

Divine Gravity: Rethinking God's House, God's Way, and God's Nature

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[0 : 0 0] So once again, good morning. My name is Anthony Parrott. I'm one of the co-lead pastors here. It's great to see you all. Thanks for being here. We are wrapping up a series on the Gospel of John and the drama of new creation. Next week begins the Sunday before Lent, and we'll start a series on sacred self-care. You know, some of our Lenten series are not the most popular series that we've always done because they're like dark and heavy and about confession and everything that's wrong in the world. And so Tanetta plans our sermon series. She made a pivot listening to the moment that maybe we need something about self-care. But today we're finishing up the Gospel of John and the drama of new creation. If you have your Bibles or devices, I invite you to turn to the Gospel of John chapter 14, and we'll be hanging out there this morning. Gospel of John chapter 14.

This is Jesus's farewell discourse. So whereas Mark, Matthew, Luke, they tell the story of the upper room and the Last Supper, John does something a little different because John is Johning. That's what the Gospel of John does. And instead of giving us the Last Supper, he gives us the washing of the disciples' feet. And instead of giving us this very sort of short, succinct story of the body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ given for you, he gives this very long speech of Jesus giving his final words and advice to his disciples before he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane and is taken away for execution. So John chapter 14, starting in verse 1. Before we do that, would you please join me in prayer? Spirit of the living God, we believe that you are here in this place, that you are waiting to speak to us, God. And so we want to listen, we want to pay attention to what you have to say for us in this moment. We are people who are desperate, we are needy, we are needing something good and fresh and living and reviving, God, in moments where things seem heavy and despondent and despairing.

God, so I pray that you would use even someone like me, use even these lips in this tongue, God, to say something that is true and essential and good in this place. God, would we have ears to receive it, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. All right, so the Gospel of John chapter 14, verse 1, it says this, it says, 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, Jesus says, and I will take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also. Anybody grow up with that Rich Mullin song? That where I am, there you may also be. That where I am, there you may also be. All right, and Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? I think I skipped verse 4. You know the way to the place where I am going. And Thomas says, actually, we don't. Verse 6, Jesus said to him, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Verse 7, And if you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him, the Father. And Philip says to him, Lord, show us the Father and we'll be satisfied. Jesus says to Philip, have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father? The word of the Lord thanks be to God.

So I want to offer us today three reframes, three answers to some big Christian theological questions and approach some of the ways that maybe we've heard these questions answered before and then some reframes of how we might answer them today. Question one, where is God's house?

[4 : 13] Question two, what is the way to God? And question three, what is God like? Question one, where is God's house? Question two, what is the way to God? And question three, what is God like?

So first one, where is God's house? What is the Father's house? Jesus says, in my Father's house, there are many rooms or many dwelling places. You grew up in the King James, many mansions.

What is this house that Jesus is speaking of and what are these rooms or mansions? Now the phrase Father's house is used one other time in the book of John. That's John chapter 2, 16, one of our first sermons in this series where Jesus goes into the temple and he stops the seller, the animal sellers, the money changers, and he says, take these things out of here. Stop making my Father's house a marketplace. And so if a first century hearer is hearing Jesus talk about my Father's house or God's house or the Father's house, they're going to assume that they're talking about the Jewish temple, which was the intersection of Jewish religious, social, political, and economic life.

Everything flowed into the temple in Jerusalem. We talked about the difference between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans, the major conflict between Jews and Samaritans was the fact that they did not believe that the temple was this sort of nexus, the locus of God's activity in the world.

But a Jewish perspective saw that God's center of activity in the world was the temple and everything flowed into it and out of it from there. So Jesus goes into the temple and actually stops it from functioning for at least a few moments and says, don't make my Father's house a marketplace.

[5 : 59] So then Jesus uses this one other time in the gospel of John, in my Father's house are many rooms. Now, because by the time that the gospel readers or listeners would have heard this message from Jesus, the temple has been destroyed at this point. All of Jewish culture is living out the reverberations of Rome coming and destroying the temple. And rabbinical Judaism, which begins to develop, has to deal with this reality that the temple is gone and isn't coming back anytime soon.

