

I was flying home to Seattle while in seminary in Berkeley and I pulled out my netbook to work on some homework. Do you remember netbooks? They were small laptop computers in the days before tablets like the iPad. Anyway, I pulled out my netbook and turned it on. The woman in the seat next to me leaned over and said “That’s a cute little computer. What do you use it for?” This may seem like a simple question, but for pastors and seminary students this type of question can be treacherous. Once people find out you’re a minister, the direction of the conversation on an airplane usually changes in one of three directions: Either, people will then tell you how much they hate organized religion, or they will ask deep theological questions that are difficult to answer in normal circumstances much less with the roar of an airplane engine in the background. Or they will stop talking and ignore you for the rest of the flight. When posed with questions like “what do you do for a living?” many of my colleagues have been known to lie in order to avoid the aftermath of what might follow.

So I was at a crossroads. The woman stared at me waiting for my answer. What do I use my little computer for? I replied, “I’m in grad school and I mostly use it to take notes in class, but it’s also great for doing homework while I’m traveling.” Phew! Good answer Leslie. Dodged a bullet on that one. But then came the dreaded follow up question, “What are you studying?” Argh! She got me! Now what? “I’m studying religion.” I replied. I began to type hoping that looking busy would discourage her from probing any further. I was wrong. “Are you going to be a minister?” There it was. The question I had been so deftly avoiding. “Yes.” I responded. And then with bated breath I silently hoped that she was done. But we were only getting started. “Can I ask you a question?” she said. My heart raced. “Sure.” I responded hesitantly. The woman told me that she was a Buddhist from Vietnam who had moved to the United States as a young child. Her daughter was raised Buddhist but had fallen in love with a man who was a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian and the daughter had converted to Christianity. The young couple was about to get married and she was flying to Seattle to visit them. They had recently been putting a lot of pressure on this woman to become a Christian and she was nervous about seeing them again. They had told her they were worried

about her soul and that she wouldn't go to heaven unless she followed Christ. Then she looked at me and asked "What do you think?"

As I read this passage from John this week, verse 6 me and made me think of this conversation I had with a Vietnamese Buddhist woman at 30,000 feet. Jesus, speaking to Thomas and the other 11 disciples says "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Verses like this one have been used to scare people into becoming Christians. Preachers and family members alike interpret verses like this to mean that if you don't believe in Jesus, you won't go to heaven. But is that really the most faithful reading of this text?

When Jesus utters the words, "No one comes to the Father except through me." he is gathered with his Disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. His closest friends, the inner circle who have been with him since the beginning of his ministry and who he is trusting to carry on his ministry after his death. Jesus has just told them that he knows he will be betrayed by Judas and denied by Peter and that he is leaving them. The disciples are rightfully confused and scared about this message and what it means. These verses from John this morning are the beginning of what many call a "Farewell Discourse" in which Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples and preparing them for what is to come.

Theologian Gail O'Day writes about this verse saying, "What John intends as particularism, many contemporary Christians wrongly interpret as exclusiveness. John 14:6 celebrates how Jesus reveals God for those in this particular faith community and is not a statement about the relative worth of the world's religions. John is concerned with helping Christians recognize and name their God and the distinctiveness of their identity as a people of faith."¹ Jesus is not delivering an address to a crowd in attempts to convince them to follow him. To read this verse as a guide to who's "out" and who's "in" distorts the theological message.

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "John," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 1937.

Jesus' entire conversation to his disciples in the upper room that night can be summarized in the first verse of the passage for this morning: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me." Jesus is reassuring the disciples that they need not worry. Even though Jesus may not be with them physically in the flesh, they can trust that they see and experience God by knowing who Jesus is, the life he lived and the ministry of radically inclusive love for which he gave his life.

It is this expansiveness and also intimacy that Jesus is referring to when he describes God's house. Jesus tells his disciples that in God's house there are many dwelling places and that Jesus is preparing a place for them. This is typically interpreted to be a lesson about the afterlife. But many theologians including Gail O'Day encourage readers to not equate this verse with a metaphor for heaven.² The key to this passage is the notion of abiding in verse 10: "The Father who abides in me..." This language of abiding, of in-dwelling, is common in the Gospel of John. God abides in Jesus and Jesus in God. Later in chapter 15 Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him as he abides in them. The dwelling places in God's house are not about mansions in heaven, but about extending the abiding relationship between Jesus and God into a relationship that God also desires for the disciples and for us.

I spoke a few weeks ago about the nature of eternal life in John's gospel. John uses the words "eternal life" not in the sense that life never ends, but to describe a life is infused with the Eternal, the divine, the expansive and radical love of our infinite God. Eternal life is not about life after death; it is about a life that fully embraces the love of God for self and others. This dwelling place in God's House, this room in the kin-dom of God is about the spaciousness of God's grace and God's love. It is not about heavenly architecture, but instead about the boundless welcome that God extends to her children.

A life infused with the eternal means a close and abiding relationship with God. Our God who is a refuge when we are troubled. A God who guides us and leads us on

² Gail O'Day, *New Interpreter's Bible*, v. IX, p. 740

our journey. A God we can trust and flee to when the way forward is unclear or daunting.

Part of me wishes I had studied this text in depth and preached this sermon before boarding the plane to Seattle that day. As I looked into the eyes a Buddhist woman seeking answers from a still-in-school future pastor, my mind searched for the right words. Words that I knew in my heart to be true. I simply said, "I think God is big enough for all of us." Relief washed over her she became visibly more relaxed. She grinned back at me and whispered, "I think so too."

I often wonder what happened after arrived in Seattle. My hope is that the woman felt a renewed sense of God's love and presence. I believe God was sitting with us in those seats on the airplane delighting in our conversation. I experienced a feeling that day that I had felt once or twice before and many times since that day. A feeling that I describe as a strong push combined with heart pounding anxiety that I have come to recognize and believe as God's invitation for me to speak up and speak truth. I felt God's presence on that plane inviting both of us to dwell in her house. To know that the rooms in God's house are unending and available to us not only when we die, but especially in our living. There is room in God's house, in the shelter of God's love for all of us. Amen.