

God Prepares a Place for Us-Here and Now

John 14:1-7

May 7, 2023

Prayer: God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our minds, lead us to your wisdom in our day. Amen.

John Odegard tells this story:

Typically, when you enter the Boundary Waters, you are using a canoe to get around. You might enter in one area, load all of your equipment, food, clothing into the canoe and paddle across a lake, and then you take everything out and carry it through the woods to the next lake, where you load it all up and paddle across again. Whether you like to move camp sites each day or plant yourself in one spot for a week, typically the goal is to pack light. Remembering that everything you bring will be carried on your back at some point.

A few years ago, some friends and I decided to take a very different kind of trip into the boundary waters. We decided to pack as heavy as we possibly could. Heavy enough that our boats were filled to the top, and it looked like we were pushing a barge through the lake. We planned to find a spot and stay put.

Where typically one would forgo all of the comforts of home, this time we brought lawn chairs, a cooler full of steaks and brats frozen to last the week, as well as fresh potatoes and onions. We had hammocks and tents for everyone, and even ended up with an extra, because when you are bringing everything, you don't always realize you have over packed. We had a small table to cook at, a coffee press and fresh roasted beans to keep us awake all night as we played some quiet songs on the guitar that we squeezed into the boat as well.

We were going to enjoy ourselves in our secluded slice of paradise. Even when a thunderstorm that evening bent the trees so low that my hammock was resting flat against the ground, I wasn't worried about not being able to sleep comfortably. Though I had to quickly take down my own hammock and tarps to keep them from being torn apart in the wind, I found plenty of room in the 4-person tent my friend had brought for himself. We weren't even crowded as we watched an old movie on his phone before sleeping like a log.

After a hearty breakfast of biscuits and gravy, I set up my hammock again, and I took a 4-hour nap, because you can do that kind of thing there, and because the waves were still a foot high on the lake and too wild to want to go anywhere. I slept until I was awoken by the sound of a boat thumping up onto shore in my quiet and secluded corner of the island and I looked up to see two of the most tired and worn-out people I have ever met.

Now part of the appeal of the Boundary Waters is that you are secluded. The idea is to avoid other groups as much as possible to preserve the wilderness and to be respectful. To have unexpected visitors hit the shore ten feet from your hammock is more than a little unusual. I walked over to see what had brought them here and found that while I had a safe and comfortable place to rest in the storm, they had been anxiously awaiting the opportunity to leave the wilderness.

While I ate my breakfast that was better than what I usually eat at home, they were loading their boat early that morning hoping to be out soon. And while I took a 4-hour nap, they were fighting those foot high waves until their boat flipped, half of their belongings were lost, their tent, their clothes, and more; and they clung to what they could hold on to for several hours in the very cold water.

In the middle of this giant lake, they couldn't set their boat right, so they just floated in the wind and the waves until they finally found a large rock they could climb onto. They turned the boat over and set off again, hoping they would make it.

Trying only to keep from flipping again, and going only where the waves led them, they had found this shore. Unsure of where exactly they were on the lake, or how close to home they might be. Now they were not sure if they would be welcome crashing our party, so they were quite apologetic. They asked if they could only rest a moment and then be pointed in the right direction.

I wonder how the words we find in our scripture lesson this morning -

Do not let your hearts be troubled... I go to prepare a place for you? Would have fall on the ears of those washed ashore – those who found safe shelter and a warm welcome with John and his friends.

Most often I read this passage at funerals and read in the context of loss and grief, many find comfort in Jesus' promise - that he goes to prepare a place for those we love who have died. There is comfort too knowing that there is perhaps something more for them and for us when it is time to leave this life.

The King James Version of the bible – suggests that Jesus goes to prepare more than just a place - Jesus goes to prepare many mansions – The King James Version bumps things up a notch. Now a mansion is bit more swanky then a dwelling place. This version of the Bible, gets us thinking that there might be some fancy reward when we are done in this life if we live this life extra well – mansions await - However modern scholars have down graded our abode on high - convinced that a more accurate translation is “dwelling place”. And quite frankly that is more our Jesus style – he wasn't very interested in fancy things and earning our keep– he was more interested in heart things.

Not only do scholars suggest that Jesus goes to prepare a more simple dwelling for us but some suggest that Jesus might not be referring to a place beyond this life at all but rather Jesus is preparing a place for us now. In this place – on this side of things.

I invite you to consider the ways that we find ourselves in that “place prepared just for us” in the here and the now.

I think “that the place - prepared for us” exists in extra-ordinary ways and in simple ways - perhaps as simple as a meal shared, or making space when another is in need of welcome.

John's camp, with its abundance of amenities turned out to be just such a place. It turned out to be a place “prepared” just for those who needed it.

John continues his story: We pulled up a chair and made a fresh pot of coffee for our unexpected guests. We asked them to please stay until dinner, because the waves were too unpredictable, and we had plenty to share. We hoped the wind would relent as the evening set in and we could help them get back to shore, but after a dinner of steak and potatoes, the waves were worse than before. So, we begged them to stay over night, because even though they had lost their tent and sleeping bag, we had an extra

of each of those by accident. We had plenty of warm clothes to share, and we had marshmallows to roast.

Two weary souls found, in John's camp - a place prepared, unknowingly just for them; a place to rest, to be fed, to sleep for the night, and after a hearty breakfast - the strength to paddle safely home./

Friends, whenever the opportunity to love arises, that is the place that Jesus has "prepared for us", whether we are the ones lost and in need, or the ones welcoming and sharing.

Like John our kindness might only feed two hungry strangers, perhaps our campfire is simply shared with someone who is cold but because God is always preparing a place for us and others, and Jesus followers are living and seeking the way - lives are changed.

Jesus prepares a place for all and we when live generously and with compassion are part of the preparing.

Jesus does not simply hold your spot at the table in some far-off heaven. He is inviting you to pull up a chair today for yourself and, in love make room for others.

Thanks be to our generous God. Amen.

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