

John 14:1-14  
May 22, 2011

South Plains

### Comings and Goings

I count myself fortunate that every time I have moved away from one place, I have always been able to look forward with eager anticipation to another place where I wanted to be. This is in contrast to political and economic refugees forced to move. Despite my blessings, I have noticed that at the last minute before leaving, I feel regret. What has been even more disturbing in our peripatetic life from Richmond to Cambridge to Raleigh to Reidsville to Richmond again to Jacksonville to Portsmouth to Murfreesboro and finally to Charlottesville, immediately after every move I find myself drowning in nostalgia, looking back at least briefly to what's been lost. The good news from this pilgrimage is that my nostalgia is almost exclusively centered on faces and personalities, relationships that endure over great distances. It's the friendships we form, more than anything else, that we hate to leave behind. That's what is happening in the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel, a kind of grieving among Jesus' followers.

Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples, those friends who have been closest to him, who have appreciated more than anyone his ministry in Galilee, who have defended him from detractors and depended on his help, and who have shared all the joys and inconveniences of life on the road,. Tonight the place is

Jerusalem, an upper room. The time is Thursday night. Jesus has told them plainly, "I am with you only a little longer." But, he has said nothing about where he's going or the circumstances of his leaving. Peter swears he will never leave Jesus' side, a foolish promise he will not be able to keep.

And, so Jesus offers some reassurance. "Don't let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. After three years with me, you believe more fully than before. Believe also in me."

There follows those mysteriously comforting words about what Jesus calls "my Father's house." Some people believe this is a place of heavenly mansions, thanks mostly to the King James Version which veers more toward poetry than translation here. However you think of that place, Jesus speaks of a place, if only because we have no other way of talking about heaven except in spatial and material terms. Along with the resurrection of the body, Jesus promises a new heaven and a new earth.

What a strong endorsement for the priority God places on a physical creation! Not only does God call this tangible world good, not only does God take on God's self a human body, God also promises an eternal place prepared for us. We cannot know exactly how this world will translate into the world to come, what will endure and what will burn away and what will be recycled into better stuff. Nevertheless, because there is a new

earth coming, we know this earth matters to its Creator. That is one reason I for one cannot get excited about celebrating the end of the world (which supposedly happened yesterday at 6 PM).

The reassurance that Jesus offers to his followers, including us, does not rest primarily on the guarantee that our accommodations in the kingdom will have a five star rating. The best part is that Jesus himself is preparing to bring us to that place where we'll be with him. It's his presence that makes the kingdom. That's why he makes the announcement in the first three gospels at the beginning of his ministry, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." "The kingdom of God is near," because Jesus has arrived.

Just as he has led his disciples to Jerusalem, he will lead them again. In a few hours he is going away, but in a few days he is coming again. In fact, he is the way. In a very real sense for Christians, our destination is the way because the presence of Christ makes every step of the way from birth to death good. We are often called people of the way.

When I was 23 years old my brother and I hiked the Bright Angel trail to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately, he was wearing his new motorcycle boots. By the time we stopped for lunch at the Colorado River, the cold water was welcome to his feet. His blisters meant that the return trip up 7000 feet was slow going. We had a good moon that led us to our campsite about

10 o'clock that night. My best memories are not about the canyon itself, but about doing the hike together. The adventure cemented our relationship as brothers and friends.

It's the promise of Christ's companionship in the journey of life that guarantees a good time. "I will take you to myself," he tells the disciples. His going away is not the end of that relationship. Later in this same farewell address, Jesus will talk about abiding in him. It turns out that the word "abiding" is verb form of the noun we saw earlier that gets translated as dwelling places or rooms or mansions. Whatever those rooms look like, they will feel like mansions because we are abiding with Christ.

Philip tires of the strain of all this talk about leaving, and a place to go and a way to get there. He cuts to the theological chase and asks, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus' answer goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." That's why we make such a big deal in the church about Jesus. Jesus is our introduction to God, the only introduction necessary, the only way to the Father. Jesus is God.