So listeners of John's gospel are going to be trying to figure out, okay, what could Jesus be talking about now in this new reality where there is no more temple? And because he's clearly talking about something other than the temple, it's been reinterpreted. And the most common interpretation of this is heaven. In my Father's house, there are many rooms. I go to prepare a room for you. It's typically reinterpreted as heaven. When I was 14 or 15, my grandmother, my mom's mom, passed away from colon cancer. And I was homeschooled, but I also was playing piano for the high school jazz band. And then I would go to the local college piano conservatory and take piano lessons. And this was, shows my age. Back in the days before, I had a cell phone. So I think I made my way on my bike to high school. And I was homeschooled into the conservatory. And the conservatory secretary had a phone call from my parents to say that my grandma had passed away, sort of expectedly had passed away. So I had some free time before my piano lesson and made my way into one of the practice rooms. And in like one sitting had like written, composed this song that I would play at my grandma's funeral. And in many ways, like a lot of things in my past, perhaps your past as well. Those, these things are like super duper meaningful in the moment.

I wrote that song. It was played at my grandma's funeral. It was played at a couple other family members' funerals. But I look back on it now and be like, oh, cringe, right? It was meaningful in the moment. And I understand why 14-year-old Anthony like thought this way and wrote this way. But also 37-year-old Anthony is like, oh, buddy, okay. And in this song, the chorus, I could not find it anymore. I know I have it printed out somewhere. I couldn't find it. But in the chorus, the words go something like, she left her body that wasn't really her own. She left this earth to go back home.

Which is a very typical sort of verbiage you might hear at a Christian funeral. That this earth is not really our home. It's heaven. It's somewhere out there. And that death is the sort of escape from our mortal coil, as Shakespeare would put it, from these decrepit old bodies to the place where we belong, which is heaven. Now, this is not particularly Hebrew way of thought. And it's not a particularly ancient Christian way of thought. This is much closer aligned to the philosophy of Platonism.

So if anybody paid attention in their, like, intro to philosophy classes, if you read Plato's Republic, this is what Plato puts forward. That there is this physical world, but this is not reality. Reality is the ideal somewhere over there somewhere. This non-physical reality. And our goal is to escape this illusion. Make it out of the cave, in Plato's language, and get to the real thing, which is the ideals, which are non-physical, non-tangible. And this has infiltrated Christianity to say, hey, this physical world, this physical, tangible stuff that you and I are made out of, this isn't the real stuff. We need to get to the spiritual realm, to heaven. That's home. And that's what my song for my grandma was saying as well. So when Jesus says, in my father's house, there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. Well, it's that's that somewhere out there, this non-tangible, non-physical reality, the clouds and the harps in the heaven. And when we die, thank God, our souls escape our bodies and make it to the spiritual realm. But the Jews, the Hebrews, you know, people like Jesus, people like Paul, the writers of the New Testament, and especially the Old Testament writers and prophets, they would be appalled by this. Because the refrain of the book of Genesis chapter one, we just taught this to our youth catechism class. We just taught that the refrain of

[10:26] Genesis chapter one is that God created this physical world and called it, what's the word in Genesis one? Good. God calls it good. He calls it good six times and then creates human beings, the tangible physical made out of the dust of the earth, the dirt of the earth, and God breathes life into them and calls them not just good, but very good. So this divorce, this divide between the physical and the spiritual, it's not a particularly Hebrew way of thinking. It's not the way that Jesus would have been familiar with or Paul would have been familiar with. So if Jesus is saying, in my father's house, there are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you, and it's not the temple because the temple is gone, and Jesus actually seems to stop the business of the temple, and it's not just heaven out there, then what is it? So in my father's house, there are many, like any Greek good sermon, we're going to get into the Greek, there are many dwelling places.

Can you put that slide up? And the Greek word here is mone. Let me hear you say mone. And you can play the clip. Yes, mone, mone, okay? Bet you didn't know it's based off of a New Testament Greek word.

It's actually not. They were trying to figure out a name, like a funny name for a woman, and they were just like dwelling on this for a while, the writers of the song, and then they saw a sign for a mutual of New York insurance company, and so that became mone for the song, mone, mone, ride the pony. Okay, so the Greek word is mone or mone, and it means an abiding place, a dwelling place, an abode, a home. Mone is the noun, and mone is the verb, to dwell, to abide. So here's some examples from the gospel of John, to dwell or to abide. John chapter 1, when Jesus turned and saw some disciples of John the Baptist following him, Jesus says to them, what are you looking for? And the disciples say, Rabbi, where are you staying, abiding, abiding, abiding, mone. Jesus says to them, come and see. And they came and saw where Jesus was staying, mone, and they remained, emman, which you can see that's where we get the word to remain from, emman, not emman the rapper, with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. And again,

John chapter 4, verse 40, Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman at the well. She goes, tells her story, becomes the first apostle, the one who is the one who shows light to the Samaritans. They come back, and they ask Jesus to stay, to mani with them there two days. And he stayed there two days.

