

To Prepare a Place for You

John 14.1-6

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‘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.

A week from tomorrow, on May 22, our oldest member, the beautiful and radiant Glorie Steele, will celebrate her 102nd birthday. That’s also the age my mother would have been, were she still with us. Once upon a time, 102 would have seemed unimaginably old to me. Now, it just seems like the furthest neighborhood in a big city, not the furthest planet in the solar system.

My mother always seemed more worldly wise than my friend’s mothers, most of whom were vivacious young homemakers and Cub Scout den leaders. She seemed that way because she was older than they were. She was 37 when I appeared on the scene, 38 when my sister was born. I once would have thought that was a little late to start off in the birthing business. Not anymore. Now I am the age-inappropriate father of a nine year old daughter who periodically implies that I’m older than dirt.

I know it will get worse as she careens into adolescence. Parents, regardless of age, tend to be chronic embarrassments to their teenage offspring. Having Emma's geriatric father meet her junior high classmates will likely incite stratospheric social humiliation. I envision the scenario. Clarissa and Hermione, her brand new BFFs (Best Friends forever) have suddenly seen Emma in the grocery store. She is putting provisions in the cart that I am pushing, so they know there is some kind of connection there. "Hi, Emma!" they will greet her. After she catches up on the latest news while pointedly ignoring me, they will politely ask, "Is this your grandfather?" I envision her response. "No. This is my elderly butler."

At the moment, my advanced age is not an embarrassment, but a source of wry amusement, like a six-toed cat. Maybe someday having an older father will be a source of inspiration. Maybe she'll write her Master's thesis on the origins of the AARP. Or...who knows? Maybe she'll go into medicine and try to find a cure for Alzheimer's. We tend to have high aspirations for our children. My mother certainly had high aspirations for hers.

I miss my mother a lot, and I'm looking forward to being with her again, though hopefully not for a while. Though I have an ever-growing list of loved ones in heaven, I'd still like to stick around for a while and see how the young people in my life turn out. That said, the older we get, the more familiar grief becomes. Despite its increasing familiarity, it never ceases to hurt. The higher the love, the deeper the grief. And leave takings

are always hard. Whether it's teenagers who have fallen in love for the first time at a summer camp and are dealing with the anguish of parting, or parents packing their high school graduates off to college, or wives or husbands saying good-bye to their military spouses as they head overseas on a long deployment, or families standing around the bedside of a loved one in hospice, separating can be really hard. Of course, there are degrees of pain separation, as we come to know from experience. It is different sending a child off to college than it is sending one off to Iraq; it is different saying good-bye at summer camp and good-bye at hospice.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus is taking leave of his disciples. But he's not saying good-bye to them because he's going to suffer and die on a cross the next morning. Even though the terrible agony of the crucifixion is imminent, Jesus has already told his disciples that he will rise again on the third day. Of course, once they heard the "suffer many things and die" part, they pretty much forgot the part that came afterwards. What he's preparing them for in our scripture reading is his upcoming ascension into heaven. He tries to reassure them: "In my Father's house are many dwelling places; I go now to prepare a place for *you*, so that where I am *you* may be also." Jesus wasn't going to abscond, leaving them abandoned; he was going to ascend. He was doing that to prepare a place for them. He was going to make them a home.

In the Greek of the New Testament, there are two words for time. One word is *chronos*, which means human time, as in minutes, hours, days

and years; we get the word “chronological” from *chronos*. We see the effect of *chronos* in every new wrinkle, in every inch our child grows, in every repair we need to make in our home. The other word for time is *kairos*, which basically means “God’s time.” When will we know the fullness of the joy Jesus has promised us in a heavenly reunion? In God’s good time.

Several years ago, I was with the Exie and Tony Nicholas family at a hospital in Fort Worth as we awaited word from the surgeon about how their beloved wife and mother, our wonderful Exie, was doing. You know what it’s like when you’re waiting for a loved one to come out of surgery—the time drags by, and you always wonder when the doctor’s going to come out to tell you how things went. Their daughter Amy quoted something George W. Bush had said about his time in the White House: “The days were long, but the years were short.” A few years ago, the great Christian evangelist Billy Graham was asked what impressed him the most about all his years of his ministry. “How quickly they all passed by,” he said. I’m discovering the truth of that.

