

Am I Making A Mistake? - The Way

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Easter 5 (Year A [John 14:1-14])

St. Andrew's Westridge

“Do you have enough?” grandmother asked William, her thirty year old grandson, just as he lifted the lid on the heavy pot and stirred the beans.

“Oh plenty!” he said, digging the spoon deep into the beans as steam billowed up towards the ceiling.

“Ok, I'll finish it then,” grandmother said. William furrowed his brow in confusion, and turned around just as grandmother finished pouring the rest of the bottle of wine into her now very full glass. His own wine glass sat on the counter next to the stove — almost empty. “Well, I didn't have enough of that,” he muttered to himself. He had thought she was talking about the beans.

Context matters; assuming the wrong thing is being talked about can lead to a significant loss of wine, or even something more substantial.

We just heard a gospel reading from John, but without any of the narrative context. At the start of it, Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.” The disciples of Jesus don't need to worry about having a place in God's house. But why are they troubled to begin with? What is Jesus addressing?

Within the Western Christian world, for at least the last 700 years or so, the primary question troubling people about whether or not they'd make it to the Father's house has been “Am I good enough?” To imagine Jesus is answering that question is to make a wrong assumption; akin to William in my opening story assuming his grandmother was talking about beans.

But it's a natural wrong assumption for us to make, because hearts troubled by this question were the spiritual engines of the Reformation, and the subsequent re-appreciation and reemphasizing of the saving nature of God's unmerited grace in Jesus Christ, as opposed to our works, drove theological thought, preaching, and everyday devotion for centuries. The correct answer to “Am I good enough?” is “No, you aren't — but Jesus loves you anyway.”

That answer comes from scripture, because the question “Am I good enough?” has always been asked. But, until recently, there was something peculiar about the

context of our Western world within which it was being asked. Namely, one could look around and virtually everyone was nominally Christian. Many of them certainly weren't acting like Christians, but they claimed the faith. This realization drove the "Am I good enough?" concern. Where is the line between claiming the faith and living it? How can I feel confident I have a room in the Father's house?

"Am I good enough?" is still an important question (and again, the answer is "No, you're not, but Jesus is"). But this question is currently being relegated from its position as the primary spiritual question for followers of Jesus. A different question is forcing its way to the fore. In some ways it's a much older question. It's certainly even more disquieting. This question is, "Is faith in Jesus a mistake?"

This is very much a question for us today. On the one hand, militant and angry secular forces claim we're wasting our time, or worse, that this is all fairy tales and systems of oppression. Many, perhaps most, people my age and younger have decided that God either doesn't exist or they don't need him enough to bother trying to figure out if God is or isn't.

On the other hand, many of us passed the enormous Hindu temple on our way here — which is crowded, vibrant, and growing. This is anecdotal, but one of Henry's closest friends is named Vishnu — Vishnu, of course, is the name of a Hindu god. Henry the son of a priest is best friends with a kid named after a Hindu god. Islam's tide is rising too, and we do it no favors by thinking of it as a primarily as a political or terrorist threat. Islam is unequivocally opposed to the Christian faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no more potent theological threat to Christianity than Islam, for by explicitly rejecting the Trinity, it strikes at what is both the most wonderful mystery God has revealed and the most difficult concept for most Christians to explain or understand.

That's the bad news.

The good news though is that "Am I making a mistake by believing in Jesus?" is a question the Bible addresses head on. Actually, the Bible is much more focused on this question than the "Which of these pale-skinned, romance-language speaking people around me are good enough to actually get into heaven?"

In fact, "Am I making a mistake" was the question rattling around in the disciples' hearts when Jesus told them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." The disciples were starting to wonder if they'd hitched themselves to the wrong horse.

It is my intention over the summer to preach a number of times about the answer to this question, "Am I making a mistake by believing in Jesus?" Obviously, I believe with all my heart the answer is "No." But that doesn't mean we should assume that

answer and never come back to the question; we should seek and find not only encouragement for our faith, but also the confidence to trade in our culture's marketplace of ideas, and to do so wisely, with grace and love.

I don't plan to do this in any terribly systematic fashion. This is not the start of some month-long series. I merely intend to be intentional about this throughout the summer: where the readings appointed for Sunday explicitly or implicitly address the question, "Am I making a mistake believing in Jesus?" I'll preach from them. If you get something out of these sermons, but miss some as you're away this summer or at our other campus, they'll all be posted online and tagged with the series, "Am I Making a Mistake?"

This will not be philosophical apologetics, "proofs of God," or anything like that. I've always been skeptical of those, and besides, the preaching task is to preach the Word of God as it is in the Bible. So let us turn to it.

