

I

Steve Hayner was one of my favorite teachers. Not only was he a brilliant scholar possessed of an incredible intellect, he also had an enormous pastor's heart.

So when he was elected as the president of Columbia Theological Seminary in 2009, I was thrilled for Dr. Hayner, the seminary, and the wider church. Over the course of his career, Dr. Hayner had made friends and colleagues the world over, and he was at the top of his game in every respect.

So just five years later, when Dr. Hayner announced that he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, it came as a shock to all of us. All of us thought that Dr. Hayner had many more years, if not decades, of life and service ahead of him, but it turned out he had just a matter of months.

But ever the faithful pastor, biblical scholar, and writer, Dr. Hayner began chronicling his experience as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and he published his reflections on social media. His wife Sheryl also began occasionally offering her perspective, and near the end, when Dr. Hayner became too ill to write, Mrs. Hayner wrote for him.

Social media certainly has its downsides, but it was quite something to be able to listen to our teacher and friend talk to us about the important things knowing that death was fast approaching.

On January 31, 2015, Columbia Seminary released this statement.

The Rev. Dr. Stephen (Steve) A. Hayner, president emeritus of Columbia Theological Seminary, passed away today at the age of 66 surrounded by family and friends in the Columbia community. Known by many throughout the world with love, affection, and gratitude, Steve was a person of many honors and degrees who refused to categorize others or himself by achievements. His goal was to always live to and for an audience of One, and his hope was to live life with wide open arms and relational integrity. His life was imbued with joy and freedom, which touched and changed many people along the way.

II

When we know that death is drawing near, we have different kinds of conversations, don't we? When death is drawing near, when time is drawing short, we have a tendency to drop the trivial and mundane matters and focus in on what's truly important, on the things that need to be said before the end comes.

And of course, we know that not everyone gets that gift of time. We know that life is fragile, and sometimes death comes without any advance warning whatsoever. But for those that do receive that gift of awareness that death

is near, those final conversations become rich and deep, and they are remembered long after death has come.

III

And a final conversation between Jesus and his disciples is what is before us in our story from John's gospel this morning.

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel according to John. We started with chapter one just after Christmas, and we left off in chapter 13 last week, as Jesus and the disciples once again traveled to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish holy day of Passover. We read about how after the evening meal, Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, picked up a towel and a washbasin, and washed the feet of the disciples, including the one, we're told, whom Jesus already knew would betray him.

If you have one of those red-letter bibles, the kind where all the words spoken by Jesus are set in red type, you may note that chapters 14, 15, and 16 appear almost entirely in red ink. These three chapters make up what scholars refer to as Jesus' final discourse. There in Jerusalem, at the time of the Passover, Jesus knows that the hour of his betrayal and death is very near at hand. And so one final time, the disciples sit at the feet of their rabbi and listen.

The Final Discourse in John's gospel is both as beautiful as it is dense, and time prohibits us from exploring in

its entirety this morning. Instead, we will listen to just the first few lines.

So listen now for a Word from God from John 14:1-7. Jesus said,

"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."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We live in a world that is growing both more connected and more diverse with every passing day. In the 21st century, we are far more likely to have a meaningful relationship with someone in our lives who practices a different faith, or someone who doesn't ascribe to any particular faith at all, than our forbearers did just a generation or two ago. Religious diversity and pluralism are a part of our everyday lives.

But that wasn't the case for John and his original readers. John and his

original readers all practiced the same religion – first-century Judaism. Remember, John’s original readers were faithful Jews who had been cast out of their synagogues, who had been cut loose from long standing community and family ties, because they dared to claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the long-promised and long-awaited Savior of which the Scriptures foretold.

The theological claim that they were making, and the theological claim that the church makes to this very day, is that Jesus of Nazareth was not just a rabbi, not just an interesting moral philosopher, not even just a prophet. The theological claim that is at the heart of the gospel, the claim that the church makes to this very day, is that Jesus is God incarnate.

Lots of faith systems and philosophies teach their adherents about how humans can become more god-like, but the gospel claims that the God who made all that is, seen and unseen, the God who was and is and is to come, the God who is fully divine, became fully human in Jesus of Nazareth. That claim of incarnation, that God took on human flesh and lived among us, is what makes Christianity distinct from all other religious traditions.

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” For John’s original readers, this likely wasn’t read as a word of judgment asserting the superiority and dominance of the Christian faith over all other claims.

It was likely read as a word of theological affirmation and comfort to a people who, because of their faith in Jesus, had been marginalized and cast out of the communities that had nurtured them through their whole lives. For John’s original readers, this statement was likely read as a confession of faith, a statement about who God is, and who we are, and how we are set in relationship to one another in and through Jesus Christ.

Much later, as the church grew larger in number and power, this text was and sadly still often weaponized as a cudgel brandished against our neighbors who practice other faiths. Such a practice is neither loving nor reflective of a careful and faithful reading of the text. As even Jesus himself said in John 10:16, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”

IV

For now, that’s enough about other people and other faiths. Let’s talk about you, and let’s talk about some gospel news.

Jesus knew that his hour was nearly at hand. And so knowing that time was growing short, knowing that death was near, hand, Jesus looked at those whom he loved, and the very first thing he said was, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

And then he went on to talk about how in his Father’s house, there are many dwelling places, and how he was

going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, and that he would come again and take them.

My friend, I suspect that your heart is troubled this morning. Maybe it's troubled by all the horrific images and sounds that continue to come out of Ukraine. Maybe it's troubled by all that we've endured during the pandemic. Maybe it's troubled by worry about inflation and economic upheaval.

Or maybe your heart is troubled by something far closer to home. Maybe you're facing a big decision about your future. Maybe you're troubled about an important relationship in your life. Maybe you've received a diagnosis or faced a challenge that has made you worry that perhaps death closer than you previously imagined.

Whatever it is that is troubling your heart, my friend, whatever it is that you're facing, know this – there's not an emotion you will feel, a place that you will go, a threshold that you will cross, that God has not already crossed ahead of you.

Because God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, God knows personally what it is to be human, to feel like you feel right now in this very moment. God knows personally what it is to have a troubled heart. God knows personally what it is to experience pain, be it physical or emotional or both. God knows personally what it is to love someone so much it hurts, and how much it hurts when that love is not returned. God knows personally what it

is to enter the valley of the shadow of death.

Because of his resurrection from the dead, Jesus is not bound by the laws of space and time. So whatever is waiting for you tomorrow, my friend, Jesus is already there. He has gone ahead of you and is preparing a place for you, and his heart's desire is that where he is, you will be also.

You can't know what tomorrow holds, my friend. No one can.

V

But we know the One who holds tomorrow. We know how the story ends. We've read the last page in the book.

In a world that seems to have completely lost its way, in a world that wants to claim that truth is in the eye of the beholder, in a world where all too often life is short and brutal and cheap, we sit at the feet of Jesus and listen as he reminds us yet again, "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life."

And so we keep telling this story. We keep following his example. We keep breaking bread and washing feet and proclaiming that death will not get the final word.

We don't know what tomorrow holds. But we know the One who holds tomorrow. And because we know him, we know his Father also.

And we do know him, and we have seen him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.