and earth met. Now Jesus points to a new city, a new world, a new "house." Heaven and earth will meet again when God renews the whole world. Then there'll be plenty of room (N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone*). Jesus is saying that with God there's plenty of room for all who will come through faith in God, faith in Jesus. And he's saying that we're truly at home with the Father. With God is where we belong, now and forever.

Jesus goes to the cross to make the way to the Father's house. Through his death and resurrection and giving the Holy Spirit he's making us able to live in God's presence, to be part of God's family, to live as God's children.

Jesus goes away. But he goes to prepare a place for his disciples. And he will come back so we will always be where he is. God's new creation, the fulfillment of God's kingdom, is "a prepared place for a prepared people."

Baptism and Confirmation are steps we take to enter into and commit ourselves to God and God's family. These are also ways that the family welcomes us and affirms that we belong. As these young people take those steps today, let's all renew our commitment, renew our faith, give ourselves again to the Lord who loves us and makes us part of his family.