After saying "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me," Jesus says (famously) in verse 2, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I go to prepare place for you." As a response to "Am I making a mistake," Jesus doesn't say, "No, here's why you're right..." He says something to the effect of, "No, here's what I'm doing for you..." This distinction frustrates those who want to keep religious discussions bound to the plane of reason; Jesus binds religion firmly to the plane of living.

The King James Version, that old English translation with its stately language, renders verse 2, "In my Father's house are many mansions." Our translation has "dwelling places." Other translations use "rooms." Let's hope the King James Version is correct, am I right?

Whatever word we put there, the metaphor has an architectural sense too it. So when it comes to imagining Jesus preparing the place for us it's natural to focus on the physical space. Hipster Jesus with his leather tool belt hanging crown molding. Don't you think your heavenly dwelling should have crown molding? And the perfect mattress. And look out over the 18th green on the heavenly Augusta.

Lamar Williamson, writing on this passage, noted that in his travels around the world, where ever this passage was read, people tended to imaginatively decorate their mansion with elements from their own culture — or really as they yearn for their own culture to be. That makes natural sense, but is it right? Do medieval Europeans get castles, and southwest Native Americans very large pueblos?

This line of thinking points toward one potential answer to the "Am I making a mistake by believing in Jesus?" question. That answer is basically, "No, but no one else is making a mistake either." These are all paths to heaven, all equally valid, and

we'll all get up there and find our mansion, decorated in a way that bears some continuity to our life on earth. In this way of imagining things, heaven will be split up — like post-war Berlin, or maybe like modern day Jerusalem, which is divided up Christian, Muslim, Jewish quarters, except in heaven they'll be even more flavors of mansions. Maybe we'll all be friends; or maybe we'll stick to our own areas. And maybe Jesus is up there right now, hard at work, getting our rooms ready just the way we'd like them.

Or maybe we should recognize that the only architectural elements involved in Jesus' preparation are two heavy wooden beams, set at a right angle to one another, and the nails which hang the flesh upon those beams. In getting the rooms ready, the closest thing to paint is Jesus' blood streaming down the beams. There's stonework too — a tomb hewn out of rock, the heavy stone door rolled away. Such macabre architecture is Jesus' preparation of a place for us. Jesus prepares a place for us by his cross and resurrection — not by fluffing the pillows on our heavenly bed.

That was what Jesus meant when he said, "I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus' work of preparation forever changed our experience of death, such that death becomes a step into even fuller life.

Yet when it comes to this fuller life, despite how evocative we find the phrase "many mansions," Jesus gave us almost no details about what this place is like. All we know is it's with God the Father ("the Father's house") and there's lots of room. That's literally all Jesus said about it.

This is because Jesus was not trying to console the disciples with an image of heaven, rather he was comforting them that he was showing them the way there. In his response, Jesus prioritized the journey over the destination. Thomas even objected to Jesus on this very point, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

Jesus doubles down. He says, you don't need to know about the where, because you know the way. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

I went to seminary in New Jersey. And while I was there I ran a half-marathon in Delaware. In a state park. In the woods. After a torrential downpour. So this was a totally strange place. During the race, I knew I was headed to the finish line, but that was mostly an abstraction. Until I could hear the cheering and then see the finish right at the end, I didn't know many details about the place where I was going. But I didn't need to. All along, I knew the way forward.

I think until we hear the cheering and see the finish right at the end of our life, we won't know many details about where we're going. But we know Jesus is the way there.

And then there in verse 7, is the reason it is not a mistake to go the Jesus way: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In choosing the way of Jesus, we see and know God even now. To know Jesus is to know God now; not to have the hope of getting to meet God later — but to know God right now.

The destination we arrive at traveling on this way is not unimportant; the heavenly prize is hardly insignificant — the eternal rest, reunion with loved ones, joy beyond comprehension, the very presence of God himself.

But we've misplaced something if we're answering the "Am I making a mistake?" question on the basis of who gets the best eternal habitation. Namely we've misplaced our Lord, the way. The reason Jesus tells his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled is that following Jesus is not just the best investment for an eternal future, but the best way to live today. For it is the way that makes God known to us today; following Jesus the way we come to see and know God.

To be clear, this knowing God is not the logical result of some intellectual commitment to Jesus; it's the practical result of the commitment of one's life to his life. For Jesus offers us his life — the life of love and self-giving and word and deed - he offers us that life living in us. Not someday, but today, while we are yet on the way. And because Jesus is one with the Father, that is the very life of God.

"Am I making a mistake?" Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth and the life — know me and know the Father." That's not making a mistake; that's the very best way to live. Amen.