Jesus does not say you have to be a member of his church. He does not say we have to be baptized in a certain way or confess our faith using key words or avoid particular sins or do anything. He says he is the way. Well, the obvious question is, "What about non-

Christians?” Peter wrestled with the question, and finally concludes in Acts 10:34: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” At their best, New Testament Christians hold two convictions in tension. On the one hand, God holds us accountable. On the other hand, God counts us acceptable in Christ. Our job is to say what we know about following Jesus Christ and leave the judgment to God.

That is no small thing on our part. And the more we know, the more accountable we are. While ignorance may be no excuse, the other side of that truth is that knowledge increases our responsibility. With our responsibilities comes power. Jesus’ final promise of reassurance to us is that believers will do what he has done. In fact, “the one who believes in me,” Jesus says, “...will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” “Ask,... I will do it (vv. 12-14).”

It almost sounds like he’s giving us a blank check. But, whatever we ask has to be asked trusting in Jesus Christ. The source of that power depends in a sense on Jesus going away. He is going to the cross, to his death. And, he will be raised. On this side of Easter, we have the full story of God’s love. We can see that God loves us enough to die telling the world about the quality of that love, demonstrating God’s love, and proving the power of divine love that beats even death. Having the full story means that we’re in a better position than the disciples gathered with Jesus in the upper room. We know the

end of Jesus’ story better than they did until after Jesus had gone away.

Life is full of comings and goings, hellos and goodbyes, births and deaths. Only a sense of hope and trust allows us to navigate those rapids with confidence. Indeed some might say that experiences of nostalgia keep us grounded. A South African musician reflecting on the years of apartheid has said, “You are anchored in the past... whether you like it or not.” The chain of memory holds us to the past, enabling us to learn and grow into the future.

What Jesus is telling his disciples and us is that he will be with us. Whether our memories of the people and places we have known are fond remembrances with the added depth of nostalgia or painful regrets about irretrievable losses, there is a way through the nostalgia and regrets and mourning. Jesus is the way, the truth about our way, and the provider of life all the way.

## A Prayer of Thanks for the Manse

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the Manse was built you are God, our refuge and protection. You provided for South Plains many years ago a place where ministers of the gospel lived, where children grew up, and in these last years where this congregation could gather for fellowship, education and the work of your church. We give you thanks for every life nurtured in that building. Even as it disappears, we are grateful that its timbers and parts will be recycled to shelter others, that in its place the love of Christ will be shared in new ways by this church, and that it remains in our memory a sanctuary of your peace. Make us good stewards of all we have learned of you in the building you provided. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

God of the years, you welcome us at birth with the breath of life, and you welcome us at death with the promise of life eternal. Much of our time is occupied with greetings and farewells, some of which are cherished and rehearsed with pleasure and others trouble our conscience for years. Anchor our minds in the knowledge of your love in Jesus. When we are filled with regrets, show us your forgiveness. When we mourn what is lost, comfort us with your unfailing presence.

We pray for families that dissolve in divorce, for relationships that bring pain, for children of all ages bereft of their parents for any reason, for Christians losing faith and for anyone who feels they have lost their way. Be a guide and a companion. Awaken your church to opportunities for us to be a friend. For you have provided friendship to us in Jesus' name.

Remember all who need your strength to get through each day, whether the need is brought on by illness or confusion, loneliness or pain. We lift up the names of military personnel: Andrew, Rudy, Doug, Mark, Michael, Marshall, James, Josh, Charles, Ralph, Travis, Allen, Rick, Rob and Andrew. Give to each the grace you know best.

Continue to be the rock on which South Plains becomes your church. In our celebrations, inspire thanksgiving. In our trials, guide us with your wisdom. In our successes, turn our minds more firmly to know your goodness. We are grateful for the leaders of this

congregation, those in official positions and those who simply work faithfully. Continue your blessings for Jesus' sake who teaches us to pray with those ancient words,