

In my Father's House...

Hespeler, May 7, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, [John 14:1-14](#)

In 1946, a brand-new translation of the New Testament was published. It was called the Revised Standard Version. And this was a very significant event in the history of the English Bible because, the previously unrevised Authorized Version had been around for a long time – I mean a very long time. That Bible, better known as the King James Version, was first published in 1611.

So, for 335 years, people had only heard one translation of the Bible. It was quite a shock for some people to hear familiar verses translated in new ways. And one particular verse was especially shocking. We read it this morning and in the Revised Standard Version it was translated like this: **“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”**

“I want my mansion!”

In this passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples just before his death. He is apparently describing to them what it is that will await them after they die. So, the promise seems to be that, in heaven, they will get to have rooms in God’s house. That sounds nice enough. Why would anyone have any trouble with that translation? Well, the problem was that they were used to a somewhat different translation in the King James Version. In the King James version, Jesus says, **“In my Father’s house are many mansions.”**

And now you see why people got upset. It seemed as if this new translation of the Bible was ripping them off. The King James Version promised them a mansion and now this newfangled Bible was downgrading them to a mere room? I don’t think so. And so, one of the big complaints against the new translation was, “I want my mansion!”

A Word with Changed Meaning

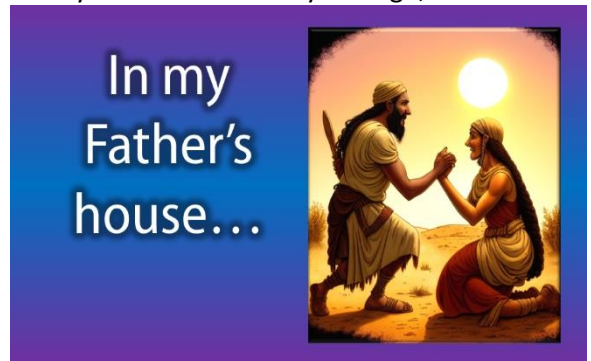
It was all a misunderstanding. What the original Greek text of the Gospel of John says is basically what it says in the Revised Standard Version: In my Father’s house are many rooms or dwelling places.

But actually, the old King James Version hadn’t been wrong, at least not when it was first published over 400 years ago. Over 400 years ago, the English word mansion didn’t mean the same thing that it means today. Back then, when somebody said that they lived in a mansion, people didn’t imagine the homes of rich people like, in the year when the Revised Standard Version was published, Henry Ford or Andrew Carnegie. They didn’t imagine The Beverly Hillbillies.

Back when the KJV was published, a mansion just meant a place where you stayed. It often referred to a room in an inn or a place where you were staying in somebody else’s house. 400 years ago, that was an excellent translation of the original Greek phrase. It wasn’t the Bible that had changed. It wasn’t the promises of Jesus that had somehow been reduced, it was just that the English language had changed.

It’s about what you get

So, that is one misunderstanding that people have had of this verse. But there is another, deeper, misunderstanding that is also there that I think we need to address. Whether they’re thinking of a room or a



mansion, there is a bigger fundamental assumption that people bring to this passage. They assume that is all about what they *get* in heaven. It is taken as a description of the accommodations, even of the possessions that they will have in the afterlife. And I just want to underline that that is absolutely not what is being described for us in this passage.

I do not believe that Jesus or anyone else in the New Testament for that matter, ever gave us a description or list of what we would get in heaven. I don't think they ever described it at all. And they didn't for one fundamental reason: whatever is waiting for us from the other side of death, absolutely defies all human description. We've never been there, and we don't have the language to describe it.

The best we can do is offer a few metaphors. The best we can do is tell a story about what it is like. And that is exactly what Jesus is doing in this story. He's not telling you what you get. He's telling you a story.

A Familiar Story to them

And the story that he is telling would have been familiar to everyone who was listening to him or reading this gospel in the first century, because it was based on something that was essential to their culture. Their imaginations would have filled in the details of the story with no trouble.

But we are not a part of that culture, so it is harder for us to fill in those details and understand the richness of the story he is telling. So, for us to appreciate what is really going on, we have to add those details. So allow me to assist you.

A Young Man Makes his Way

The young man had come to the city to find himself. His father was a wealthy man who owned a fine farm in the countryside. The young man knew that it would all be his one day and he would look forward to doing his best to take care of it. But in the meantime, he wanted to experience the world outside of the farm and discover himself apart from his family.

And so, he did not flaunt any of his wealth. He went and found what work he could to sustain himself. And he just lived in the city and experienced its people.

Miriam

And it while he was there that he met and became rather enchanted with a young woman named Miriam. She was a simple girl, hard working and kind. She kept a booth in the city marketplace for her father.

Over several weeks he had interactions with her as he bartered for some fruit. He found himself spending more and more time hanging around her booth. He was smitten. She was smart, clever and had a killer sense of humour.

He just had to find out more about this enchanting woman. And so, he started to ask around. He found out that she came from a poor family, but one that was highly respected and honoured. He decided to approach her parents. Respecting all of the customs and expectations of the society, he wanted to ask them if he could have their permission to speak to their daughter.

