

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
May 14, 2017 Easter 5
John 14: 1 – 14

Our gospel reading this morning has some of the most widely misunderstood language in all of the Christian Scriptures. To get what I'm talking about, let's step back for a moment and consider John's gospel as a whole. Right at the start of the gospel, we have a creation story.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him no one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was **life** and the life was the light of all people"

What has come into being through him – through Jesus – was life. Remember in last week's gospel we heard Jesus say, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." And remember we had a conversation on what an abundant life looks like? Of course, it's different for each one of us, but a constant that runs through any notion of the abundance of life is relationships. Healthy, life giving relationships, with family, friends, and community, is at the heart of the abundant life.

You've heard of the famous Harvard Study of the happy life, haven't you? It was begun in 1938, in the heart of the Great Depression. It began with 238 college sophomores, and this group has been followed for the last 80 years. The original story included JFK and Ben Bradlee of the Washington Post and over the years expanded to include children and grandchildren of the group. In the 70s another group of 456 Boston inner-city residents was established for comparison with the original group. The purpose of these so-called longitudinal studies (which just means studies that are measured over a long period of time) is pretty simple.

What are the most important contributors in our lives to health and happiness? The answer, among both the highly educated and affluent Harvard group, and the less affluent and less well-educated inner city group, was the same. And it won't surprise faithful Christians. The most important indicator of happiness and physical and mental health, is happy and healthy relationships.

It seems that the abundant life is most often predicated on abundant relationships. Not necessarily the quantity of our relationships, but certainly the quality. Not money or success or being famous. Health and well-being are predicated on thriving and flourishing relationships.

So what does that have to do with John's gospel? Everything. Back to the Creation story in Chapter one. After telling us that what came into being in Jesus, the Word made flesh, was **life**, John says: "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." The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son. We'll

hear that over and over from John. In other words, it's in the **relationship** between Jesus and the Father that God is made known in the world. Health, wholeness, salvation, the abundant life itself, is **in that relationship**.

Now let's come forward to today's reading, this passage from John that is so widely misunderstood. First we hear Jesus, who's in the midst of saying goodbye to his friends just before his arrest: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house there are many dwelling places (many mansions as the KJV puts it). If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, you may be also." We often think of "the Father's House" as a place. And specifically as a place called Heaven. But that is not how John understands it. Nor is it how Jesus understands it. "The Father's House" describes the intimate, interconnectedness of the relationship between Jesus and his Father. And he's saying that for all who trust in him, they are part of that relationship too.

Then Thomas asks a question that we all want to ask. "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus famously replies, "I am the way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Now this statement has been widely understood, to put it simply, to mean "nobody gets to Heaven unless you sign off on Jesus."

But if you stop and think about it, Jesus' answer is pretty strange if he's pointing to a **place** called Heaven that has a specific location. We might have expected him to say, "I'll show you the way" or "I'll point you to the way," or "I'll give you some infractions or guidelines or rules about how to get there." You know, if getting to a place called Heaven was based on our moral performance, which is what a lot of us have been brought up to believe, that's what Jesus would be telling us. "I'll give you the guidelines or the Guide Book or the playbook that tells you how to get to heaven" But that's not what he says. Heaven, it seems, isn't a place. Heaven is **a relationship**. A relationship between Jesus and his Father that has room for all of us.

If only we'll trust. If only we'll surrender. If only we'll be vulnerable enough and humble enough to give our hearts, our heads, our souls, to this relationship. And it's a relationship that lasts forever. Past the end of the age and into eternity. And we are included. We belong.

So back to our Harvard Study. A huge takeaway is that our relationships – the ones that thrive and flourish and are life-giving are a glimpse into Our kingdom of Heaven. Heaven is in relationships. So tend your relationships! Are there some hurts or slights or injuries that need to be mended? Do it now. Tend your relationships just like you would tend your spring garden. (that is if it ever gets to be spring) Don't take your relationships for granted.

Oh and by the way, speaking of relationships, have you called your Mother today? Tell her how much you appreciate and love her. Tend that most important relationship. Or maybe you're like me and your mom isn't immediately by phone because she's in Heaven. You know

that special room in that special relationship between Jesus and the Father- that's where my Mom is and yours is too if she's not available by phone. But you can sure be thankful for her. And send her your love.

Or maybe you are not inclined to be in touch with your mom today. That's a sad relationship for some of us. How can forgiveness and healing happen? It might be complicated of course, every situation is different. Some parents can be cold, distant, emotionally abusive. But real forgiveness, even if it's a one-way street, can be the beginning of your healing.

And some Moms might have children who are less attentive and thoughtful than they might be. Well, that can be complicated too. But those kids need our love now just as much as they did when they were two years old, even though they might not quite recognize it. So love them with God's love. With unconditional love. Even when they disappoint you.

The Kingdom of Heaven is about relationships. That special relationship, that heavenly relationship, between the Father and Jesus is the model for all our relationships. Relationships built on compassion and healing and forgiveness and joy. And Jesus, the pattern, the blueprint, the Way, The Truth and the Life is bringing us home. Bringing you and me, for all eternity, into a very special relationship. That's why we call it Heaven. Amen