

ORATING OR BESTRIDING

John 14:1–14

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on May 14, 2017, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

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’?”

“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. 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. 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

I.

In the first church I served, I was one of three clergy and a director of Christian Education who were called at essentially the same time to follow the retirement of a beloved Pastor who had served the church for 28 years. In the final years of his ministry, Dr. Earle Crawford had led the church to build one of the first retirement homes in the country – along the lines of Goodwin House in Alexandria. Upon his retirement he moved into the wing of the home which had been named in his honor. Contrary to the way rules in the Presbyterian Church are now constructed, Dr. Crawford continued – long after his retirement – to conduct funerals of members whose families asked him to do so, and because of his popularity and length of service, he was often asked. Over the course of the four years I served as an Associate Pastor, I heard him lead probably twenty or so funerals.

At each funeral he would read in the language of the King James Version of the Bible the passage we have read from a more recent version today. Whenever I read or hear this passage, I hear Earle Crawford’s voice, see his face, catch his accent and cadence. This passage is engrained into my heart and my hearing through his funeral orations.

*Let not your heart be troubled:
Ye believe in God, believe also in me.
In my Father’s house are many mansions:
If it were not so, I would have told you.*

*I go to prepare a place for you.
And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again,
And receive you unto myself;
That where I am,
There ye may be also.
And whither I go ye know,
And the way ye know.
... I am the way, the truth, and the life:
No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*

I once heard someone say: “Whenever I hear Dr. Crawford read that passage at a funeral, it almost makes me wish I was the one who had died.” His language was that vaulting, the words that beautiful.

II.

But the reality is: the language did not belong to Dr. Earle Crawford. He did not compose the passage. He did not translate it. The language comes from the Gospel writer we call John, whose identity is debated by scholars, who was generally believed to be the last to write of the four Gospel writers we read, and the writer who most used his gift of language to convey to generations across time the words and deeds and teachings and destiny of Jesus Christ with the most sublime and vaulted language.

You may recognize John’s language from other parts of the Gospel as well:

*In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
And without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life,
And the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
And the darkness did not overcome it.*

From John we hear Jesus says:

I am the bread of life.¹

I am the light of the world.²

I am the good shepherd.³

*I have come that they may have life,
And have it abundantly.⁴*

¹ John 6:35.

² John 8:12.

³ John 10:11.

⁴ John 10:10.

*I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me,
Even though they die, will live,
And everyone who lives and believes in me
Will never die.*⁵

**

As I type these words into the Word document on my computer, my cell phone alerts me to a news flash. I read the headline:

Malware, described in leaked NSA documents, cripples computers worldwide.

And then the article:

*Malicious software that blocks access to computers is spreading swiftly across the world, snarling critical systems in hospitals, telecommunications and corporate offices....a far-more extensive problem, spreading across the Internet and unbounded by national borders.*⁶

The thought occurs to me that the very words of the sermon I am composing may soon vanish into Internet mischief. But I print what I have written and write on...knowing that the vaulted language of John will never be destroyed by technological foul play. John's language lasts forever.

III.

Why is this vaulted language so important?

It is important, first, because vaulted language has a certain *secular* value. The quality of a commonwealth is enhanced by the quality of its speech.

In the eighteenth century, reacting against the excesses of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke coined the phrase "The Moral Imagination."⁷

- He defined "the moral imagination" as human aspiration toward "*right order* in the *soul* and *right order* in the *commonwealth*."
- Burke saw in the power of language – literature, poetry, biography, philosophy, theology, even childhood fantasy – the capacity to *quicken* the moral imagination of human beings of all ages and cultures.
- Following his lead centuries later, Russell Kirk wrote:⁸
 - "The end of great books is *ethical*—to teach us what it means to be *genuinely human*."

⁵ John 11:25.

⁶ Newsfeed from *The Washington Post* 5/12/17.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

⁸ Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," in *Literature and Belief* Volume I, (1981), pages 37-49. Available at <http://www.kirkcenter.org/index.php/detail/the-moral-imagination/>.

- “Reading of *great lives* does something to make *decent lives*.”
- Burke pointed to *imaginative* and *beautiful* writers like John – rather than *didactic* or *moralistic* writers – as having a *greater* influence on our moral imaginations and therefore the *quality* and *character* of our *civilization*.
 - “The better the artist,” Kirk said, “the more subtle the preacher.”
 - “Imaginative *persuasion*, not blunt *exhortation*... is the method of the literary champion of norms.”

One of the truths I have come to believe is this:

- There is value in the language of the church – its liturgies, its prayers, its hymns, its anthems, its sermons – being a little more exalted, a little more dense, perhaps even a little more mystical than the language of the street, the classroom, the soccer field, the family vacation.
- When we enter a sanctuary, we are not necessarily meant to immediately to understand everything we see or hear or read or sing or recite.
- There is value in our hearts and minds being stretched *upward* rather than remaining *flattened* and aesthetically *unchallenged*.

