

Platforms

The visual image associated with the word platforms has changed over the last few years. My first understanding of the meaning was that it represented a base level for building a structure; it was the foundation upon which the whole was erected. For me I can and often do, visualize my faith as a platform, a base level from which I understand the world and how I am to live and interact with the world around me. These days, in this digital age, many folks, especially those who have grown up in the time of electronic devices, understand platforms in a similar non-literal manner. Their metaphor views platforms as social media applications upon which information is transmitted. These “platforms” create digital relationships which become their focus and guide for their interactions with their surroundings. Facebook is the only “platform” of that type that I have ever used...and from what I have come to understand about this type of platform which is so numerous now is that they can be very dangerous because the information is so anonymous. The opinions spread rapidly and often not reliable as it they are conveyed by someone with an undisclosed agenda. The tendency to put unquestioned faith in these undocumented opinions which are often relayed as known facts has led to harm in many instances where they have been used to bully or to spread malicious and hurtful comments. Some of these platforms are used to spread hatred and cause divisions within our communities through the depersonalization of the “other”. These behaviors are not new to the human family, but have seemed to become more virulent over the last decade. When we turn to the passage from 1 Peter for today it uses a metaphor describing those early believers as a community which is a “spiritual house” called the household of God. Under this motif the newly baptized have in many aspects taken on an identity as resident aliens, of a people living “outside the house” of the dominant culture which surrounds them. Their faith has drawn them into this community which provides them a new type of structure for their lives. Through this process they are called to be ones who “follow the Way”, with the Way being that path that follows the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This text gives them an invitation: “Come to him, a living stone, through rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.” This image of belong is a wonderful message for those in the community, but despite its good news it also has elements that are not so great. This letter was written to those believers who were not members of the Jewish family, to those who were called by them “Gentiles”. That term described anyone not of Jewish lineage. This letter affirms that they have been accepted into a new family, a new family based on the Jewish heritage of some of their members who have become believers. Within this “new” family they are to be nurtured so that they may grow “spiritually” away from their old ways of their former traditions. This nurturing is so that they may grow “into salvation” through formation that takes place in the community because of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit among them which gives them guidance. They are to become “living stones” which seems an oxymoron as stones are not usually considered to have life within them. While the “old stones” of the Jewish tradition are considered dead, after all at this time the Temple which was considered God’s house has been destroyed; Jesus who had been chosen to provide a path for them into God’s household has become the foundation for this new way of life. The still living presence of Christ among them is thus their cornerstone which provides for them in a hostile world. Those forming this community are to be grounded

in the Word of God, rooted into this new community formed which revealed God's love for them and the creation God had spoken into being. The household of God is at once built on the spiritual cornerstone of Christ and rooted deeply in God's good creation. Peter's understanding placed the "coming" kingdom in this world, not some distant "heavenly place". They were given the fundamental vocation as living stones to proclaim the good news, not only in word but also—and perhaps primarily—in deed as they lived according to the "Way" in a hostile world. Peter also refers to those who have refused to accept God's perspective which reveals Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of God's household find this a stumbling block which prevents their entry into God's household. Their perspective is that although the world's view of them humiliates and ostracizes them, they have been honored and chosen by God. Peter's letter offers these believers the assurance that God has prepared a place for them within the chosen people. This assurance of a place within God's reign is highlighted in the passage from John's gospel. This text comes from what is known as the farewell discourse which Jesus gives to the gathered disciples on the night of his betrayal. This discourse appears only in John's gospel and is about Jesus trying to prepare those he has chosen and gathered for the events which are coming soon. The church visits the section of John's narration annually on Maundy Thursday as we remember Jesus' sitting with those who would betray and deny him calling on them to love as he has loved. There is another time that this portion of the evening's teaching is lifted for us. A commentary referenced this text as the basis for the "cots in heaven" sermon which dominates the theme at gravesides. The sermon which goes something like this: when we die, our souls are immediately whisked to heaven to a mansion of some sort where our personal cot is waiting and where we finally get to encounter God intimately after a lifetime of "seeing through a glass darkly." Doing this we fail to appreciate that this place is the one God created by God's very own Word. The passage begins with Jesus telling his disciples not to be "troubled" by the news he is sharing that he is going away because within God's house there are many dwelling places. This statement is followed by his promise that he would take his disciples to himself so that wherever he was, they and we who believe, would be there. This is a description of total intimacy. The issues which remain with us today, were immediately raised as Thomas objected to the idea that Jesus told them they knew where he was going. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" There's that important little word again...the way. Thomas has taken Jesus' words and placed the destination on a map...not in his experience as a follower of Jesus who was teaching them about God's way. This leads Jesus to respond with a well-known "I am" declaration which has led to a sense of exclusive entrance into God's household, God's family by many. The statement is the famous or infamous one where John narrates Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Thomas and the others present at that table are groping for a path, a truth, a life while the path, the truth and the life is staring them in the face and they cannot see it. They are looking for seven habits, nine steps, or ten commandments when their answer lies in intimate, if confusing and challenging relationships for their lives. They are to love as Jesus loves; that is the way Jesus lived and demonstrated how they would come to know the Father as Philip asks Jesus to show them. Thomas was fixated on "the way" and his sense that Jesus hadn't given them enough information related to it. Philip is concerned with seeing the Father. Jesus' response to both is that he has provided all the need because he has lived the "way" of God's envisioned

