

Untroubled Hearts in Troubled Times

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John 14:1-14 and 1 Peter 2:2-10

It was the evening before the last earthly day of Jesus' life.

He had been preparing his disciples for this moment for some time, but they stubbornly refused to listen. So, this night, with the final grains of sand in of the hourglass of his life running out, he tried one more time. The conversation he had with them began after their last supper together, when Jesus took a basin of water and a towel, then knelt to wash and dry their feet the way a lowly household slave would do.

John saw fit to devote five out of the twenty-one chapters in his Gospel—roughly a quarter of all the news he saw fit to print about Jesus' life--to this single conversation. Which tells us something about the degree of significance he attached to it being recorded for posterity.

To this day, some of Jesus' most comforting words for troubled times can be found in these chapters. More than likely, some of the verses I just read you have heard recited at funerals. I could probably count on one hand the number of funerals I've conducted where I *didn't* read some of these words.

These passages are often referred to as Jesus' Farewell Discourse, and they actually follow a pattern that was common to that day and culture when persons of some importance neared the end of their life. They often summoned family and friends to hear a similar discourse as what Jesus gave to his followers, who would be his successors in continuing his mission. The discourse usually contained a review of the person's life and achievements, some final advice or instructions for the soon to be deceased person's successors, and a final prayer.

Jesus' Farewell Discourse to his disciples was intended to prepare them, not only for the grim certainty of his imminent death, but no less importantly, for their future without him. Some of what he had to tell them was deeply disturbing. Like, that one of them would betray him that night. And, that one of the most

respected and fiercely loyal members of their group would deny he even knew him. Then, Jesus paused and said to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

It sounds like an absurd expectation for Jesus to put on them. How could their hearts not be troubled by what he had told them? But, if it seemed to them that Jesus was untroubled by the future, the truth is that Jesus knew all too well how it felt to have a troubled heart. On three occasions prior to this, the Gospel writer had chosen that same expression to describe something Jesus was feeling.

The first time was at the funeral for his good friend Lazarus, where Jesus observed the depth of mourning by Lazarus’ family and friends. It says “he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” by what he saw. The next time Jesus’ heart was troubled within him was when he and his followers entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus knew what no one else did, which was that he wouldn’t be leaving Jerusalem alive. With the inevitability of his death staring him in the face, he said, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” The next time Jesus’ heart was troubled was on the very same night he encouraged his disciples to *not* let *their* hearts be troubled. When he was done washing their feet as an expression of his love for them, he surprised them all by revealing that one of them would betray him. John describes Jesus as being troubled in spirit as he said these things.

A common thread runs through these three experiences of troubled times for Jesus. Each of these times when Jesus’ heart was troubled, it was a reaction to some situation where outward appearances indicated that either death or evil seemed to be in control. A troubled heart was an understandable reaction to such “troubled times.” Even for the likes of Jesus.

As we have watched helplessly while the coronavirus has made its ruthless, relentless march across one continent after another with no clear end in sight it appears that a grim and deadly evil has become our master on a scale unseen in recent history. Troubled times of this order of magnitude create troubled hearts that move us to stumble into unwise actions. Actions that we mistakenly believe will help us take back control of our suddenly uncertain futures.

One way that troubled hearts trip us up is by moving us to deny the reality or the severity of the problem we face. And based on that denial, to insist that the issue

will resolve itself or that the recommended measures for dealing with it—in this case, measures like social distancing, staying at home or wearing masks—ought to be ignored. Maybe even to be condemned as conspiratorial infringements on our personal freedoms. The other counterproductive impulse of troubled hearts is to attempt to seize control of the future through acquiring and hoarding everything from toilet paper to disinfectant.

Thankfully, Jesus offers a way of coping with troubled times apart from the strategies generated by troubled hearts. A way that does not deal in denying the seriousness of the problem and doesn't incite panic reactions to gain a false sense of personal control. Jesus' tactic for troubled times was to cultivate untroubled hearts. "Let not your hearts be troubled," he told the disciples. Then, in the next breath he offered them the way to follow that advice. "Believe in God, believe also in me."

Jesus' preferred response to troubled times is to have untroubled hearts because our future depends not on our own power to preserve ourselves, but in the power of trusting God. This is not a trust we take out and dust off when a crisis comes. It is a trust that is nurtured by an ongoing relationship with God. As the author of 1 Peter expressed it, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

When Jesus sought to relieve the disciples troubled hearts, he encouraged them to believe in God—to put their faith in God's care for them. But he also told them to believe in him. One thing he surely meant by that was, that they should believe in him as the perfect and complete revelation of what God was like. And that his lips spoke the words of God to their troubled hearts. One of the disciples said, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." To which Jesus replied, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

That was one way that believing in Jesus could unburden their hearts about the future. But, I think there is another way he was inviting them to believe in him.

He said, "If you do not take my word for it--that I and the Father are one, then believe me because of the works themselves." On one level, he most certainly was referring to the miraculous works they had seen him perform as a compelling reason for them to believe in him.

However, he might also have wanted them to believe in the works he was yet to do. Throughout Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion he never resorted to wielding those miraculous powers that were at his disposal to rescue himself. He simply trusted with all his heart in his relationship with his heavenly father. This was a work that he invites us all to trust in for ourselves. Maybe, his invitation for them to believe in him was also a call for all of us to entrust ourselves to God's care, the way Jesus trusted.

As I said earlier, I have often cited this passage to comfort those who grieve, as an affirmation that Jesus has conquered death and prepared an eternal home for us in his Father's house. But no less important, is the knowledge that Jesus has also conquered the fear of death's power. And, so this passage has as much and more to do with life here and now, as it has to do with the afterlife. Because Jesus entrusted those troubled disciples then, and to us, his often-troubled disciples now, the success of the mission for which he gave his life. "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do."

There are works that we, his church, have yet to do in Jesus' name. Those works are never more urgently needed than in times such as these. And those works, whatever they may look like, will only be doable through believing in him. Not only to believe in the power of God to miraculously change our troubled *circumstances*, as Jesus miraculously altered the realities of lepers and blind beggars. But for us to also believe in, and to emulate, the trust he placed in his relationship with God. Because that is the power that can miraculously transform our troubled hearts.