As Christians, we dwell in both *chronos* and *kairos*, and cannot ignore either one. There is urgency in some things upon this earth: minutes, even seconds, do matter. Before we reach our heavenly dwelling place, we have to take care of our earthly one, right here, right now. As long as we dwell upon the earth, we are commanded to fight the good fight, to finish the race, and to keep the faith, even as we recall, with deep

gratitude, that in God the Father's house there are many dwelling places, and that our Lord Jesus Christ has gone to prepare one for us. The last words of the great English poet Joseph Addison, who died in 1719, seem fitting. Shortly before he passed, he called his stepson to his side, and said, "See in what peace a Christian can die."

More and more, I feel profound gratitude to all the mothers who granted us the great mercy of bringing us into the world. Every one of us here today had a birth mother. Our first home was that mother's womb. I also feel profound gratitude for those who became mothers by love, the women who, with kindness and grace, cared for the children who were not knit together in their wombs. God bless all of those mothers.

When I was born, my mother was staying with her mother at the family farm outside of South Hill, Virginia. She was with her mother because my father was overseas. He had served during World War II and was recalled to active duty when the Korean War broke out. Though his overseas assignment when he was recalled was in occupied Germany rather than in the crucible of Korea, his return to active duty must have made my mother anxious. Because she was stoic by nature, she would have repressed that anxiety. During World War II, before she met my father, she was an unmarried teacher in Bedford, Virginia. Bedford, with a population of about 3,200, lost more young men per capita during the Normandy Invasion—19 on D-Day, three more during the rest of the

Normandy campaign—than any other place in America, which is why the National D-Day Memorial is there. Though she would have been older than most of “the Bedford Boys” (she was 29 on D-Day), I suspect, given the size of the town, that she knew some of the fallen. I am quite confident she would have known some of their mothers. The death of a child is, I am convinced, the hardest of all griefs. It is also, I think, the most sacred, for it is the one the Blessed Virgin Mary knew. And just as Mary saw the resurrection of her child, so stricken parents, through faith Jesus Christ, have the blessed hope of seeing theirs.

The only family pictures in which my mother beams with pleasure are the ones in which she is with her young children and grandchildren. When my sister and I once expressed deep envy over the affluence of a neighbor (implicitly accusing our schoolteacher mother and NCO father of shorting us in the blatant consumerism department), she told us about Cornelia, a Roman mother whose patrician neighbor asked to see her jewelry. Cornelia brought out her children and said, “Here are my jewels.” “And you two,” our mother said, “are mine.” She invested heavily in securities like education, character formation, and piano lessons. To my unceasing regret, I quit the piano lessons early on. I like to hope that to a certain extent, the other two stuck.

We Christians remember the young mother Mary, especially at Christmas time. But there was another mother on the scene. Her name was Elizabeth, Mary’s kinswoman, and she and her husband Zechariah were

old and childless. Just as the angel Gabriel made great promises to Mary, so Gabriel made great promises about Elizabeth and Zechariah's child. "You will have joy and gladness," Gabriel declared, "and many will rejoice at his birth..."

Mary learned of Elizabeth's astonishing expectancy from none other than Gabriel himself, and made her way to where Elizabeth abided. She rejoiced with Mary, and Mary with her. There is a lovely passage that tells of Mary's arrival at Elizabeth's home. The baby in Elizabeth's womb "leapt for joy" at the proximity of the baby in Mary's [Luke 1.39-41]. They were together for three months, and after they parted old Elizabeth gave birth to John (later surnamed "the Baptist") and young Mary gave birth to Jesus. Then they both got on with the hard work of being "blessed." It was hard being their mothers. It was especially hard for Mary. From giving birth in a stable, to becoming a refugee in Egypt; from hearing her son ask a large crowd, "Who is my mother?" to watching him die on a cross before her eyes, it was hard to be Jesus' mother. His last words to her before he died had to do with her motherhood, when he said to the Beloved Disciple (possibly John), "Son, behold your mother; mother, behold your son" [John 19.25-27]. The blessing of motherhood does not mean a life without sorrows or struggle. It means that one is an instrument of God's grace.

When Winston Churchill recalled the woman who did the most to raise him (not, as it happened, his imperious biological mother, but a

beloved nurse he called “Woom”), he quoted Edward Gibbon: “If there be any, as I trust there are some, who rejoice that I live, to that dear and excellent woman, their gratitude is due.”

Thank you to all of you who have served as mother, to all of those to whom gratitude is due. Thank you, Mary. Thank you, Elizabeth. And thank you, Nell, mother of David and Linda.

Dear Lord, if you could pass this on to her, I would be ever so grateful:

Mom, I love you so much, and I'm looking forward to catching up. We'll have a lot of time to do that. But for now, thank you for all you taught me. I finally paid attention. You were right, and I'm doing much better now.

Thank you, Lord.

Amen.