

**Sermon: 21 May 2023 – John 14: 1-14 – preached in Banff.
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley.**

“In my father’s house are many mansions.” These are words that have brought comfort to centuries of Christian worshipers, and I long ago lost count of the number of times I have used these beautiful and reassuring words in memorial services.

Watch: <https://youtu.be/0Oa81EJPse8>

They’ve also brought no small amount of head-scratching, as I, for one, continue to operate on the assumption that a mansion is a large, opulent single family dwelling, rather than something that could fit many times over into a house. A Christian resource website entitled “seedbed.com” writes that in the days when the King James English translation was written, “a ‘mansion’ was a room, not a huge, fancy house, [so] today most translations say ‘many dwelling places’ (NRSV) or ‘plenty of room’ (TNIV).” A painting by Jan L Richardson, which is on-screen (and at the end of the PDF sermon), provides a visual version of this: a sketched outline of a larger house, containing many dwelling places, some independent, some overlapping.

That helps clarify things, I think. But as the seedbed.com folks continue their article, something emerges that might be more unsettling. When Jesus says “My father’s house” they write, “[it] does not mean heaven. Heaven is not mentioned once in the whole chapter. What then is the ‘Father’s house’?”

Rather than leaving us dangling, they continue. “Jesus speaks out of the context of the whole Old Testament revelation. In the older Testament, the Lord’s ‘house’ or ‘dwelling place’ is an immensely rich idea. It essentially means the place or places where God’s presence is manifest. Often in the Psalms God’s ‘house’ or ‘dwelling’ is the temple in Jerusalem. Other times it refers to the whole creation, or even the whole universe. Some Psalms describe God... as our ‘dwelling place’ (Ps 90:1, 91:9).

“The point is: God’s ‘house’ or ‘dwelling place’ is wherever God is and wherever [God’s] presence is made evident and [God’s] will is done. Jesus assumes this in many of his discourses. The meaning of John 14:2, then, is, ‘There is plenty of room with God.’”

I’m less certain than the folks at seedbed.com that these words do not also include the heavenly realm as one of those places where God’s presence is made evident, but I enthusiastically underline their main point: God’s ‘house’ is wherever God is and wherever God’s will is done. God makes room for anyone that wants to be in that kind of place – a place where God’s love is abundant and overflowing, a place where we dwell in God and God dwells in us. It’s not so much a “place” as an attitude: wherever God’s powerful love is found, we are home.

We find our dwelling place in God as we recognize that God has already claimed us, and we gain a sense of being “at home” with God as we give ourselves more and more fully to that love and all that it implies. As love – the kind of equitable, just, invitational love that Jesus lives - becomes our motivator and our guiding principle, we dwell in God, and God dwells in us.

Now within this, there are words that seem less expansive and invitational than these first words that invite us to dwell with God, knowing that there’s ample room for everyone. Amidst this same discourse, Jesus says “no one comes to the Father but by me” and that, to me, sounds like it’s building a wall rather than opening a door. But Rev Mark Davis, a Pastor and

Greek scholar whose work has helped me time and again, reminds us to place these words in their original setting: Jesus was talking to his disciples in the week before his crucifixion, reassuring them that things are going to be OK even when he leaves them. He assures his friends that they don't need to go looking for anything beyond what they already have learned and done with him, as they have travelled the countryside teaching and healing and sowing the seeds of the new Kin-Dom of God. He's reminding them that they already know the way to God, they already in essence "dwell with God", they just need to keep on keeping on.

All of this, is intended to EXPAND our notion of God, and DEEPEN our sense of connectedness to God, not to narrow our notion of God, or set up a screening criteria of who is eligible to come up close to the divine. God's house – the place where God's love is made known – is not a closed-door, reservation-only lodging, designed to house only the most devout Christians. All who are drawn to the love of God, are invited to dwell with God and to have God dwell in them, inspiring them to thoughts, words and deeds that spread God's love.

And – for those of us in the Christian faith - the path to God's house isn't hard to find, we just need to invest our lives into to the words and actions of Jesus, many of which are EXTREMELY political, causing for a complete inversion of our ways of privilege and greed. We aim our lives in a Godward direction when we do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. As stated earlier, the key point made in these first verses of John 14 is that "there is plenty of room with God" and the God of my understanding throws the doors open wide.

So going back to that verse we started with - "in my father's house are many mansions" – we've looked at the ways that this goes far beyond some narrow way of viewing where God is. It's not just about some pearly gates up yonder. But within these verses – and the verse from 1st Peter on the front of today's bulletin {1 Peter 2:4-5, "Come to Jesus Christ. He is the living stone people have rejected, but which God has chosen and highly honoured. And now you are living stones being used to build a spiritual house"} – the very specific, physical language of construction work is used, and that bears investigation as well.

We've now been here in Banff for fifteen consecutive Sundays, and I want to give thanks for the ways that this building, this physical structure enables the ministry of Jesus Christ to be experienced, by those who gather here for worship and by all who are helped by the things that happen here. Expressions of tangible assistance are provided through the affordable, re-used goods made available through the Thrift Shop. The readying of the manse for the Bhatti family, the playschool that has served generations of Banffites, and the explicit statements of solidarity expressed to passers-by on Banff Avenue by the rainbow logo and the recent Red Dress display, all express a strong connection between the bricks-and-mortar of this place and the "living stones" we are called to be.

Once we are able to use our other Church home as well, once the accessibility upgrades are complete in Canmore, the ungendered washrooms, the accessibility features, plus our pre-existing solidarity with the LGBTQ community and our Indigenous hosts on this land, will expand our ability to extend Christ's own broad-based welcome. And while I have heard for decades that the Church should be about ministering to others, not about having buildings, the reality – in town ministry in particular – is that a building that lives not just for our needs but for the greater needs of the community, fills a tremendously important need. Every single thing we do that makes these buildings more accessible and inclusive, every public action we undertake that creates safe and welcoming space for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations, among others, affirms life just the way Jesus would have us do.

On this Sunday, we consider the dwelling place that we have in God, and we acknowledge that ability of Church buildings to help us express God's welcoming love, or to express something contrary to that. But you know, at the end of the day, we also need to remember that it's not all about us: all of this is made possible by the glorious, creative, invitational love of God, the author of life, the author of love; Christ, the cornerstone of our lives. As we dwell in God's love, as God's love dwells in us, as we seek tangible ways of sharing Christ's vision of a future Kin-Dom, God's own glory is made known, and that is a good and glorious thing indeed. May this be so: Amen.

References cited:

Davis, D. Mark. <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/05/incarnational-truth-v-propositional.html>

Seedbed. <https://seedbed.com/fathers-house-many-mansions/>

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