

Troubled? Hang Your Heart on God Reading: John 14:1-14 Easter 5/A
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Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” [John 14:1] This is a passage frequently read at funerals and grave-side services. When people lose a loved one, they seek after words of comfort to minimize their grief. On any given Sunday, you will find folks in our congregation whose hearts are troubled; troubled from vanishing dreams, broken promises, difficult emotions, diminished health, the demise of a relationship, and the ultimate loss which is death.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” In this gospel passage, Jesus is sitting at table with his disciples, delivering his farewell address as a way of preparing them for his death and departure. He has washed their feet, predicted Judas’ betrayal, and prophesied Peter’s denial. He tells them that he will be with them for only a little while longer and where he is going, they cannot come. No wonder the disciples’ hearts are broken, unsure of where to turn next. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their feet and they have lost their way.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The verb used here is *tarasso* which means to agitate, stir up, disturb, to shake to and fro. In the midst of loss and disappointment, our thoughts and emotions are often shaken up. With uncertain ground, we lose our equilibrium, thus troubling our hearts.

So, the core spiritual question we are all want answered is this: What would free the human heart from being troubled? The world out there has many answers and has pretty much convinced us that bigger, better, faster and more will still the troubled waters of our life. And while bigger, better, faster, and more might give us immediate gratification, they are only temporary solutions.

What do you think would free the human heart from being troubled? Good health? Well, most young people have good health yet they often seem to be in an existential crisis. Wealth? Some of the most miserable people I know have a lot of money. While money may bring them comfort, it does not remove their misery. How about a beautiful home? The landscape is dotted with fine homes inhabited by lonely people. The ideal family? I have never met one. A perfect relationship? People come and go and in the end, all of us will die. This is what the disciples are about to experience with their leader.

What would free the human heart from being troubled? Jesus has one answer and one answer only: “Believe in me and believe in God.” What does that mean? To believe in someone means to have the confidence that he/she will act in a consistent way that displays character and virtue. From a theological perspective, *to believe* comes from the same word meaning to trust or to have faith in. To “believe” is not about proving facts or doctrines or 12 impossible things before lunch time. To believe is to trust and by implication, to trust in the Source of life which we Christians call God.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Jesus is calling his disciples back to this fundamental relationship of trust in God. No matter what happens, if they put their trust in developing this holy relationship, they will have an abundant life. Does this mean that they will be healthy and live forever? No! Does this mean that they will be successful, and highly respected? Not necessarily. But it does mean that if they immerse their lives in the wisdom and spirit of God, then they will experience an abundant life filled with the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. This is the promise.

So how do we walk this life-giving path in order that our hearts will not be troubled? What does it mean in practical terms to build up a relationship with God so that we humans can experience abundant life? Does it involve a complicated formula for the spiritually elite? Is there some esoteric knowledge that we must first acquire? Must we have a spiritual conversion experience like St. Paul? How can we know the way? Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” If you want to know and love God with all your heart, mind, body, and soul, then follow me. I am the way to God.

While following Jesus is not an easy path, it is fairly-straight forward to those who are willing to remove themselves from the center of the universe and put God there. Instead of focusing on me, myself, and I, striving to get our own ego needs met, following “the way” is to discern what would

Jesus do in different situations. For instance, if we want to know the kind of politics that will best serve society, then we must follow Jesus by striving for justice, mercy, and the dignity of every human being. If we want to know what kind of diplomacy we should take in dealing with other countries, then we need to follow Jesus' ways of peace and relationship building. If we want to know what kind of relationships we should nurture with our own families and friends and community to have abundant life, then we like Jesus need to err on the side of compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice. Following "the way" means to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, invite the refugee, and have mercy upon all those who suffer. Jesus is the template of God for humanity. And it is this image of God, incarnate in the person of Jesus, that we hang our hearts on.

Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14] The gospel of John's primary concern is the clarification and celebration of what it means to believe in Jesus. Unfortunately, this verse has been used as a weapon to beat people into theological submission or as a litmus test to discredit the value of other religions. It has been used as a rallying cry of Christian triumphalism, trying to convince non-believers that Christians have the corner on God. But to interpret the verse this way is to rip it from its first century context and do violence to the spirit of Jesus' words.

Jesus is assuring his disciples that he is the embodiment of God and that if they follow him on this path, not only will they embody the spirit of God themselves but they will do even great things than he has done. There is nothing in this text to suggest that John's gospel is concerned with the inferiority of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam as some contemporary readers insist on. In fact, I doubt that Jesus ever knew about the religions of the East and he certainly knew nothing about Islam because it only came into being some 600 years later.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus is concluding his earthly ministry. He is saying good-bye, passing on the baton, and leaving his ministry in the hands of his anxious but capable disciples. I do not underestimate the inner turmoil of change and uncertainty they were experiencing at that time. Saying goodbye has never been easy for me. I remember saying good-bye to my best friend who moved right before my senior year in high school. I said good-bye to a dream of becoming a physician, a goal I had worked towards for 9 years. I said goodbye to the idealism of the 1960's, coming face to face with struggle, injustice, fear and disappointment. I have said goodbye to loved ones, pets, security, neighbors, and faith communities.

In a few months, I will be saying goodbye to you which is a deep cause for sadness. But if I were to remain in that state of goodbye, holding onto the past and not looking to the future, my heart would remain troubled forever. And while grief has touched my heart many times, I truly believe that resurrection, not death, is the final word. This is a posture in life that gives me hope for a new future.

Last week, we gathered together for a memorial service celebrating the life of Joan Von der Heiden. Like every funeral service @ Trinity, the liturgy began with words of hope and new life: "I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die. And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith, shall not die for ever." [BCP]

"The Resurrection is not a one-time miracle that proved Jesus was God. Jesus' death and resurrection *name and reveal* what is happening everywhere and all the time. Reality is always moving toward resurrection. This is the divine mystery of transformation, fully evident in the entire physical universe. God uses the very thing that would normally destroy us—the tragic, sorrowful, painful, or unjust—to transform and enlighten our minds. There are no dead ends...just a constant pattern of growth and change." [Richard Rohr]

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." I think Jesus was trying to communicate to his disciples that life does not end but merely changes. And the secret of change is to focus our energy not on trying to recover the old but on building the new. And one of the ways to keep our hearts from being troubled in building the new, is to include Jesus the Christ as the chief cornerstone. This, I believe, is the message of today's gospel. This is good news and this is where I will hang my heart and my hope.