

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

I know this isn't Bible Study, but there are some things I would like to share with you about the structure of John's Gospel first-off this morning. This week, and for the next two weeks, our Gospel selections are from John's story of the Last Supper. This is the last time that Jesus is together physically with his closest disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. And, he is well aware of what is about to happen. His followers aren't, so much, though for some time he has tried to share with them just how much danger lies ahead, and how much they will need to be strong and resolute in order to meet the challenge. Mostly, they had signed-on in order to be his pupils, his disciples, and witnesses to his ministries, slowly building confidence that they, too, would be able to be missionaries in his name, in his stead, maybe even in his absence. But now that the crisis was immanent, they would need a more particular type of confidence. So, Jesus, as their leader, calls them together one last time for a family meal.

John's Gospel, from which we read this morning, has been divided into 21 chapters. Now, the author of the book didn't divide it up that way; that was done centuries later, in the early 1200s when all the Bible books were divided-up into chapters. But out of those 21 chapters in the Gospel according to John, five of them take place at the Last Supper! Nearly one-quarter of the Gospel of John is spent on this one event, nearly 25%. Chapters 13 – 16 reveal the conversation at that supper between Jesus and some of his followers, and then Chapter 17 is a long, meditative prayer Jesus makes as the supper is ending, some of which we will hear two weeks from now. The fact that so much of the Gospel story takes place at this one evening event leads me to think that this time was of particular importance, one which was remembered with such profound care, one during which the discussion was so significant that it really ought to be remembered fondly. In the other three Gospels which have been preserved in our Holy Scriptures we are told that this was the Passover meal, that the disciples had some ritual reason for meeting that evening. But not in John. The fourth Gospel says, rather, that the Passover was to be the next night, which would have been the evening of the crucifixion. It would have been then when the lambs were to be slaughtered for that ritual celebration. So, there was no particular reason for the Last Supper except that Jesus needed to speak with the disciples in private, in person.

And what he says to them sounds a lot like his "Last words and Testament". The whole meal, with its five chapter's worth of conversation and discourse, seems so personal. There is no record here of Jesus instituting the Holy Communion by breaking bread and passing the cup, the Holy Grail, which would have been a liturgical action taken from the Passover rituals. There wasn't anything liturgical about this gathering, only Jesus pouring his heart out to his closest friends. In fact, as the disciples begin to gather for the meal, Jesus washes their feet! Such an intimate thing for their leader to do for them! They didn't expect that! Some, including Peter, even say that, no, he shouldn't do that for them; it's just too personal a thing to do. But Jesus sets the tone for this family reunion right off by demonstrating his love and care for his students in such an intimate way.

Down below in the streets, people are celebrating the holy days with enthusiasm, and there are thousands, probably, of tourists in Jerusalem, roaming the evening streets with laughter and revelry. But upstairs in that upper room, Jesus takes a pause with his trusted comrades. He is not preaching to the crowds, he is not warding off verbal attacks and tricks from the scribes and Pharisees. He doesn't feel obliged to work any extraordinary miracles to demonstrate God's power. He can let his hair down and speak sincerely with his friends, without needing to look over his shoulder or parse his words into convincing speeches. He can share his passionate thoughts with confidence and fellowship. He even seems to ramble a bit, repeating himself, trying to think through what he is saying as if kind of "off-the-cuff". What he shares with them at this meal is so personal, so intimate, so painfully honest that the disciples seem encouraged to ask him even the stupid questions. Things about which they might have otherwise stayed silent, not wanting to show their ignorance

and confusion. I mean, we're talking about life and death here, and topics so close to the heart, but Jesus has set the stage for questions to be okay, a safe-place, a secure and loving place, while the clamor of the world goes unnoticed below.

Speaking for myself, this is the kind of intimate personal time I crave to have with Jesus, with God's grace, with God's Christ. I think that such an honest, sincere relationship with love itself, deserves at least 25% of my time, despite the noise of my surroundings, despite my own anxieties, in spite of my fears and confusion. And my greatest longing is to share that personal, intimate time with all of you, that we could be together in spirit, connecting with Christ, our mentor, without pretense or prejudice. That our hearts and minds might be open to God and to one another, as I believe Jesus intended. The intentions of Love must be, I think, that we may experience the worth, the worthiness, God has placed in each of us, in all life. It must be that Jesus, God's unconditional Love, intends that we honor each other by glorifying the spark of God we all share. I am compelled to believe all that because of the refreshing and restoring experiences we continue to have with each other, day by day, week after week. The connections we share with Christ and in Christ and through Christ are precious to me.

And like the disciples at that Last Supper, when we accept Jesus' invitation to that intimate time of sharing, we hear such reassurance together with the ears of our hearts! Jesus tells us, Love tells us, that he goes to prepare a life for us, a way for us to follow, full of truth and grace. And as he does that, he will come to us, retrieve us from the clamor of the world, and take us to himself. We don't need to search for him. We don't need to fret. With reassurance, we can expect him to come for us. Love will find us. Love will forgive us. Love will lead us. That's the promise. That's the Good News. And it's not just the words of some prepared speech, of some lofty proclamation, that's the good news we have heard personally and intimately, as if we were reclining at supper with the Master of Love himself. He has been doing his important work all along, and now invites us to join him, to do our own work in his name, in his stead, with his honor and authority, and to do such good works of love that have not ever yet been accomplished. He trusts that we can do them, and loves the fact that we want to try.

In this portion of the supper conversation which John's Gospel shares with us this morning, we hear Jesus promise that in God's presence there are many "dwelling-places". In some translations, you might find the word "rooms", or even "mansions", but in Biblical Greek, that noun is closely related to the verb which is often translated as "abide". The implication is that God's Love prepares a way for us to abide in God's presence, a sort of place, a thin-place perhaps, where we live and move and breathe in God's own intentions, in God's name, in the name of God's Christ. A borderline place where the spiritual and the physical overlap. But this is not necessarily a particular location, it is more a state of mind and heart. This is one of the most important things Jesus seems to want his disciples to take away from this intimate supper conversation. No matter what, come what may, God's love will abide in us and we in him. The connection can be indelible, indestructible, trustworthy, and permanent. And this promise is given sincerely and personally, not from some sermon on a lofty mountain peak.

I encourage you to read John Chapters 13 -17 in their entirety these next couple of weeks, not just the short excerpts we will hear together. But read them knowing that they represent such an intimate and personal time together with Jesus. And maybe read them in a contemporary version of scripture rather than the old King James Bible, whose language makes everything seem a bit pretentious to us today. In these chapters, Jesus is confiding his deepest, most loving thoughts to his closest friends, and listen for him to be speaking directly and personally to you, to each and all of us. Go ahead, and like Thomas and Phillip, ask him the naïve questions, the ones which trouble and confuse you. Listen for faithful insights. Be in conversation. Abide in Love. Look Jesus squarely in the eye as you break bread with him. Let your hair down as he does his. Let him wash your feet to prepare you for ministry in his stead. Become a part of that dream which God wishes to share so intimately with you. Amen