
Sermon

by the Rev. Buddy Crawford

John 14:1-14

John Todd was born in Rutland, Vermont in the year 1800, becoming the seventh child in his family. A few years later John's father died in a tragic accident. His mother, who had been ill for many years, was so overcome with grief and she died shortly after his father.

The anxious relatives and friends of the family wondered how they would care for seven orphaned children. Slowly they began to parcel the siblings out to members of the family who willingly provided places for them to live. Matilda, a dear and loving aunt from Connecticut wrote that she would take little John into her home. Matilda sent a slave with a horse to get John who was only six at the time. Caesar, the slave, arrived and collected the boy and his possessions and they began the journey to Connecticut. As they approached John's new home this endearing conversation took place:

John asked, "Will my aunt be there?"

Caesar replied, "Oh, yes, she'll be there waiting up for you."

"Do you think I will like living with her?"

"Yes, you will, for your aunt has a big heart."

John asked, "Will I have my own room, and do you think she will let me have a puppy?" Caesar said, "John, she has everything prepared for you and I bet there will be some surprises too!"

"It is getting late do you think she will go to bed before we get there?"

"Oh no, She'll be sure to wait up for you. As soon as we get out of these woods you can see for yourself. She will be waiting for you with a candle shining in the window."

When they got to the clearing, sure enough, John could see that the door was thrown open and his aunt was standing in the doorway, a candle shining brightly in the window. Seeing that he was fearful and anxious Matilda reached down and took him in her arms, kissed him and said, "Welcome home, John!" After supper she told him that his room was all prepared. They went upstairs together and Matilda tucked him into bed, sitting with John until he fell asleep.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

Whether you are a child or an adult, knowing that you have a place prepared for you—a room of your own, where you belong and are cared for is a comforting thought. Jesus' opening words in our lesson this evening are some of the most comforting in the gospel of John. They have been used in music and poetry, stitched on samplers and even printed on bumper stickers. These verses are often read as we bury our dead, offering hope to the mourning family and friends, a promise that continues to calm and soothe troubled hearts.

At this point in the gospel story the disciples have every reason to be anxious. Jesus has just finished washing their feet and revealing the news that one of them is his betrayer. As the supper comes to an end Jesus begins to say farewell before making the journey to the garden of Gethsemane. It is a night when the disciple's hearts are troubled by Jesus impending

death and their uncertain future, they are troubled by fear and failure and the loss of hope. But most of all I think they are troubled by the fact that Jesus is not the kind of messiah they had expected. In Jewish tradition the long awaited Messiah was supposed to come as an immortal being with mighty power to establish a new kingdom.

The questions posed by Thomas and Phillip-Show us the way and Show us the Father-reveal that they do not understand who Jesus is. Even after three years of following Jesus, in spite of the miracles and signs, his teachings and public ministry, the disciples remain baffled as to Jesus identity and mission. And so Jesus tells them quite plainly that he and the Father are intimately united in purpose and mission. All his works and teachings have been to reveal the Father to the world. The purpose of Jesus' life is to establish relationships with humankind, which through him unites the world to the Father.

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places , I go to prepare a place for you ,"

We might also read this as, "In my Father's household there are many dwelling places." A household is much more than a place or buildings, it is about relationships. Jesus came to earth to make the household of God begin in the present. And the good news of Easter is that the relationships he enters into do not end with death, but continue into the future in God's own house. Isn't that what human beings long for the most-a place to belong, a relationship rooted in love that brings acceptance and security? Jesus offers his life to make this relationship an eternal reality. Through the waters of baptism we are adopted into God's family and made sisters and brothers of Jesus. Although the dwelling place may be in the future, our new identity is given to us in the present. While Jesus returns to be with his Father, He sends us the Holy Spirit to be present with us-a comforter in his absence

When the Jewish people were in held in captivity in Babylon, cut off from the Temple, God's earthly dwelling place, the Prophet Isaiah spoke these words of comfort.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,

This passage was a favorite of mine when I was discerning my call to priesthood and throughout seminary. When I was filled with doubts or uncertainty about the future or fearful that I was not up for the task before me, I would read and pray these words, remembering that it was God who called me by name.

Isaiah says, "Fear not, I have redeemed you" Jesus says, "Do not let your heart be troubled." Neither of them guarantees that life will be without problems or troubling times. Their promise is that when the waters are raging around us or when the fire seems as if it will consume us or when we feel abandoned-God will be with us.

Like John's Aunt Matilda, Jesus waits in the doorway of God's house, candles lit in the windows, always listening for our prayers-our cries of fear and distress and loss, Jesus is vigilant and attentive to our needs as we seek to make the God's kingdom a reality here, yet also preparing our place in the eternal presence of God.

When John Todd grew up he attended seminary and became a minister in the Congregational Church. But it was in his aunt's house that he found a home and a family. It was a place of enchantment because of her love and acceptance. Years later, long after he had started his own family, his aunt wrote that she was near death. She wondered what was to become of her. This is what John Todd wrote in reply:

"My Dear Aunt, Years ago I left a house of death not knowing where I was to go, whether anyone cared, whether it was the end of me. The ride was long but the slave encouraged me. Finally, he pointed out your candle to me and there we were in the yard, and there you stood embracing me and taking me by the hand into my own room that you had made up. After all these

years I can't believe it, how you did all that for me; I was expected; I felt safe in that room, so welcomed. It was my room. Now it's your turn to go, and as one who has tried it out, I'm writing to let you know, someone is waiting up, your room is all ready, the light is on, the door is open, and as you ride into the yard""don't worry, Auntie. You're expected! I know. I once saw God standing in your doorway""long ago!"

In our gospel passage Jesus tells the disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you may be also." As a child, John Todd found that a place of his own through the love of his aunt. As modern day disciples is you and I who are called to make room for those who are lost and lonely, fearful and confused. We who know Jesus must light the way for others to encounter the risen Christ and to find their homecoming in his loving acceptance.

Do not let your hearts be troubled ,

Fear not! For I have redeemed you, and called you by name, and you are mine ,.

Amen.