

**No Cart, No Load**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

John 14:1-14(NRSV) <sup>1</sup>“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>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? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” <sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me<sup>£</sup> for anything, I will do it.

**Introduction and Comments:**

A not too bright guy goes into a feed store looking all frustrated and put out. The sales clerk asks, "What's the matter?"

The guy replies, "Well I've got these two horses and I can't tell them apart. I don't know if I'm mixing up riding times or even feeding them the right foods."

The clerk suggests, "Why don't you try clipping the tail of one of the horses?"

The guy says, "That sounds like a good idea, I think I'll try it."

A few months later, he returns to the store in worse condition. "I clipped the tail of one of the horses, but it grew back and I can't tell them apart again!"

The clerk says, "Why don't you try clipping the mane?"

A few months later the guy is back. "I clipped the mane of one of the horses, but it grew back!"

The sales clerk, exasperated with the fool, yells, "Just measure the darn horses. Perhaps one is slightly taller than the other one!" The guy storms out of the store, jumps in his pick-up and heads home.

The next day, the guy runs into the feed store exclaiming, "It worked, it worked!" "I measured the horses, and the black one is two inches taller than the white one!"

We need to keep this story in mind as we look at the Gospel of John as just one Gospel among four.

## Sermon:

To this point, each time I read and study the Gospel of John, I must remind myself of its first-century social, religious, and historical context. To neglect doing so is to run the risk of interpreting the Gospel of John as if it were spoken directly to me as a twenty-first century Christian, when it wasn't. So, when Jesus addresses the "you" in our text this morning, he is not speaking to me or "you" but to his Jewish disciples. (Whew! That lets us off the hook a bit, doesn't it?) However, John believes these "you" statements are relevant to his group of Jesus-confessors or he would not have written the gospel. Therefore, we must try to envision the experience of the first audiences with an eye on gleaning the meaning of the gospel for them, and then draw relevance for our life of faith from what we hold in common.

The Gospel of John is unique among the gospels as are its claims for and about Jesus. As Dr. Bart Erhman said last week in our After-Lunch Sunday School lecture, many New Testament scholars consider John a "maverick" gospel. Mark, Matthew, and Luke give us narrative accounts of Jesus' life and ministry along with his special human relationship to God. John, and John alone, among the four gospels understands Jesus in a radical and unprecedented manner. John understands Jesus as an incarnation of the divine creative, wisdom, and purposes of God understood in a unique perspective on the Stoic's concept of the universal mind, soul, or Logos.

John believes that Jesus and God are in effect one in will and purpose. In other words, John emphasizes a common Ancient Near East saying of his day that says "like begets like", "kind begets kind." Which is to say, that as much as a father's honor-ranking and reputation determines his son's social standing and gives direction to his son's character development, the son's social standing and his character reflects or mirrors that of the father. Thus, we hear Jesus say,

<sup>1</sup>"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In this, John understands that Jesus provides a unique and unparalleled access to God for his Jewish believers because he brings the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses fully into the world in his person. Jesus does more than speak God's words or does God's deeds; he is in fact the creative, life-giving power or Word of God that was in the beginning. This understanding, however, has become uniquely a Christian understanding and was the source of much controversy among the Jews in John's community and well as in our modern world. Thus, we see part of our commonality with John's community of faith.

The writer of the Gospel of John puts pen to parchment, as it were, sometime during the closing years of the first century of the Common Era either in Ephesus or Alexandria, Egypt. We gather from the text that the prevailing concern and conflict that occasioned the author's writing is that he, as a Christ-confessing rabbi, had been excommunicated from the synagogue. Furthermore, like-minded people were in danger of being disciplined and temporarily banned from the synagogue until they came to their senses on this matter of Jesus. Many may actually have lived in fear of being permanently excommunicated because of their radical confessions of Jesus, which by this time was formally declared a heresy by emerging rabbinical Judaism. John refers to these rabbinical forces and their adherents as the "Jews", synonymous with the Pharisaical Judaism that survived the Temple's destruction and was in the process of restating Judaism solely from within the context of the Mosaic Law and its various understandings.

It becomes apparent that the author was steeped in ancient Hellenistic worldviews of his day and was very knowledgeable of the Jewish scriptures. However, the author often gives

unique, insider meanings to common metaphors and passages of Hebrew scriptures as he speaks to the unrivaled presence of God in Jesus and his mission.

I want to mention also that these scriptures we've heard this morning are frequently used by many modern Christians as word-weapons to condemn to hell or at least to suspend people of other faiths and assorted brands of Christianity in between floors on the elevator of eternity as either noble pagans, infidels, or not real Christians.

I have no reservations in saying that the definitive way the Creator-Sustainer of Life intends to bring all human beings under the mantle of God's will and on track with God's purposes is through the "Way of Jesus", which is the way of divine love. However, those not in the way of Christ in some form of institutional Christianity are not necessarily condemned or excluded from God's care, concern, or eternal keeping. Again, I caution us not to fall victim to false dilemmas - either this or that - the common ploy of lawyers, preachers, and con-artists. Such religious exclusivity, no matter what faith expression or religion, I think, speaks of a level of human arrogance, pride, and ignorance that presumes upon the very nature and power of God to the point of blasphemy.

So, keeping this in mind, let us look at our scriptures this morning. In John's Gospel, Jesus is never a victim, he is always in control. Jesus chooses to lay down his life, he chooses to be taken into custody, and he does not try to avoid his fate. Also, our text this morning comes from the opening verses of Jesus' Farewell Address to his disciples as he encourages them not to be anxious or fearful in view of his upcoming crucifixion and departure from this world.

