

Reflections of the Way Life Used to Be

John 14:1-14

Sermon by: Joanne Gallardo

May 10, 2020

14:1 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*

14:2 *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?*

14:3 *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.*

14:4 *And you know the way to the place where I am going."*

14:5 *Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"*

14:6 *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

14:7 *If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*

14:8 *Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."*

14:9 *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'?"*

14:10 *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.*

14:11 *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.*

14:12 *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.*

14:13 *I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.*

14:14 *If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

I've spent the last few weeks running away from my reflection. I'm talking about my literal reflection and metaphorical reflection. Any haircuts or personal grooming habits have sort of gone out the window given that Zoom doesn't produce the sharpest image of ourselves. My lowered levels of vanity is probably a good thing.

But I've also found myself running away from reflecting on myself. I don't know if it's the quarantine, or being away from others, but self-reflection seems a bit scarier and a bit higher stakes than it was before. It's one thing to reflect on myself in normal circumstances, or even optimal circumstances. But to take a look at myself during this

time, a time where I'm missing others and am generally not my best self, that seems to take a little more work.

The title of this sermon actually comes from a Diana Ross song called "Reflections," the meaning of which doesn't have a whole lot to do with this sermon. Diana sings of a relationship gone wrong and how she's remembering, or reflecting, on how things were before her breakup. It seemed to hit some kind of nerve because while I just listed a whole bunch of problems related to reflecting, one thing I seem to have no trouble reflecting on is, as Diana would say, the way life used to be. Looking at myself is difficult, both figuratively and literally, but looking at the past and remembering that "normal," that way we were before our world changed, that doesn't seem to be too much of a problem.

Our John passage is talking about a different type of reflection. The first reflection comes from the disciples. This time with Jesus is a reflection back to his past, his ministry before this point. Liturgically we've come out of the resurrection story but we have not yet come to Ascension Day. Our reading of this passage reflects Jesus' life and teaching.

The second reflection is to one that Jesus has with God. I am in the Father; the Father is in me. Jesus is a reflection of God, God is reflected in Jesus.

Jesus says very plainly that if you have seen him, if you have seen Jesus, you have seen God. Not yet satisfied, it's Phillip who says, "Show us God and we will be satisfied." Jesus patiently replies that all this time, the disciples have been shown God. How can you walk, talk, pray, and lead with Jesus and still not think you had a connection to God?

I wonder if the disciples did some reflecting on the way life used to be. I can't help but wonder if they thought Jesus' talk was getting weird and they just wanted to get back to "normal." Jesus is speaking differently now than he has been. He's talking of going to see his father, preparing a place, basically leaving the fellowship that they had created together. He made hints to this before but now the conversation was getting real. Jesus isn't holding back. Jesus is in the middle of a speech to his disciples that calls for them to think about something different than the old way of doing things.

Right now, I hear a lot of talk about "when things get back to normal." I say the same thing myself. When we reflect, we reflect on the way life used to be, we think of the way our gatherings were just a few weeks ago. Gathering in the sanctuary, some of us at 9:20, others of us at 9:40 or maybe if we're honest, 9:45. We'd sing, someone would lead us in worship, offertory would happen, we passed offering plates, we listened to a sermon, we shared joys and concerns, we made announcements, and we fellowshiped. We did this all with mugs of coffee.

How differently we think about that time now. We know that singing together is a very good way to pass along germs. Gathering together in a room that's more often full than

not also spreads germs. The coffee station? Full of germs. These are things that people in medical fields probably think about a lot but likely a lot of us don't give germ transmission a whole lot of thought for every aspect of our life. Sure, we do more during cold and flu season but now we're being asked to imagine a new reality. That's a bit jarring.

All of that being said, something new is going on. Something new is going on with us, and something new is being told to the disciples.

I met with my spirit feast group this week and someone was wondering what they were being invited to during this time. And I can't help but think that applies to all of us. Things are moving in a different way. The world is becoming more aware of itself and its practices and we have changed our worship accordingly, to keep ourselves safe and to keep others safe, as well. We can view this many different ways. It can feel like a big inconvenience. It can feel like maybe an overabundance of caution. It can feel distressing. It can feel frustrating. It can also feel like a nice change. Or maybe more convenient than before. Maybe meeting this way is less stressful for you. Maybe you feel safer this way. There is certainly no "one way" to feel or experience this time. For many of us, it's a combination of all the feelings.

Whether our experience is positive or negative, or maybe a mixture of both, we are all being invited to something different. And a lot of how we respond to that something different depends on...how we see reflections. How we reflect on our past determines what our present and future look like. In terms of a different type of reflection, if we see Jesus as a reflection of God, and God reflecting Jesus back to us, it's going to impact how we both talk and act in the here and now.

Jesus starts off this part of his address to the disciples with "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Before calling his disciples to something different, he prepares for their kneejerk emotion (which would possibly be "troubled") and invites them to belief instead. Jesus then talks about how he reflects God, and that God is reflected in him.

As we think of this reflection of Jesus of God and God in Jesus, I can't help but think of our call to be Christ-like. If we follow this logic out, we are called to a three-fold reflection, of course we reflect ourselves, but we also reflect Jesus, who in turn reflects God. I think of those three-fold mirrors that reflect on one another and lead to a seemingly infinite number of whatever subject is in the mirror.