So to get what Jesus is actually saying, we have to actually keep reading in John chapter 14. Jesus answers the question for us about what it means to, for him to build a dwelling place with us, a win the father's house. So Judas, not Iscariot, said to him, I want to be part of the editorial meetings where they put together the gospel. And Judas is like, yes, but I'm not that Judas.

[13 : 42] Okay, make that clear to whoever's reading this. Make it clear. Judas, not Iscariot, says to him, Jesus, Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world? And Jesus answers him, those who love me and keep my word and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our dwelling, monen, with them. So this is not a promise of someday in heaven. It's not the divorce or the divide between the physical and the spiritual, the tangible and the intangible. It's not about when you die. It's about now. Jesus's work is to make us the dwelling places of God today. We don't have to look up in the sky to find God. We don't have to prostrate ourselves down low. God is within us and among us, plural, as a community. God makes their home within us. When Jesus says, there are many dwelling places, many rooms in my father's house, and I go and prepare a place for you, he's talking about making us the people of God, the community of Christ, the very dwelling place of the divine.

So reframe number one is that God's dwelling place moves from the temple to not heaven, to not somewhere out there, but us, the community of God. Reframe number two, what is the way to God?

Jesus says, verse four, you know the way to the place where I am going, which we now know the place where Jesus is going is through the story that comes after the crucifixion and the resurrection.

resurrection and the ascension. It's about preparing a people, not a heaven, but a people. Jesus says, you know the way. Thomas says, Lord, we don't know. We don't know where you're going. How can we know the way? So Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Now this can be one of the more offensive claims of Christianity.

It's one that I have dealt with pastorally for years, particularly here in D.C., where so many of my pastoral counseling conversations are, Anthony, I'm a Christian. I've been a Christian for a long time, but the fact of the matter is the people that I work with, that I live with here in D.C., they seem to be doing a lot more work to reveal God's justice in the world than a lot of other Christians that I know. How is that possible?

[16 : 07] And how can Jesus say something so offensive as, I'm the only way to the Father? And now this notion of there's only one way to God is called Christian exclusivism.

That Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation before God, and that faith, explicit, cognitive faith in Jesus is required in order to be saved, which again is typically understood as in order to go to heaven and not to hell.

So that's Christian exclusivism. And like the metaphor that I have in my mind is like the moving walkways at the airport, and that you get on the right one, and you're going in the right direction, and you get on the wrong one, and then you're on a highway to hell. Play the clip.

On the highway to hell. Yes, today was the classic rock day. Why not? But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying, and I don't, I don't disagree, like, the reason I think this is not just because, like, it offends my sensibilities. The reason I think this is because I think if we make Jesus this exclusivist that says it's my way or the hell way, I think that actually goes against the grain of what the entire gospel of John is saying, because you have verses in the gospel of John, like John chapter 17, where Jesus is talking to the Father, what's called the high priestly prayer, John 17. You, Father, have given me authority over all people to give eternal life to all whom you have given to me, which is this very sort of, like, riddle, zone-like way, but pay attention to the language. Stay on the last slide. Thank you. You've given me authority over how many people? All people to give eternal life to. How many people? Whom you have given to me.

Who did God, who did the Father give to Jesus? How many people? All right, so, like, there's this, the, the, the, the, like, a balance between these two statements. You gave me authority over all to give eternal life to all that you have given me. Okay, that makes sense. Go to the next slide, John chapter 12. Jesus says, I, when I'm lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