Vaulted language lifts our souls.

**

On our recent trip to Israel, one of the members of the entourage was a Roman Catholic woman from Springfield.

On these trips there is a tight time line at each stop, and for security reasons, the group must remain together. It often falls to us who lead to be “the enforcers.”

At one stop we are at a beautiful Catholic church which was filled with worshippers and in which the Mass was being said in Arabic. Most members of the group had peeled off to return to the bus, but the woman from Springfield remained behind, in the pew. I tapped her on the shoulder. “We need to go.” “I would just like to stay through the reading of the Gospel,” she said. I couldn’t say no. So she and I stood, along with hundreds of others, as the lengthy passage was read. It was, of course, in Arabic, which neither she nor I understood. But it was beautiful.

My friends, religious language makes a contribution to civilization – to “right order in the soul” and “right order in the commonwealth” – apart from and beyond the particular religious views of those using the language, creating the art, or standing in the presence of either.

IV.

But at a deeper, more *theological* level: I focus on the religious language of John because as John lifts our hearts or souls toward heaven, we come *closer to believing* than in any other form of language or discourse in which we engage.

Let me illustrate:

In today's passage, John attributes to Jesus the words: "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

That is a straightforward proposition. Across the centuries, Christians have lifted this verse from its context, asked it to stand alone, and used it to argue such theological points as:

- In order to be *saved*, one must *specifically* believe in Jesus Christ.
- What Jesus Christ preaches and teaches is the *only* way for the human race to follow, the *only* ultimate truth for the human race to believe, and the *only* ultimate life for human beings to live.

While as a Christian and a Presbyterian I believe that

- What we know of Jesus Christ *embodies* what we know of God
- And that whatever *grace and salvation* God chooses to bestow upon human beings is given *through* Christ – perhaps even *retroactively* in a way that transcends our understanding of time and that is larger than our capacity to understand

But I also believe that

- To use these two sentences in a way that they become a specific confession of faith and individual *must* make or a specific conversion experience through which an individual *must* pass *in order to be saved* lessens the beauty and power of the way John's language about Christ can actually lift our souls into his presence and lead us to belief.
- In a context in which disciples are confused and fearful of his leaving – "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" – Christ is saying, with calm reassurance, "You have seen the Father because you have seen me. I am the way, the truth, and the life."
- Jesus is expressing exalted reassurance, not a call to conversion or theological precision.

In John, Jesus does not come as one who "orates" truth *at* us, but as one who "bestrides" earth and heaven and *lifts* us from one to the other. As my friend Patrick Willson writes, Jesus' language in John does not "*exhort* or *explain* but *exalts*."⁹ And it is that *exalting* that actually brings us closer to God. It is his "bestriding," rather than our "orating," which draws us into the realm of Father, Son, and Spirit.

V.

I want to close with another story from the trip.

Our trip had forty-one people, about evenly split between Jews and Christians. It was led by two rabbis and two ministers (which sounds like a bad joke) with my wife Maggie and me being the two ministers. Maggie and I long realized that the hotel in which we were staying during the first Sunday of the trip was on the Sea of Galilee, and we would have the opportunity to lead a sunrise communion service – *together* – on the very shores in which Jesus called his first disciples.

⁹ Paper on John 14:1-14, Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2017.

So we planned the service together, chose the hymns we thought people could sing acapella, put together a bulletin, had it printed in our office, made sure we secured bread and (yes – real) wine, chose the spot on the beach, took a hotel towel and beachside end table to make a chancel, set everything up, and were thrilled when most everyone on the trip – Jews and Christians alike – joined us for the service.

We conducted the service, read the liturgy, served the bread and wine to those who chose to partake, then began to clean up, gather our materials, and do what ministers do sixty seconds after a service is over – perform an autopsy:

“Do you think the hymns worked?”

“Could people hear us?”

“Sorry I messed up that line.”

As we were cleaning up and analyzing the service, our friend Rabbi Jack Moline came up to us and said: “Listen, you two: Did you not hear the words you just sang: ‘When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun....’?”

Then he said: “The sun is rising. There are your knees. Have at it.”

So the two of us, who so rarely get to worship together and who had never before served communion together, obeyed the rabbi, spread the towel on the edge of the sea, fell on our knees with our face to the rising sun. And when we picked the towel up, it seemed to sparkle.

In that elevated moment, in the presence of Christ who was *bestriding* heaven and earth, we were closer to God than during any oration either of us had just delivered. And the worship brought – at least momentarily – “right order” to our souls, and perhaps even a bit of “right order” to our commonwealth.

Amen.