<sup>2</sup>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? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going."

I believe we modern believers should hear Jesus and John referring to the "Father's house" and "dwelling places" as earthly metaphors for a unique dimension of time-space reality beyond our human ability to comprehend; wherein, God preserves and conserves the value and distinction of everyone in divine love. Furthermore, to be accurate in our interpretation, we need to hear the term "Father's house" as referring to God as the Father of the Jews as God's "house" or "people" at this time.

However, given our understanding of the extension of Jesus' mission to all nations and people through the work of the Holy Spirit, I would add that such terms as resurrection, heaven, Father's house, and eternal life fall way short of describing the sublime reality to which they refer. I am frequently appalled by not only the arrogance of various religions and their claims of absolutes, but that of science attempting to discredit such a world of mystery and sublime possibilities as well. Please, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let no one box you into a false dilemma, either this or that by leaving out the option that with God nothing is impossible - the very universe itself and all its wonders and mysteries stands as testimony to this insight. Mystery does not mean we don't know yet. I say this because I believe the essence of the divine mystery is what Rudolph Otto called the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the awesome, terrible, and ineffable presence of the Creator-Sustainer, who is beyond our knowing as we know all other things.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus tends to address individuals and to carry on dialogues with individuals by name. These individuals then question something Jesus has said, Jesus gives and answer, which the individual doesn't fully grasp, so Jesus must explain further. John, ever the Jew himself, makes his primary case for approaching and being in relationship with God through people loving God with all their hearts, minds, souls, strength of will, and love of neighbor as the self. And, to this I add my belief that no one, no one, can ever enjoy the fullest relationship possible with God no matter how religious and conscientious they are about keeping the Laws of God unless they are willing to be open to the transforming power of God's love made known to us in the good news of Jesus Christ.

People may enjoy a deep intellectual and emotional sense of the ineffable mystery of Being, which seems to be a universal human awareness; however, I believe that the spiritual relationship all humans long for with the Holy, with nature, creature, and with others can be found only when the human will totally surrenders and merges with the divine will through our capacity to love. This merging of wills does not destroy our individuality, our choices, or our potential as the human life of Jesus plainly exemplifies. The way of the Christ brings life and it more abundantly, now, and forevermore, and it can only come through the way of Jesus - the way of self-sacrificing love for God, and self-expending love for others as the self.

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' [That is, we will be convinced] <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?' <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Phillip, who had been with Jesus from the beginning, asks Jesus to show them the "Father" contrary to all understandings on such a thing in Judaism. Even the great prophet, Moses, only got to see God's backside as God walked away. Jesus says, "Hey, Phillip, where have you been? If you can't perceive with spiritual insight that the Father and I are one in will and purpose, then at least let my many signs, although inferior witnesses, speak to you of God's power and presence in me." The disciples must wait for Thomas to make this point clear; when he declares that the resurrected Jesus is not only his Master but his God.

Now, please, let us not get all maudlin, warm and fuzzy about John and miss this last bit of Jesus' instructions to his disciples:

<sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

I find it amazing that so many Christians want to claim the exclusivity of their salvation based upon verse six while ignoring these last verses of our scriptures. Jesus tells his followers

in John's Gospel that they are not to set around like moon-struck adolescents, but that they are to be involved in practical activities, doing the same work that Jesus did but even greater works that will make known God and God's glory, which are the infinite possibilities for goodness in the world. Jesus tells his disciples he will not leave them without his power and presence and will send the Holy Spirit as Comforter, Advocate, and Counselor. In addition, Jesus says that whatever the believer asks of him that is aimed at making known and glorifying God - not increasing human comfort, safety, status, or power - he will do. Jesus, in this unique relationship to God through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit aids the believer in the enterprise of making known God and God's glory through the way of Jesus.

The point I wish to make is that if we are to hear the "you" in our text as addressing us as people of the Way of Jesus across the centuries, then we must ask ourselves are we doing or even attempting to do even greater things than Jesus did to make known God's glory and righteousness in the world? So, we may believe we are "saved" because we believe that Jesus is the Christ as incarnate God, but are we effective in our faith to the ends of making God known to the world and glorifying God? I mean Jesus healed people mentally, physically, and spiritually as signs of God's power and presence within him. He fed them mentally, physically, and spiritually. He showed them the ways of life and it more abundantly. He did all these signs and wonders to show his disciples and their Jewish world that he was of God.

Sadly, I think much of Christianity now and across the ages, has gotten and gets mired down in claims of religious exclusivity, theological and Christological minutiae, and faith bashing at the expense of doing what Jesus did - healing, mending, and saving a world from itself, making the majesty and love of God known and glorifying the God of "In the beginning" with goodness, kindness, compassion and opportunities for the abundant life for all.

The power to these ends is available to us, you know. However, by force of will we must take the first step and we will be met by the power of the Holy Spirit. So, Christians let us be careful when claiming salvation based upon verse 6 unless our life demonstrates the actions of verse 12.

Many Christians in effect seem to be like a horse in harness without a cart with no load to pull for God. And, if we find ourselves coming up short - let us reconsider our relationship to God in Jesus and recommit our life to God's purposes. Yes, we have the power, we have the Truth, but what are we doing with it? God's Holy Spirit will help, comfort, counsel, and guide us but must await our decisions as the world awaits our decisions.

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