[18:14] One translator, David Bentley Hart, he actually translates this as drag, that, like, Jesus is bringing people along with him. When I'm lifted up from the earth, which is a reference to the crucifixion, to the cross being raised up, that that is the thing that's going to draw, to drag, to bring along all folks into the embrace of God. We talked about John 3 17, Antonio and Matt Collinson. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. So when Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life, many Christians have interpreted this as the cosmic version of my way or the highway. But I wonder if we're missing something more beautiful and expansive in Jesus's words. Instead of, like, the moving walkways at the airport, think about our solar system. Every planet and asteroid and speck of cosmic dust is caught in the sun's gravitational embrace. Even when objects appear to be moving away or in different directions, they're also being acted upon by the sun's gravitational force. And some may try to escape it, but the sun's influence remains constant and unrelenting. And I wonder if Jesus as the way works similarly. Rather than being a single narrow path that excludes all others, what if Christ's love acts more like a gravitational force, an underlying reality that draws all creation towards God, whether we recognize the source or not? And this isn't just like philosophical musing. Like,

C.S. Lewis explored this idea beautifully through the character of Emeth in the last battle in the Chronicles of Narnia. Emeth was a soldier of the Calormen, the worshippers of the false god Tash. And when Emeth is confronted with Aslan the lion, Aslan says, everything that you thought you were doing to Tash, you're actually doing it unto me.

Emeth discovered that his pursuit of goodness and truth, even though he had been lied to about Aslan, that was actually in service to Aslan all along. His honest seeking, even when mistaken about the source, was honored. Can someone actively rebel against this divine gravity pull of love? Absolutely.

Just as we can fire rockets away from Earth's pole or send satellites away from the sun, we too can also choose paths of hatred and violence and oppression that actively resist God's love.

But that doesn't stop God's loving attraction towards us. God's gracious, gravitational pull remains constant and patient and ultimately irresistible, not through coercion, but through love's persistent invitation.

[21 : 08] This reading of John 14, 6, I am the way, the truth, and the life, I don't think it diminishes Jesus's uniqueness or necessity. Rather, it suggests that Christ's way of self-giving love undergirds all genuine paths to God, even by those who walk, even those walked by people who may never hear Jesus's name. And it's also not saying that all religions are equally true, but that Christ's truth and God's activity in the world can work through many, many channels.

Thomas asks about the way because he was confused about the destination. How do we get to heaven would be the modern way of asking it. But Jesus's response points not to a mapped route to a location, but to a person, to Christ himself, and to a way of being that reflects God's heart.

So when we embrace that way of radical love, whether we name it Christ's way or not, it doesn't change the fact that we're still being drawn by the same divine gravity.

Refrain number three. What is God like? John 14, verse 8, Philip says to him, Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied. And Jesus says to Philip, Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don't know me?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, show us the Father? The sort of typical way that most of us, many of us are taught to read the Bible is that you start with Genesis and you lead your way through and you sort of build your theology as you go.

[22 : 41] And this makes sense, this chronological approach of building a theology because it's the way a lot of books work, so why not the Bible? So you start with Genesis 1, there's this God of creative divine activity who bends down and breathes a soul into the living dirt and makes the first human.

And so, okay, that's all well and good, but then there's this God who, like, plants a tree and then, like, the humans hide and God doesn't seem to know where they are, which seems weird for an omnipotent being, but actually you don't know about omnipotence yet because that comes in a later book.

And then, like, God, like, floods the entire earth, but don't worry, he's not going to do it again, but, like, once seems like too many times already. And then, like, there's a God who, like, redeems and pulls people out of slavery and also, like, commands genocide.

And you're just like, man, I don't know. And so then you finally get to Jesus in the Gospels and you're forced to, like, square these ideas around God, around the God that you already began to put together these really, really mix-match puzzle pieces.

How do you square Jesus with the God that came before? And so instead of a chronological approach, the way that the church fathers seemed to do this instead was that you, if you want to know what God is like, you start by looking at Jesus and you build your theology from there.

[24 : 01] Because if Jesus, what Jesus claims is true, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father, then all prior revelations of God then don't have to sort of get, like, squeezed later into what Jesus did.

You start with Jesus and then you look back and say, yes, this seems to be a way that we see the character of God shown here. Oh, this seems to be a distortion that humans have put onto God.

Oh, this seems to be a way that God was active and moving and showing his character. Oh, this seems to be a way that the old writers were just taking the pagan gods and painting that onto God because they didn't know the truth yet.

And Jesus makes this claim that if you want to know what God is like, you look at me and you go from there. John chapter five, verse 19, Jesus says, the Son can do nothing on his own, but he only sees what the Father is doing.

For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. If you want to know what God is up to in the world, you look at Jesus. And what does Jesus do? He heals and he feeds and he makes friends and he confronts oppression and he raises the dead and he brings people close to himself that were pushed far away by everyone else.

