

Sunday, May 10, 2020
“Troubled Hearts”
A sermon from Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
by Rev. Christopher W. Keating
John 14:1-14

Although my father’s Irish pride would never have admitted it, my mother normally had the last word in our house. Choice of dinner on holidays? Mom. Choice of what we were to wear to church on Sundays? Mom. Choice of where we would go to dinner? Mom. Even after her death mother had the last word – as we found as we were sorting through her things. Mom had a large ceramic turkey platter for Thanksgiving, – it was indeed a large turkey, and as far as my brother was concerned, it was indeed a turkey. It hung over our dining table for years, and Cliff never had a nice word to say about it. After mom had died, we took the platter off the wall, only to discover mom had placed a typed label across the back which read, “After I die, be sure to give this platter to Clifford.”

Like my mom, Jesus makes sure his family understands his last intentions. In John, these last words cover several chapters of the Gospel—he was by no means brief, and, like my mom, his words were sometimes met with a confused look.

He is telling them things which do not seem to make sense. Remember that the mood is somber, tense. Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples. Judas has left, and questions are beginning to emerge. What are we doing here? What is he talking about? Why does he keep saying, “Where I am going you cannot come?”

Tensions have risen like yeast dough left by a warm windowsill. Grief lingers in the air, and as Jesus continues this long, wandering path of conversation, one question jumps across the centuries and lands into our laps this Mother’s Day 2020: “Is he speaking to us?”

I’ve been wrestling with these words all week, and as I stare into the nonblinking eye of this camera, I am beginning to see where Jesus’ words may lead us. They form a trajectory from that grief-filled room straight into our own coronavirus confinements. Just as Jesus sketches out the possibilities of faith for those leaning around that table, he is offering us a promise and an opportunity.

While social distancing prevents us from sharing the sort of physical closeness and intimacy Jesus shared with the disciples, it is not hard to imagine. We see the yearning in their hearts, perhaps the way we see the yearning of our own families to be together this Mother’s Day. We sense the confusion and anticipatory grief that is present. The emotions are high.

And like the disciples, we who are some fifty days or so into our “stay at home” procedures know that our hearts are indeed troubled. We are troubled by the uncertainty which hangs in the air, concerned about friends who are sick, troubled by anxieties about personal safety and well-being, concerned over finances and the economy, troubled by the thought that it may still be weeks before we get haircuts. We are at the point where we are

learning to make do—we sniff at the leftovers in the fridge and decide they'll do, and choose to wear the same sweatpants three days in a row.

Our hearts are troubled by what our eyes see in this world: a young man, out for a run, murdered only because he was black. Our hearts are troubled by the Ahmaud Arbery's death.

Our hearts are troubled by the divisions in our world. Indeed, as St. Augustine said, our hearts are restless...until they find their rest in Christ.

We turn to these verses at funerals in attempts to assuage troubled hearts. But what we so often miss is that the comfort Jesus provides is not so much a calming of our grief, but an invitation for grief to be transformed.

On that evening, the air is punctuated by what we call anticipatory grief, a sense of gut-wrenching foreboding doom. Jesus has washed their feet, Judas has been excused, and the shadows are falling. Jesus tells them, "You know the way to the place where I am going." That is not completely accurate, as Thomas is quick to point out. "How can we know the way?" Thomas pleads. He's not doubting; he's grieving.

Thomas voices what we are all feeling. Grief is the result of having loved. Right now, our experiences of grief are at all time highs, as grief expert Alan Wolfelt reminds us. The world, says Wolfelt is confronted by two pandemics right now: one is caused by the virus, and the other is grief.¹

The struggle is what we are not especially adept in talking about grief. It is uncomfortable, and sad. It's remarkable that Thomas is able to find words to express the pain he feels. His heart is troubled and confused; he has no idea where to find this "way" that Jesus says they already know.

In Thomas' mind, the way forward is always logical and sequential. He is looking for concrete steps toward to God, just as we might be looking for specific actions we can take to move through this virus. Our struggle is that we also want a logical, sequential path with easy-to-follow steps.

But Jesus does not come offering a set of steps. He brings resurrection. He does not offer the disciples a how-to manual, but instead reminds them of his invitation and his challenge.

I am the way to God, he says. Remember that I have loved the entire world. I am the truth which leads to God. Remember the words I have spoken. I am the life which brings abundance. Remember what I have shown you.

That is the hope which Jesus offers for hearts that are troubled: it is a promise but also a challenging opportunity. It is an invitation to dwell in the grace of God that surrounds us at each step of the journey, and it is an opportunity to become a place what that hope abides.

¹ See <https://www.centerforloss.com/2020/04/pandemic-of-grief/>

Jesus is the hope for hearts that are troubled, a hope that secures our lives in moments when we are most alone. In a time marked by unpredictability, sudden change and nearly universal grief, we are called to abide. But the promise leads to an opportunity, which I believe holds significant possibilities for the church of Jesus Christ, and for our own congregation. We heal from our grief not by remaining in our own individual silos, but by abiding with each other.

An invitation, and an opportunity.

Too often, we misread these words as statements of exclusion. Yet Jesus meant them as words of invitation.

When the late great theologian Shirley Guthrie looked at these words, he saw in them an opportunity to hear for the church to proclaim the good news in new ways. “What if we heard it first of all,” wrote Guthrie, “as an invitation to ask afresh who (Jesus) is and what he says and does, not to congratulate ourselves on what we are and what we have to say and do?”

Guthrie added, “I believe then we would be in a position to discover an understanding of Christian faith and life that is uniquely and faithfully Christian and at the same time open to a genuinely productive and mutually corrective conversation with fellow Christians who are different from us as well as with followers of other religious traditions—just because we believe that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.” (See Shirley Guthrie, Jr. *Always Being Reformed*, 2nd edition, 2008, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 68.)

Jesus – the way, the truth, the life. Allow these promises to lead you from grief into hope. Amen.