

“The Words We Long to Hear”

Sunday, May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

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Easter’s hope is that life triumphs over death, and that we are never abandoned by God.

In 2013, New York Times columnist David Brooks found himself at a crossroads both personally and spiritually. After spending some time researching the life of Christian activist Dorothy Day, Brooks, a somewhat nominal Jew, suddenly grew attracted to the Christian understanding of grace.

As Benjamin Wallace Wells notes in the New Yorker: ¹

One morning, passing through Penn Station at rush hour, Brooks was overcome by the feeling that he was moving in a sea of souls—not the hair and legs and sneakers but the moral part. “It was like suddenly everything was illuminated, and I became aware of an infinite depth on each of these thousands of people. They were living souls,” Brooks writes in his new book, “The Second Mountain.”

“Suddenly it seemed like the most vivid part of reality was this: Souls waking up in the morning. Souls riding the train to work. Souls yearning for goodness. Souls wounded by earlier traumas. With that came a feeling that I was connected by radio waves to all of them—some underlying soul of which we were all a piece.”

Brooks’ writing is filled with references to these sort of soul-searching ways we are reaching out to each other, crossing divisions, looking for healing in a time that has become disrupted by illness, grief, and physical isolation.

He is listen for the words we long to hear.

As frustrating and fatiguing as these days of quarantine have become, I am hopeful that we be paying attention to the stories which arise. The illness has impacted everyone, even if we have not become ill, and because of that, we all

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/david-brooks-conversion-story>

have stories that should be told, and which long to be heard. Stories of moments that have changed us, stories of people who have made a difference, stories that tug on our hearts and fill us with emotion. In this time of separation, we would do well to write down these stories however we can, documenting for future generations our experiences of this strange and difficult time.

Last Sunday, on Mother's Day, my cousin shared a short story on Facebook of how this would be the first Mother's Day in 55 years to not hug his mother, who lives in a care facility. Thankfully, my aunt's facility has had zero Covid-19 infections, but the reason behind that is, of course, that no one is allowed to visit the residents.

That is a story we long to hear.

Some stories are harder to hear. We know the stories of long-married couples who are separated because of illness. Some of us can tell the stories of working long days and nights in hospitals and clinics. Some of us can tell stories of heartache as loved ones remain socially distanced – even as they approach death.

We can only imagine their heartache. A friend of ours is in hospice, and his wife is unable to be with him. A neighbor has been unable to hold her new grandbaby who was born at the beginning of March. Carol Stepp and I listened to our youth tell stories of their frustration with not being able to be with their friends.

The other day I heard a story of a child who was growing weary of having his mother as his teacher. He looked up at her and said, "I better get a good grade on this test because there's no way I can bear having you as my teacher again next year.

Fear, worry, anxiety these abide– but perhaps the greatest of these is wondering if we are all alone.

In an article in last week's Washington Post, three emergency room physicians wrote about watching as children were separated from parents who tested positive for Covid-19. Frequently, the children are placed into isolation wards, separated from their parents and each other. After weeks of observing children in these settings, the doctors worry. They write, "The traumas inflicted by covid-19 will remain and will likely resurface. We cannot completely shield children from

the consequences of this pandemic, but acknowledging its effects on their well-being and taking other meaningful actions might lessen their scars...”

The doctor’s continued:

As health-care providers, we are doing what we can right now: We fight the solitude these children face with our company. We point out murals of athletes, animals and trains on our emergency department walls. We chat about favorite television shows and school subjects. We joke until we belly-laugh together, cutting through the tension heavy in so many hospitals of late. When our shifts end, we update our colleagues so the children can make new friends. We aim to help them understand that regardless of what lies ahead, we will continue to care for them — and that they are not alone.”²

That is the promise Jesus offers. It is the promise that has shaped so much of this final going away speech in John 14. As I indicated last week, this section of John’s gospel is referred to as a “Farewell Discourse.” Jesus has a lot to say -- and I do mean a lot – in these chapters. They are jammed packed with instructions and reminders and admonitions.

He imparts his instructions to the disciples. He reminds them – over and over again – to remain in loving relationship with God and with each other. This is his commandment—the one word that really matters.

And that word is love. John, more than any of the other gospels, is a gospel of love. There are 57 times when John uses the verb form of love, compared to 13 times in Matthew, six in Mark, and 15 in Luke. Love and loving actions form the backbone of John’s message. It was said that when the apostle John was an old man living in Ephesus, as he was led from place to place, the only thing he would say, over and over again was “Little children, love one another...love each other.”

That is the commandment Jesus offers. John does not tell us to go the second mile, to offer up our coats, or to share our bread with the hungry. Instead, Jesus in John’s Gospel says that if we love him, we will show that love in our relationships with each other. Jaime Clark Soles reminds us that within this call to

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/17/how-coronavirus-is-exposing-new-kind-family-separation/>

love, there is no distinguishing between the way God loves and the way we are called to love. “The so-called dividing line between human and divine love simply does not exist,” she says. The God who has come to dwell with us calls us to live unabashedly and wholeheartedly in love.

It is indeed the word we long to hear. We are not left alone, but are instead swaddled in the grace, power, and joy of the advocate, the Spirit whom John calls the *paraclete*.

The Advocate remains with us, pleads for us, and comforts us in the knowledge that we are not orphaned.

During the time that Carol and I were dating, she had an encounter which forever changed the way she understood the Spirit’s work. She was a chaplain at a nursing home in Princeton. It was filled with the all the astonishing sorts of souls and characters common to care facilities, including the woman with a strong New York accent who would always greet you at the front door by saying, “I’m just visiting here from Queens.” One of the residents was a bright-eyed, yet medically fragile resident named Ruby. Ruby held a soft-spot for Carol, especially after learning that Carol and I were engaged and planning a wedding. She always wanted an update on wedding plans. She’d listen as Carol would give her an update, and then Ruby would wander back into the far-away places of her memory, sharing stories about she and her husband.

“Why are you talking to that mean old woman?” the staff would ask Carol. It seemed Ruby had a reputation of being a bit abrasive with the staff. She could be rude and even mean. But what Carol discovered is that at the heart of the matter, Ruby was just lonely. She longed for the words of Jesus: “I will not leave you abandoned.”

They are words of comfort and deep assurance, but perhaps also an invitation to the work of loving and listening for the stories around us. As we are comforted, we find ourselves invited to that demanding work of loving one another—even while we are apart. Amen.