Meeting the Family

To them he revealed his family and the resources that he could claim, but he asked them not to say anything of that to her. He had this odd idea that she should be free to choose for herself whether or not she wanted to spend time with him. He didn't want her to be influenced by his name or wealth.

The parents thought his ideas to be odd, to say that least, but they told him that he had their permission. So, he spoke of his love to her and, to his own wonder and amazement, he discovered that she felt much the same. They entered into a period of time together of heady love. They continually found ways to talk together and spend time. Always he was careful not to act in any way that might put her virtue or modesty in question, but it became plain to all that theirs was a relationship that was not to be denied.

Love matches were not common in those days. The normal practice was for marriage to be something worked out between families with the actual couple's feelings on the matter being seen as a question of little importance. Love marriages could sometimes be frowned upon just because they were unique, but it was not as if it wasn't something that could happen. As he came to the next step, therefore, the young man was very nervous about how he would speak to her.

A Misunderstood Proposal

They met in the public square. They gazed lovingly at one another for a while before he finally found the courage to speak of his plans. "My love," he said abruptly, "I am leaving. I have to go out of the city."

In his nervousness and fear, he did not pause to think about how she might respond to such words. He did not realize how it might have sounded to her. Immediately her eyes filled with tears. He saw such dismay upon her face. She was clearly thinking that he had chosen to abandon her.

"No, that's not it at all," he cried out. "Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying." But then he felt lost because he could not imagine how he could put into words what it was he was intending to say.

And so he paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and decided that it would be best to explain to her, step by step, what it was that he was planning to do. "In my father's house there are many rooms. I know I haven't told this to you before. I haven't said it. But, yes, I do come from an honoured family and a prosperous house."

"That's what I mean when I tell you that I have to go now. I am going there, to my father's house. And if I go there, it is only so that I can 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 when she heard that, she finally understood. And she sent him off with all of her love.

Back Home

And so, the young man went off to his father's house. After a few days' journey, he arrived and greeted his parents joyfully. He went in and over a welcoming meal he told them everything about the incredible woman that he had met in the city. So lovingly and joyfully did he describe her that his parents simply could not wait to meet this extraordinary woman.

But first, the man had some work to do. His father's house was built around a central courtyard. On one side was the main entrance and the room where his father carried out his business. On another, there were kitchens. Over here was a place for welcoming guests with lavish couches for reclining while dining. But there were also a number of private chambers.

It was a large and extended family who lived here, not just his parents and siblings. There were his grandmother, his uncles and aunts and cousins as well. And they all had their own spaces for sleeping and other private matters. His task was to prepare a place among those chambers for himself and his bride so that they could join his father's household.

Preparing a Place

He worked at it hard for many days, expanding the space, making it warm and welcoming. He filled it with mementos that reminded him, and he hoped would remind her, of the many discussions they had had together in the marketplace. He put in windows to fill the room with light and cabinets in which she would store her happiest memories. Finally, it was all ready. And so he went and said to his father, “Now I will go to find my bride and I will bring her here and she will make her home in the heart of our family.”

A few days later, the father looked out of his front door and was pleased to see his son coming down the walk. He was accompanied by his best friends who had come to wish him well and at his side was a beautiful young woman with whom he would share a wonderful life.

Beyond Death

I happen to believe that there is something that awaits us on the other side of death. I don't tend to imagine it in terms of people sitting around on clouds or playing harps. Nor do I think that we're all going to join in some never-ending chorus singing the praises of God. I don't think that the streets will be paved with gold. I mean, who would want to drive on a street paved with gold? And, no, I don't think that we get a mansion or even a room. At the same time, I do not think of an afterlife in terms of some people burning in eternal conscious torment.

These are all words or images that you can find in the Bible, except for that one about clouds and harps, that just comes from a Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercial, I think. But I do not believe that any of those images are meant to demonstrate to us what that existence is. They are meant to give us some vague sense of what that existence is like.

Telling us a Story

When Jesus told his disciples of the rooms in his father's house, he wasn't giving blueprints of heaven. He wasn't telling you what you'd get. He was telling them a love story using elements that were essential features of a marriage in that world at that time.

For them, marriages did not include things like giving rings or ceremonies before ministers or justices of the peace. The essential ritual of a marriage involved taking your wife to live in a room in your father's house that you had prepared to share with her. Jesus wasn't saying what the afterlife was, he was telling a story.

Love Remains

Like I say, I believe in an afterlife, but I believe that it's going to take place in a plane of existence far beyond our understanding. I suspect it probably has more to do with participating in a great collective consciousness than it has to do with any rooms or streets or clouds. But whatever it is, we simply don't have the language to express it.

And so, we're left with stories and images and metaphors. But, man, they are some pretty amazing stories. And with this particular story about the rooms in his father's house, what I suspect that Jesus was saying more than anything else was that the fundamental nature of this existence that we can scarcely imagine is love – pure, unconditional and unending love. I believe that he was saying that, when everything else has been destroyed, love remains, and love is enough.