

“Approaching the Cross in the Presence of God”

Reading: John 14

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Carey and I went to Indiana for the wedding of one of my oldest friends, so I had that fascinating opportunity to observe, as many have done before me, how people move around at a party. It's always interesting to watch people in these sorts of settings, I think. Everyone's there for a party, ready to have a good time and celebrate their friends' love, so they're dressed up and in high spirits. Some of them know some of the other people there, but the crowd for a wedding represents a cross-section of two peoples' lives: you have family and friends and acquaintances from all periods in their lives. So some people are age-old friends, and most people are total strangers. You're expected to have a good time — it's a party, after all — but you might not know very many of the partygoers, so how do you respond? Where do you move in that sort of a room? Some of us drift out toward the edges, scanning the room for a familiar face to cling to. Some of us hurry straight for the refreshments so we can hold onto a drink or a napkin and have something to keep our hands occupied. And some people are completely happy adrift out in the middle of the room like they own the place, working the crowd like they know everyone.

Which way do you move? Toward the edges? Further into the center, right into the middle of it all? Or toward some familiar person or thing to hold onto? The story of Jesus' last supper with His disciples before He was crucified is not a party, exactly, but it's certainly a gathering that reveals an awful lot about what's going on in the hearts of the people there. People move in response to Jesus' presence and words. You've surely seen Leonardo da Vinci's famous mural depicting the Last Supper; it's probably one of the most famous paintings in the world. The mural shows the moment Jesus reveals that one of His disciples would betray Him, so as you work your way down the table you see the various ways His disciples move in response to this shocking news. Some are questioning, some are shocked, some seem angry, and Judas the betrayer clutches his bag of money more tightly. We've seen this painting so many times and the imagery is so familiar and it's been parodied so many times that it's become something of an icon to us; you almost can't picture the Last Supper as anything but this specific scene. But the painting is intended to be a moment of movement.

That's what the words and the presence of Jesus do: they provoke movement. In this season of Lent we are moving toward the cross of Good Friday, which leads us to the empty tomb of Easter, which propels us onward toward the dousing flames of Pentecost. Lent is a season of approaching the movement of God in our lives. So for this season of Lent, we're focusing on the words of Jesus in this Farewell Discourse, this block of teaching and prayer Jesus gives His disciples in the last few hours He has with them before He is crucified. The moment of crisis is almost upon them: what does Jesus think is most important for them to know? As we in our own lives move through times of crisis that demand our sacrifice, or as we deliberately move toward God in an effort to take up our crosses and follow Him, what do we need to know?

Last Sunday we saw that Jesus began all of this by washing His disciples' feet in an act of shocking humility. He rejected pride and risked shame to show them the extent of His love for them, and that was the starting point for everything else He thought was crucial for them to know. Any approach toward the cross must be done in humility, or else pride and selfishness will take over and stop our approach. What's more, Jesus shows them this love in the full knowledge of everything

that's about to happen: right after He washes their feet, He reveals that one of them will betray Him, and even those who think they are the most faithful and willing to sacrifice their lives for Him will desert Him and disown Him when the crisis comes. Jesus reveals that everything rests on self-giving, humble love for others, and the result is movement away: I'm not sure I can follow that kind of Lord.

All of that sets the stage for where we begin today. In the chapter that is our focus this morning, Jesus has literally just said that Peter, maybe the most fervent of His disciples, who has just claimed that he would lay down his life to follow Jesus, will in fact claim several times that very night that he has never met Jesus before. And then we turn the page to chapter 14, and the first thing Jesus says after that shocking revelation about Peter is this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." That's quite a follow-up. "Everything is about to fall apart, and most of you are going to fail when it's crunch time, but don't let it shake you." But on what basis can He tell them not to worry? On the basis of everything else He says in this chapter. It's all about the presence of God. He's telling them that the crisis is coming, and many of them are going to fail and be faithless in that crisis, but that does not change God's faithfulness: God will still be present.

Even after everything Jesus has just said, God will still be present. God's faithfulness is not dependent on us. Our response to God's faithfulness might impact whether we have a part to play in what God is doing in our lives and the lives of others – we can move forward in what God is doing, or we can remain on the edges and try to stay out of sight – but that doesn't change the faithful presence of God.