relationship with those of the household. Jesus has shown “the way” by exhibiting the nature of God, the deep, sacrificial, life-giving, almost embarrassingly intimate relationship that God desires with us. Christians have often taken this to mean that Jesus is the only way to heaven. There are books which place all the gospels together illustrating the parallels between and among them. When this is done it becomes obvious that John’s gospel account is very different from the other three. This “farewell discourse” is one of those that is unique to John’s narration...as is the wedding at Cana. And not only is this unique to John’s gospel but we often find our translations leave out an important aspect...that this statement of Jesus was directed “to him”, to Jesus said to him, to Thomas, those words. They were not a universal declaration as we often read them, but a specific response to one with whom he had that intimate relationship of love. In this situation Thomas is not concerned with the fate of others. He is focused only with maintaining his own connection to this teacher he has loved and followed. When this passage begins Jesus has assured the disciples that God’s household has room for many: “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?” It is only in John’s gospel that Jesus tells the disciples that he is going away so that the Advocate can come to be with them during this same farewell discourse. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will come and dwell within them to guide them. Again, Jesus is promising a continuing intimate relationship which will lead them into the “way.” Within this context, Jesus also is described as asking these people to “believe” in him...another translation for this Greek word is to “trust” in him. It seems to me that a better reading of this text is not Jesus making a comment on other religions but is about inter-religious dialogue—it is important for internal Christian self-understanding. Consider the relationship between parents and children. Within each family unit, the child will often believe that their parents are the best in the world; another family’s children will have the same belief about their own parents. For each family unit the statement expresses a truth, but it is not a truth that is universal—each child’s perspective is about their family. We should perhaps consider that is our truth as well...the God in whom we trust is the best...the God we know has reached out to us to form an intimate relationship with us to guide and lead us into what is an abundant life for us. Shortly after the description of Jesus as shepherd in chapter 10 Jesus makes an interesting statement in verse 16: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” We don’t know precisely to whom Jesus was referring, only that for some period of time the flock will not be united, there will be others listening to God’s voice and word and they too belong.

The language of the Bible is also the language of faith, of trust in what God has revealed to a particular people. The problem begins when we take these confessions of trust in the language of faith and love and turn them into absolute truths...thus putting God’s love and outreach into a box of our design. A box we use to measure the truth and worth of other faith claims despite our scriptures confessing there may be “other” folds. The statement Jesus makes to Thomas is about and directed to Christians and is about Christians...those who hear his voice and follow it into that relationship of trust for their lives...following the way of Jesus not only in word but in deed because of the intimate relationship founded in God’s revealed love for them. Christianity hold sufficient truth for salvation, but that does not mean that it has to hold that truth exclusively which becomes particularly real when it is shown that a Hindu (Mohatma Ghandi)

and a Buddhist (thich Nhat Hanh) come closer to the Jesus truth, the Jesus way, and the Jesus life than many Christians. What should be a major concern is not whether the faithful Hindus, Buddhist, Muslims and Jews are saved. Even if this were a concern, there's too much wonderful, beautiful, and challenging involved with being a Christian following Jesus' way to worry too much about everyone else's religion. The questions we who are Christian need to be asking ourselves are these: Am I living the Jesus truth about how to look at others? Am I living the Jesus way in the way I treat others? Am I living the Jesus life of offering love and care to those sharing this world with me? Through trust in the way Jesus revealed, am I being transformed to living a life differently in a world hostile to the way Jesus revealed as leading to a life abundant? John's use of the word "household or family" rather than "house or building" gives us the sense of community and relationship which Jesus taught. The place to which Jesus wishes to lead us is perhaps a relationship, not a place. The many dwelling places available may not involve changes in location or geography, but changes of heart. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.