

Sermon Series: “Good News for Life”
“The Way to the Family Reunion”
Pastor Norwood N. “Woody” Hingle III, Ph.D.
Sunday, March 14, 2021

Have you ever had a family reunion? They are wonderful experiences, and they can happen at any time of the year. Sometimes they happen at Thanksgiving, sometimes at Christmas, or another time. E.g., we used to have a family reunion with Elena’s side of the family every July 4th in Houston, and they were wonderful times at Elena’s sister Patricia and her husband Guy’s house. We would go swimming, eat a great bar-b-qued meal, talk and laugh, watch movies, play games, and often go to an Astros baseball game. And we would have multiple generations present— grandparents, parents, and children. Well, the years have gone by and the children have gotten older and COVID has happened, so we have not been able to have these reunions lately, and the interesting thing is that we all miss them— *all the generations involved!* You probably have family reunions like that, and they are wonderful times. The hard part is saying goodbye, isn’t it? I recall once when we were leaving one of the grandparents was weeping— the family reunion was over, and it had gone way too quickly. You probably know what that sadness is like. And over the years we have lost someone very special for those reunions— Elena’s Dad. So the question often comes to mind, wouldn’t it be nice to have a reunion that would never end? Jesus indicates in our passage today that that is a pretty good idea.

READ John 14:1-7 (p. 108)

CONTEXT: Jesus has just told the disciples that He is leaving them, and where He is going they cannot come. Peter wants to know where He is going, and Jesus tells him he cannot come, but later he will. Peter says he will die for Jesus, and Jesus says by the time the cock crows he will have denied Him three times.

READ vv 1-4. “The news of His betrayal and His departure has not only troubled Jesus, but also His disciples (cf. 13:21). He comforted them by informing them He is preparing a heavenly GBroadwater Beach/Grand Hotel for them and promised to return for them. In essence, where He is, they will be! Cf. Exodus 25:8; Ezekiel 37:26-27; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23; Revelation 21:3-4.” All the talk from Jesus of His leaving them and going where they cannot follow has troubled all the disciples. It is interesting that in v 1 the verb for “be troubled” for the disciples is also used of Jesus being troubled in 13:21 when He spoke of one of the disciples betraying Him. So how does He comfort them? Basically in two ways. First, He tells them of preparing a place for them in His Father’s house, where there are many rooms. This sounds like a pretty exclusive resort, doesn’t it? Have you ever been to a nice hotel or resort? E.g., I recall one of my favorite places was the Broadwater Beach Hotel in Biloxi. Do you remember it? It was demolished after Katrina, but it had already lost the luster it had from the 1970s. I recall we used to go there and rent a cottage for a week in the summer at times in the rear of the vast property. They also had town homes and regular hotel rooms. They had basketball goals, two large swimming pools, tennis, a par-3 nine-hole golf course, and really nice breakfasts in the dining room. And of course it was right across the street from the beach. Those were magical times for me growing up. The Grand Hotel in Point Clear, AL is also like that for me and my children. We have not been there for a while, but we went there a few times when the prices were lower and we could get some credit card points to offset the price. They have the *best* breakfast buffet ever, with omelets made to

order with crabmeat. The smell of the lobby is of old wood, and immediately brings back wonderful memories. You probably can think of similar places that you like to frequent for vacation where immediately you feel at peace. I believe the Lord has provided such experiences to give us a foretaste of Heaven— being in Jesus’ Father’s house! The second way Jesus comforts them is by telling them in v 3 that He is coming back for them, so that ὅπου εἰμι καὶ ὑμεῖς ἦτε-- “Where I am, *you* also may be”. The emphasis in the original language is clearly on the “I” and the “you”— where Jesus is is where the disciples will be, just as Jesus’ desires it! This theme of what Heaven will be like is also a theme in the Old Testament of God dwelling with His people. In Exodus 25:8 where God says to Moses, “And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them”. When Israel is taken into exile and all hope seems to be lost, God promises to restore them in a special way in Ezekiel 37:26-27, “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” This theme is continued into the New Testament as a concise way of speaking of Heaven. Paul says in Philippians 1, when he is in prison and does not know if he is going to be put to death, “my desire is to depart and be with Christ”. READ Revelation 21:3-4. I am reminded how this text in John 14:1-7 is perhaps the favorite one to read at funerals, because it is so very comforting. But I sense it is comforting for reasons Jesus did not intend. What do I mean? I have noticed two things very often at funerals I have attended, and we need to be careful not to fall into these patterns. First, the deceased is definitely going to Heaven. I recall, though, one clear exception to this. E.g., I was at a funeral for a friend of mine from high school who died young; I knew him as someone who did drugs and had a rebellious attitude, little if any interest in spiritual things; at the funeral the priest admitted he did not know if the deceased was saved— he did not say it in a