I love some of the word plays taking place in this passage, just to underline what's going on. Right after He washes their feet, Jesus tells His disciples that "whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." And in the very next verse, He tells them that one of them is going to "betray" Him, literally to "hand Him over." It's literally the image of holding onto Him or handing Him over in betrayal. But handing Him over still doesn't change the presence of God: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Before He reveals that there's a traitor in their midst, the gospel says that Jesus "was troubled in spirit," but then He tells us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He can be troubled because our faithfulness to Him is inconstant, but we have no reason to be troubled because God's faithfulness is never in question.

But this is not a new story. This is hardly the first time or the last time we've seen this play out in the story of God and His people. God is always doing this: promising that He will be present and faithful to His faithless people. He warns us that there will be consequences if we wander too far astray, to be sure, but our wandering does not change His presence. The Bible and the story of the church since the New Testament and the story of your life and my life are all the same story of God drawing near to us, calling us to approach the path of the cross, and staying faithful no matter how much we waver. And yet we worry about God's love: how can God love me after what I've done, after how many times I've failed or doubted, after how many times I've hurt other people? But even betrayal and denial does not change God's love for us. We might move forward or backward or off to the side in the presence of God, but His presence does not change.

What does He tell us about the presence of God? That there is a future for us in God's presence. He uses the image of a father's extended household in their culture, in which the patriarch of the family makes space and adds rooms to accommodate more family. Jesus warns us that He's not

going to be present to us in the same way that He was prior to the resurrection, but that's not a cause for concern. Not seeing God's presence in the same way all the time does not mean God has left, and in fact Jesus says that His going to be with His Father is a sign of better things and greater faithfulness to come. Or, as William Cowper wrote, "You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head."

Jesus tells us that He is the way, the truth, and the life. He came, in other words, so that we can see what God looks like. We approach God through Him. And then, Jesus goes to the Father so that He can intercede for us. He's the point of connection, so when He tells us that if we "ask for anything in my name, and I will do it," that's what He's talking about. There's a future for us in God's presence because Jesus is *for* us, interceding for us, hearing our prayers and bringing them before His Father. Jesus may not be physically standing in front of us, and we may not always feel the presence of God in the same way as other times, but that doesn't mean that He's absent or that He isn't listening.

And then He promises to be present in an even more powerful way. He's not leaving us orphans. He's not leaving to prepare a place for us and then leaving nothing for us in the meantime. He promises the Holy Spirit, His own presence, to be with us, to teach us the truth, to help us see God, to give us life, to fill us with His presence, to help us keep His commands, and to show us how to love. Jesus may not be physically present to us the way He was with His disciples during those few years, but His Spirit is powerfully present among us and, as Jesus says, He "will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." The work of Jesus and the words of Jesus continue in our lives through the presence of His Spirit to lead us further into the presence of God.

Approaching the cross can only be done in the presence of God. We can only walk the path God has for us with His help, acknowledging and embracing His presence. Jesus is the way. So the question for each one of us is this: how do you move in response to the presence of God? Do you move further in, embracing His presence and the path of the cross that He leads us on? Do you hang out on the edges, not fully engaging, worried about the costs there might be if you went further in, not wanting to leave but not ready to take the risks of staying? Do you look around for something more familiar to hold onto, an anchor instead of Christ, something that might be more certain than the challenging presence of God?

Because the presence of God provokes movement in our lives, one way or another, and if we're going to head for the cross and truly embrace the image of Christ in our lives, we need to hold firmly to the presence of God. Too often we give in to fear of what God might cost us, or we give in to the lure of our own agendas and motivations rather than following God's will. We want the presence of God without the sacrifices involved in the path of the cross, which is too difficult and not immediately rewarding enough. But Jesus shows us here that we have no reason to fear; do not let your hearts be troubled. God does not threaten us if we fail; we can approach the cross trusting in God's goodness and promises.

So how does God move you? Does He move you to do the minimum required to avoid punishment, or does He move you to go joyfully beyond? Does He motivate you toward the edges or forward and further in? In God's kingdom, hope is never found in your goodness, your worthiness, or

your competence. Hope is always found in God's presence and your willing trust in God's goodness. Approach the cross this Lent in the presence of God.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)