

Friends

A meditation for Wednesday in Easter 6a – May 20, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church – Franklin, Tennessee

John 16:16-24 – H. Julian Gordy

Welcome to tonight's meditation for Wednesday in the Sixth week of Easter from St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Franklin, Tennessee. Our lesson for this day is part of Jesus' long discourse with his disciples on the night of his arrest and trial. From the 16th chapter of John's gospel we read this:

¹⁶ [Jesus said to his disciples:] "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." ¹⁷ Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" ¹⁸ They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'? ²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²² So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. [John 16:16-24 (NRSV)]

During these days in Easter readings from the gospels in both the Sunday and daily lectionaries have been from the Gospel of John. If you are at all familiar with the New Testament, you've probably noticed that John's take on the Jesus story is markedly different from that of the other three gospel writers. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke – called the synoptic gospels - Jesus seems intent on keeping his identity as Messiah a secret. When people come to understand that his is the Christ, he tells them to keep it quiet. In these gospels, Jesus rarely talks about himself and when he does, he usually uses, not the first-person pronoun, but the phrase "Son of Man." By contrast, in John's gospel, Jesus is not at all shy about his identity. He talks a lot about who he is and why he is here.

While this characterization is a bit oversimplified, I'd say that in the synoptic gospels, we see a very human side of the One we confess to be fully human and fully divine. In John's gospel, we see more of the divine side.

And whereas in the synoptic gospels, we get fairly direct prose, moving the story along at a fast clip, much of John's gospel requires careful reading and maybe a good imagination to understand. As you see in today's reading, even the disciples have trouble understanding what Jesus means in his long discourses.

Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright encourages us to see the humor in this passage that is tonight's reading. This is Jesus' last night with the disciples. They are at dinner after a long day and Jesus has been talking for quite a while. Maybe the food and the wine have left them a bit dull, but these students of Jesus seem unable to follow his logic.

Let me read a bit of Wright's translation of the conversation in this text:
Jesus said, "Not long from now, you won't see me anymore. Then again, not long after that, you will see me!"

Some of his disciples asked each other, "What's he talking about? What's this business about 'not long from now, you won't see me, and again not long after that you will see me?'" And what's this about 'going to the father?'"
They kept on saying it. "What is this 'not long'? What's it all about? We don't know what he means!"ⁱ

Of course, you and I know that Jesus is talking about his imminent death and resurrection and about his promise to send the Spirit that will be with his followers forever. John sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as the birth of a new order.

Jesus uses the analogy of childbirth. The birth is a pain, but one that is eventually forgotten due to the joy of the new life that has come into the world.

I will confess that John's gospel has not been my favorite with its wordiness and its too otherworldly depiction of Jesus. And while some of the most beloved images we have of Jesus – the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way, the Truth and the Life – are from John, I've always thought that Mark and Matthew and Luke were much better storytellers.

But I was helped in my appreciation of John by the late scholar Gail O'Day. She points out that John's gospel is about friendship. Not a sentimental friendship, but one in which, as Jesus said, "no greater love has anyone than to lay down their life for a friend."

In the new order that Jesus is bringing in, the old hierarchies in which some are important, and some are not so much, are replaced by friendship. In one of the more complicated passages from this same night in Jesus' story, he says to the Father, "I am praying that that they may be one, just as you and I are one. I in them,

and you in me; yes, they must be completely one so that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them just as you loved me.”

“Oneness,” “friendship” instead of hierarchy. In the new order that Jesus has birthed, people no longer need to go through a line of subordinates to get to God. God is not remote but is one with us who are Jesus’ friends.

N.T. Wright says that this passage makes it clear that, in his words, it is “Time to throw out of the junk-room of our minds all those medieval images of a distant, remote, uncaring ‘father’ who has to be pleaded with and, as it were, bribed with the blood of his own son before he can be made even to think of doing something good for us.”ⁱⁱ Just “Ask and you will receive,” Jesus said.

I grew up in a church whose image of God was something like a humorless and intolerant dictator who demanded perfection and delighted in punishing us poor humans when we did something wrong. It is the image of God lots of people have, isn’t it? Ever heard anybody say, “Ooooh, lightning is going to strike you!” when you say something wrong?

But in John’s gospel, Jesus wants his followers to know that God loves us and wants to be with us. That is the new order Jesus’ death and resurrection is ushering in. “I no longer call you servants...but friends,” Jesus says.

And because of that friendship, no matter our current situation – good, bad, or locked-down - God is with us. When we experience pain or depression or loneliness, God is with us like a friend and, will redeem the bad. Like a mother who has just given birth to a child, the pain we experience will be forgotten in the joy that is to come.

A lot of people are experiencing loneliness in these days of physical separation. So, this may be an especially good time to hear that God loves us and that the Spirit of Jesus is still with us. And it is a good time to think of ourselves as friends of Jesus, not just servants.

There is always light at the end of whatever tunnel we find ourselves in. “Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Amen

ⁱ “John for Everyone, Vol. 2.” Tom Wright.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.