condemning way, but as an observation which was consistent with the friend I knew. But other than that experience, And often times this may be true, but other times I am not so sure. I usually find funerals where the deceased is proclaimed to be in Heaven. When I do funerals, I try to stay away from this kind of declaration, unless I know the person, with good evidence, to have known Jesus as Lord and Savior. Second, I have observed in funerals I have attended that regularly they love this passage because it means that Heaven is like a big family reunion, but I sense this is a family reunion of the wrong kind; they often think of Heaven as a family reunion where we all get together with our loved ones, and God is somewhere remotely in the background. This is not of the kind of Heaven Jesus mentions here. Jesus mentions the kind of Heaven where He is the center of attention— i.e., we get to be with Him! READ v 3. I think when we make this mistake, the Lord must feel jilted by His bride, the Church. Have you ever been jilted by a romantic interest? E.g., I recall when I was a freshman in high school I asked this girl to go with me to the homecoming dance— my first dance! I took her out to eat, and then I brought her to the dance, but the whole evening she seemed quite uninterested in me. What was her interest? Another guy at the dance! I went home that night feeling a bit unappreciated and jilted. Perhaps you have had a similar experience. E.g., I recall C.S. Lewis saying something to the effect that for those who go to Heaven, they say to God “Thy will be done”, and those going to hell God says to them, “Thy will be done”— because they had no interest in the Lord at all. Heaven will be like being with our one true love. E.g, I recall a married couple who were greatly in love; they were so in tune with each other that they pretty much knew what the other was thinking, like a time when they were at a party and they looked at each other after being at the party for a while and they both knew what the other was thinking— it is time to go home! They sailed together in a boat they christened “The Gray Goose”, because gray geese mate for life. Heaven for Christians is similar to that— we get to be with

our one true love, the person with whom we have always longed to be. This is how the disciples felt about Jesus.

READ vv 5-7. “Thomas asked what people across history have wanted to know— how do we get there? Jesus answered basically that He is not only the way, the truth, and the life, but also the only way! In fact, seeing and knowing Jesus is seeing and knowing the Father. Cf. Matthew 11:27.” We live in a culture in the United States where we see some alarming things going on, and this passage clashes with modern culture in at least two ways. First, Jesus here affirms there is absolute truth, and today many reject the idea of absolute truth. Instead we are in a post-truth era to a large part. The only truth is what the human being has found within himself or herself. E.g., I recall listening to a Christian radio program this week where the discussion was on the so-called Equality Act (H.R. 5), which focuses much on LGBTQ issues and wants to allow such absurd things as boys or men who see themselves as females being allowed to go into women’s restrooms and locker rooms. And boys and men who see themselves as females being allowed to compete in female sports. Tragically, the policy offices of many mainline Christian denominations— such as the Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and The United Methodist Church— has supported this horrendous Act (one can find the March 10, 2021 article on this by Googling James Diddams, “Progressive Church Lobbies Push Radical LGBTQ ‘Equality Act’”). The Christian response should not be to make light of such boys with such struggles, but rather to have compassion on them and be kind to them, and point them to the way God has made them biologically clearly to be either male or female. The cruelest thing to do is to affirm such feelings as normal. On the radio program the person interviewed pointed to this morning’s passage in John 14— there is truth, and God has revealed it in His creation and in His Word. The second way this passage clashes with the culture is to say that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Not only to secular humanists

reject this, but many ministers do as well. E.g., I recall going to a funeral of a minister whom I knew was liberal, and the minister conducting the funeral read from this passage in John 14. However, when the minister came to v 6 he did not read the last part, that Jesus is the only way to the Father. Apparently, this was too offensive to him to read aloud! Also, recently, in January of this year, the U.S. House of Representative Emanuel Cleaver opened Congress with a prayer with some of ending “. . . in the name of the monotheistic God, Brahma, and god known by many names by many different faiths. . .” Rep. Cleaver is a United Methodist minister who represents the view that there are many paths to God. Many may think this is good news, but I submit to you it is, if true, very bad news. But if there is an answer to our fundamental questions of our existence— like who are we?, from where did we come?, where are we going?— then that is very good news indeed. E.g., I was reminded about this when I was with a woman who had been diagnosed with terminal leukemia, and after people left her hospital room leaving her and me together, she told me she was very scared, and so we talked about the truth of the gospel, and this gave her a lot of comfort in her time of desperate need for assurance and hope. If I had told her, “Oh, all religions are basically the same, and everyone’s truth is equally true, whatever really works for you is ok”, she would have found no comfort there, and rightly so.

“What you and I do with this teaching of Jesus is key— do we apologize for it or emphasize it?” Do we hide it under a bushel basket, or do we shine this truth for the world to see so they will not stumble in darkness but travel in light of the Lord’s love?