I'm going to make the leap here and propose that maybe what we're called to right now is reflection. I mean that word in the plurality of its meanings. We are called to reflect on the ways we did things before. We are called to reflect on how we are called to be community now. And we are called to be a reflection. A reflection of ourselves, our true selves, to be a reflection of Jesus and therefore, a reflection of God.

Let's unpack that a bit. Our reflection on the past may bring to mind some things we took for granted. I know that I am not a hugger but would give anything to hug anybody right now, and I took the opportunity to do that for granted for a really long time. Our way of doing worship before now didn't give folks who live far away the opportunity to fully engage in worship with us. We were able to sing before. Singing by ourselves is much different than singing with others, maybe we didn't notice that before. Maybe we took congregational singing as a whole for granted. Maybe we haven't before thought of our worship service as a place where someone could get sick, as many immuno-compromised people have known for a very long time.

Reflecting on our community now...how are we doing? I see us being community in many different ways. We have folks coordinating and reaching out to local folks who may be having food insecurity, connecting them with essential resources. We have folks whose job it is to be a frontline worker, doing their job in a very scary time. We have folks who write our congresspeople, call senators, demand justice in all kinds of ways who haven't slowed their work just because the world seems to have slowed a bit. It's also possible that we are called to more. Are we reaching out to our church family aside from those breakout rooms and Sunday schools we do after worship? Are we allowing ourselves time for personal study, reflection, and spiritual practices in the extra time that some of us have? If we don't have a lot of extra time, are we carving out the space we need to work on our own spiritual lives? Have we taken a break from spirituality since we're not meeting together in person, or have we used this time as an opportunity to explore aspects of our spirituality we haven't yet uncovered? I'm not saying this as a way to shame us for not being "spiritual enough," I'm just wondering out loud if we are being invited to branch out or go deeper in a way we haven't thought of before.

And being a reflection. This might be the most complicated part of Jesus' invitation. We strive to reflect an authentic version of ourselves, and in that, also reflect Jesus, and in that, also reflect God. I struggle with this as aspects of the stress of this time has brought out versions of myself that are certainly authentic but by no means are uplifting, nice, or encouraging. I think maybe we've all had that happen. The stress of being away from routine, being away from some people and very, very close to others can bring out the worst in us. Maybe we are better served in leaving the "perfect" reflections to God and Jesus and not setting that same standard for ourselves. While we do strive to reflect the author and perfecter of our faith, we are not always going to make it and that is just what it's like to be human.

During this time, people are posting on social media the amazing meals they're making at home, or the home improvement project they completed, or how well their kids are taking to e-learning...and that's great. That is wholesome content we all need. But sometimes we don't get anything done. Or we yell at a loved one. Or we ate cereal for dinner because it was easy and there. And that is ok too. We are not asked to be picture-perfect clones of God, we're asked to be faithful. And to be ourselves. And sometimes "ourselves" is a mix of kind words, not so great deeds, a few missteps, and showing up. Whatever it is that you're working with, it is honored and seen by God. Yes, God calls us to be Christ-like and to keep striving to be better versions of ourselves, but

God also is completely aware that we will not get it right 100% of the time, and that's ok.

We are also called to be the loving parent that is God and the active changemaker that is Jesus, parts 2 and 3 of our threefold reflection. While there is certainly evidence of God's transcendence, omnipotence, and might, what I encourage us to reflect on this week is God's image as divine parent. In what ways might we be called to that nurturing, loving reflection? It means that our love is both boundless and unconditional. While it's easy to extend this type of parenting love to our own children or some (or all) of our families, what does it mean to extend this type of love outside of our natural borders? If we are to love as God loves, we are to love in an indiscriminate and even, I'll say, reckless manner. And if we are to unleash our love onto the world, what does it mean to love recklessly?

We are being presented with myriad ways to reflect the active changemaker Jesus. We have the opportunity here and now in our own community to support those in need or if we're not able to do actual direct supporting right now due to certain circumstances, support those who are supporting others. And I love hearing about how we're making masks, looking after our church family, working with local organizations, or helping out in other ways. Also, hearing about those praying for those who are doing these things, encouraging others who are doing those things. During this time we are invited to act out our faith in ways that show the level of seriousness we have with Christ's call on our lives, and through our actions, be a reflection of Jesus.

It may seem like a pretty basic message remind folks to reflect themselves, God, and Jesus but in the current cultural zeitgeist many of us are being watched for our reaction to the world around us. That can be overwhelming. Or, as I said before, it can be an invitation. We can take the opportunity to reflect God and Jesus to others, but also not forgetting to reflect our true and authentic selves.

On Wednesday morning I was spending time with this scripture with my coffee and I suddenly remembered a song that illustrates this scripture perfectly. Rich Mullins wrote "That Where I Am." If you were a Christian teenager in the 90s you remember Rich Mullins as a super popular contemporary Christian musician who died suddenly in 1997. I hadn't heard this song until seminary and I remember it delighted me to hear his familiar voice again, as it did this past Wednesday morning.

The song is taken directly from John 14. I think the highlighting of this part of the John passage also has a lot to do with reflections. That where I am that you may also be is about being a reflection. Where God is seen, we also see a reflection of ourselves. As we listen to this song, let's take the time to remember that where God is, we are there also. God is in us, and we are in God. Seeing the reflection of each other is seeing the face of God. And if you take a minute now to scroll through who's here in worship with us, you are seeing some pretty amazing people. You're also seeing God's reflection in each one. May we continue to reflect both God and ourselves during this time until we can see each other face to face.