[25 : 14] And whatever Jesus's activity is, that's what God's activity is. If you want to know what God is like, you look at Jesus. So some implications for us this morning.

Implication number one, that the goal of Christianity is not escapism. It's not figuring out a way to get off this planet, to escape this body, to get rid of these physical bodies, this tangible stuff.

But rather it's union with God. And the mystery of it is that the union with God starts now and continues. And it starts now in our physical bodies. It starts now on this planet.

It's why our vision is to talk about the renewal of all things in our collective liberation, because that's the stuff that has to do with this planet, this world, this country, this city, this church, this neighborhood, not just some future reality.

We're not waiting for a rapture. We're not waiting for God to put us on a boat and ship us to Cobol. Like we are here and God is with us. And then with that union with God, we then move on for the sake of others.

[26 : 22] With that energy, when Jesus is able to look at his disciples and say, you are going to be the dwelling places of God, I think that also gives us a mission to be able to look at our neighbor and, I hate to say it, but sometimes even our enemy and say, you are going to be the dwelling place of God.

Implication number two, Jesus as the way and the truth and the life is not battering down the hatches, but blowing open the doors. When we see Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, wherever we see the redemption, redemptive movement of God in the world, we can say, yes, Jesus is active and living and moving.

Wherever we see a movement that is about liberation and not oppression, that is about freedom and not slavery, that is about love and not hate, healing and not disease, we can say, yep, that's Jesus working in the world.

It doesn't have to have a Christian label on it. It doesn't have to be published by a Christian publisher or printed by a Christian magazine. It can be anything that is moving people towards freedom and wholeness and liberation.

We say, thank you, Jesus, that you are living and active. It is not battering down the hatches, but blowing open the doors, which is why Jesus is able to say, if they are not against us, they are for us.

[27 : 41] That's why we have the freedom to join with liberative movements, regardless of the label that's put on them, regardless of the religion that they ascribe to or not, and to say, if you are working for people's love and liberation, then we will join with you, and we can be trusting that the Holy Spirit is at work.

And implication number three, if it's not liberating and loving and joyful and peaceful and patient, if it's not kind, if it's not good, then it's not God.

And you don't have to twist your conscience into pretzels to try to make things that are hateful and angry and mean and fearful and say, I guess that's God, even though it doesn't really seem right.

The fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., are the fruit of the Spirit, of God's Spirit. God is the one who is the most joyful being in the universe.

God is the one who is the most peaceful being in the universe, the most good being in the universe. And so when we see that love and that joy and that peace, when Paul says that love is patient, that love is kind, that love keeps no record of wrongs, Paul is describing God.

[28 : 51] God keeps no record of wrongs. That love does not insist on its own way. If God is love, that means that God does not insist on their own way.

So if it is not liberating, it's not from God. If Jesus came to set people free and to make them free indeed, then that which does not set people free is not God's work.

And so if we want to know what God is like, we look at the way of Jesus, we look at those descriptions of love, and we are willing to say, I will not worship a God that harms people, hurts people, enslaves people, oppresses people.

And we do that not because like, oh, it feels good. we do that because anything else is actually rebelling against our very tradition and movement and holy scriptures.

Would you pray with me? The God of love, we thank you that you are the way. And God, you are not a, you're not a defensive God.

[29 : 56] You're not a God who's like super trying to like defend themselves. You're not a God who's like easily offended. You're a God who's very confident, self-controlled, peaceful.

And so when the disciples saw some undoing, casting out demons and healing, they didn't recognize them and they went to you, Jesus, you said, no, if they're not against us, they're for us, don't stop them.

when others try to use your name to hurt and harm, your response is that?

I don't know them. And so God, I pray that we would be a people who are known by love, as Jesus will pray, that they will know us through our willingness to care for one another and to care for our neighbor.

I pray that we would be a people that are not simply seeking escape, because that is a way of sort of washing our hands and walking away, but rather that we would do the more difficult work of recognizing that if we carry the presence of God in us, then we need to carry that presence into places that need a word of hope in life.

[31 : 25] God, we can't do this on our own. We need each other. We need your spirit dwelling in us. We need an anointing and we need power. And so God, we ask for these things boldly as a child would ask a parent.

God, would you pour out your blessing and your goodness upon us, God? We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.