

Many Mansions and Living Stones
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Recently I read that when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was first published in its entirety in 1952, a pastor in North Carolina was so upset by the new translation that he gathered up all the copies he could find and had a public Bible-burning. What disturbed the pastor so much was that while the King James Version of our Gospel reading today says, “In my father’s house there are many mansions,” the RSV translates it “In my Father’s house are many rooms.” The North Carolina pastor was infuriated at the “cheapskates” who translated the RSV. He said that he had been promised a mansion in the sky in the King James Version and nobody, but nobody, was going to cheat him out of it!

Some of us can appreciate his emotions, if not his reasoning. Many people miss that old word “mansions”- the word that was used in the Shaker hymn earlier. The passage is often used at funerals and memorials, and people want to hear about mansions, not rooms or “dwelling places” as the New Revised Standard version puts it. At least switching to the new version keeps us from the mental gymnastics needed to visualize what a house with many “mansions” inside of it would look like. We can picture a house that is a mansion, or I can picture a community of McMansions. But the house with many mansions inside of it? Our affection for the King James Version is often based on familiarity and sound and sentimentality rather than thought. This week I want to use mind and heart and spirit to understand Jesus’ poignant words to his confused disciples.

I don’t want to get too focused on one word from the reading (there are so many interesting words there), but let’s look at that “Mansions” word. It is *monai* in the original Greek, and sometimes it was used to mean “a place to rest along the way.” Not a final resting place, but more like an inn on a path. It comes from the same root as “abiding with or dwelling with.” Now let’s look at the word for “my Father’s house.” It is actually closer to our word for household – not so much a physical structure as a relational structure. The literal opens our minds to another, non-literal dimension. Earthly houses may become overcrowded. Inns run by human landlords sometimes turn people away. But “my Father’s household” is different. This spiritual dimension of existence is as wide as the loving heart of God. Jesus is not talking about architecture, but about God’s grace and welcome. I might paraphrase it to say “in the divine household there is a place where you will be at home.”

I would like to suggest that Jesus was **not** talking about the afterlife when he began to speak of his Father’s house. This makes us think again about “preparing a place for you” and “where I am, there you may be also.” Jesus was opening the eyes of his followers to present possibilities, not to a future reward. Jesus goes on to promise them that they will do even greater works than his, as they access this deep connection, and enter into the household of God even as they live in troubling and dangerous times.

Speaking of the afterlife, and all the images people used to imagine rewards, there is an old story of a man who died and awakened to find himself resting comfortably in a hammock, doing

nothing. When he sought to rise up and get a lemonade, a servant told him to sit still, the lemonade would be brought to him. Then he thought that he might get up and do some gardening, a hobby that he had always enjoyed. But again, another servant told him that the gardening was all being done for him. Then he tried to play a game of golf, only to be told that the servants would do it for him.

Exasperated, he blurted out, "Well, if I can't do anything, what is heaven for?"

Came the reply, "Oh, sir, you're not in heaven!"

A place without growth or movement or challenge might not be all that heavenly.

Which brings us to the other (beautiful) phrase that is so often misused and misunderstood: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." For centuries this statement has been used to teach that certain beliefs about the nature of Christ and the doctrines of the church must be accepted by an individual before they could hope for heaven. But in the context – the sorrow and confusion and aimlessness of those disciples – this is like the illumination of a pathway, not the clang of an iron gate, shutting. In the context, disapproval of other paths to enlightenment – Hindu or Muslim, for instance – is pointless. Thomas and Phillip and the other disciples were sitting in Jerusalem with someone who embodied and channeled God's love and grace. He offered them a lifeline, then and there: a purpose, a chance to move forward into a challenging and consoling community.

There are so many ways to interpret "the way, the truth and the life": like so many phrases that are ambiguous and can be twisted from Good News to tools of hurtfulness and inhospitality and exclusion. What if Jesus were saying "I, the Word made flesh, am providing a way. It's not up to you to decide who's in and who's out. Look at my life and you will see the heart of God. You will see God's love for the lost and broken. Don't place wall where I have placed a bridge. Don't decide the scope of salvation, and exclude those I love." God's way addresses us in many ways – just as there are many mansions – and we would do well to be generous rather than stingy about the scope of divine love, the size of the divine household.

The passage concludes with the promise that we can align ourselves with God, and then do greater things than we can imagine. That seems daunting! What could these greater things be? Given the vision of Jesus' life presented in the gospels, we could do greater acts of hospitality, spiritual nurture, and healing- in fact that has already happened over the years as faithful people have joined the greater household of faith and touched that spiritual dimension. We have powers we can't imagine that can be released when we align ourselves with way of the Word made flesh, letting Christ inform our experiences and resting in that way station or mansion or dwelling place that is prepared for us.

We all share the desire to find our way home, whether it's at the end of a long day or at the end of a long journey, a long time of wandering, of alienation, of homesickness and pain. That may be why so many people speak of finding a church "home" when they find a congregation that welcomes them and feels like a place in which they can grow their faith. Of course, if a church only puts us at ease with our lives as they are, our assumptions and our comforting compromises, then perhaps we're speaking of accommodation rather than challenge and spiritual growth. Nevertheless, for many people, finding a church home means finding a safe haven, a refuge, a fortress, and a rock. The church may be the one place, the one way, in their life that they experience God's protective love in a hostile and dangerous world.

It is in that safe haven, God's household, that we receive, like little babies, the spiritual milk that we need to grow our faith. We ourselves become part of the very "structure," the home, the spiritual house described in the letter of First Peter. If we remember that his audience was a group of dispossessed people, people who had no unifying dignity and identity apart from being a church, the power of these words expands in our hearing. This was an empowering transformation, from "no people" to "God's people." If one felt like a "nobody" and then became a "somebody"; if one felt outside and alone, and then became part of something greater than ever before, it was and is a great gift. Whatever our experiences of seeking a community, we can imagine the impact of being claimed as a "spiritual house, a holy priesthood, chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people." It was not about literal stones, or houses or priests, or nations. It was about belonging, and conversion from aimlessness to commitment and purpose.

The Gospel of John has many questions directed from the disciples to Jesus, but perhaps none is more poignant than Thomas' "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This is not a complaint: it shows us the sincere desire to be in touch with the mystery, to take the first step on a somewhat shadowy path. It is shadowy because it is not taking us to a "place" at all – not to a house or a room or a mansion - but into the realm of mission and compassionate service, into a household of seekers and learners, into a dimension whose ultimate destination is hidden in the heart of God. In that realm, in that household, in that dimension, there is a place for us all.
Amen.