

Easter 6 C John John 14:23-29

(At the Visit and Choral Direction of Distinguished Organist/Choirmaster Martin Neary)

- 1) My six year old son came home from school with a first grade picture essay of his father's day job.
 - The text: *My daddy techez filosofie. He lieks his work.*
 - The picture: Two students sitting with straight backs, bright eyes, wide smiles, rapt attention. And the teacher sitting on a desk (which I often did) with upraised arm and pointed finger. In a cartoon bubble near the teacher's mouth, the content of the day's lecture: **KNOW!** Wouldn't it be nice if teaching, learning, and knowing were that simple? Sometimes it seems so. My own teaching mentor in philosophy was a thin, lanky, bald headed man with a British accent. For him, the history of philosophy was high drama, and his class was a full body experience. His students sat transfixed. *This is great! This is fun! This is easy! I could do this!* I told myself. To make a long story short—as a philosophy teacher myself,
I worked for twenty years trying to get to that “easy.” I never got anywhere close.
- 2) Truth be told, some learning *does* comes quick and easy. It doesn't take a semester long seminary to learn your Social Security Number, that it isn't smart to put your bare hand on a hot stove, how to wash the dinner dishes (as long as they aren't crystal and fine china). *Significant* learning, however just does take *work* and *time*—there isn't any way around it.
 - Lesson plans—steps in linear sequence: *Information to acquire/Problems to solve/Skills to master*
 - “Steep learning curves”—lots of steps to negotiate, all of them with high risers
 - We expect to stumble and get stuck at various points along the way. The remedy for that is clear: *Go back and try again; then pick up and move on.*
 - The underlying assumption in all of this: However long and complicated, knowing is straight line process from point A (The Unknown) to point B (The Known).
- 3) But—suppose *what* you need to *know* is *who you are?* Or *who* those are *around* you? What lesson plan will lead you to knowing yourself, to knowing a colleague/friend/lover, to knowing a community of which you are a part, to knowing God? There are steps we can take to learn *about* all of these—but that's not the same as *knowing* them. The stakes are high in personal knowing, and straight line processes don't work so well.
 - Pascal: *The heart has its reasons the mind does not know*
 - Craddock: *The distance from I know to I KNOW is the longest journey we ever make.*They aren't saying that a journey of the heart is a non rational, touchy-feely affair; but that, in coming to know self and other, reasoning doesn't play out in a linear process. If lesson plans don't take that fact into account, those lesson plans *are* irrational. Journeys on the landscape of the heart are scrambles up the steep grade of rugged mountains. Any learning curve trajectory that tries to proceed step by step, straight from bottom up to the top, isn't just irrational, its impossible. No—to make any progress, to go *up* you often have to go *down*; to go *forward* you may have to go *back*. And the shortest distance between two points can frequently be a long, long way around.
- 4) The stakes are the highest; the learning curve precipitous for all concerned as the disciples gather around Jesus one last time for one last, long conversation. In the looming shadow of his own impending death, Jesus is trying as hard as he can to help his followers come to know eternal life. There is so much that they need to learn; he has so little time in which to teach them.

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus has been employing teaching strategies consisting of intuitive leaps and rhetorical circles—It hasn't been working well at all. So maybe now he should switch strategies—just talk in straight lines for a change. That is certainly what all the disciples are begging for.

One after another, they pelt Jesus with legitimate lesson plan questions—

- Thomas: *We don't know where you're going, Jesus; how can we know the way?*
- Philip: *Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.*
- Another Judas: *Jesus, HOW will you reveal yourself to us and not to the world?*
- The Bottom Line: *Eternal life—we do want that—so give us a series of straight line steps from life as we know it to Life Eternal.*

- 5) But Jesus does not give in, because he knows that will not work—Indeed, he know full well that *teaching* them all that they need to *learn* is a *task he cannot finish*.

It isn't a matter of too much material to cover in a single all-night seminar session.

What they are on is a journey of the heart into what it means to be *fully eternally alive*.

And so Jesus tells his disciples that he's handing them off to his successor:

The advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, he says and he will remind you of all that I have said to you.

What Jesus does *not* do is abandon them in the process of their learning:

I'm outta here, good luck in your lessons with the Holy Ghost.

No—even now, he cues them, one more time, regarding what they will come to know:

I have told you all this before it occurs, he says, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

It isn't that the disciples have poor memories; they're bright, earnest, well meaning.

It's that *this* learning curve is about coming to know self, others, community, and God.

- 6) In all the different places, changing circumstances, and progressive learnings that we encounter in our journeys of the heart,

you and I have to be reminded by the Holy Spirit—*re-minded*, again and again, then—there—here—now—at this time— in that place—

in these circumstances—in those relationships—in this community—*re-minded* about what it means for us, each and all,

to love one another, and to be loved by God, into the fullness of eternal life.

That process is very different than amassing one achievement after another,

and then tacking it on to an ever expanding, ever so impressive professional resume.

- 7) If we read these Last Discourse of Jesus in John 14-17 as a standard lesson plan for how to master a straight line learning curve,

then his words will probably sound bemusing, bewildering,

convoluted, circumlocutious, repetitive—in a word, not particularly instructive.

On the other hand, when we listen to these words of Jesus in John's Gospel

as the soaring sound of a choral music masterpiece—

phrase upon phrase, interweaving with each other,

melody lines not just reiterated, but dancingly interplayed across different voices,

harmonies unfolding in continually changing ways,

revealing the richness of a unifying theme—

when we listen to the love song of Jesus singing of word and commandment,

of home and indwelling, of peace the world can't begin to comprehend—

then what we hear, as the music washes over us, will ground us and grow us,

comfort us and challenge us, sustain us and stimulate us into reasons of the heart—

into journeys from "I know to I KNOW"—into the way of the cross that leads to eternal Easter life.