

**“Acknowledging Our Troubled Hearts
and Finding Something to Calm Them”**

John 14:1-14

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“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says to his first disciples and to us in a beloved text we have read hundreds of times, especially at funerals and memorial services. But just because he says this doesn’t mean our hearts aren’t troubled. In fact, he wouldn’t say this to the first disciples unless they were afraid.

Commenting on this passage from John 14, Lindsey Jodrey from Princeton Theological Seminary says this: “These farewell words from Jesus to his disciples do not feel relevant to me as I sit in my New Jersey apartment during COVID-19. Perhaps for some, the promise of a place that Jesus has prepared for them brings peace or hope, but I resonate more with the reaction of Thomas: ‘We don’t know where you’re going; how can we know the way?’”

Words alone do not calm us down in deeply unsettling times. “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” makes for a nice, peppy song — thank you Bobby McFerrin — but it doesn’t soothe our soul. We may say, “There, there” to a friend in crisis, “everything will be okay,” but we don’t know that it will, and “there, there” isn’t really much help.

Part of what we need in challenging times is the space to acknowledge our fears. Jesus allows space for Thomas to question and the others to say, “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” He answers their questions, but he doesn’t belittle them for asking and being troubled. So, before we consider his words of assurance, it might benefit us to linger over this part of the story for a while: Jesus’ understanding of those who are anxious. It is helpful for us, even as people of faith, to acknowledge the basic fact that our hearts are troubled these days.

My heart is troubled by health concerns for people I know and love, fears about what COVID-19 is doing to our economy, decisions I have to make or at least be a part of, what I see in parts of our culture right now in the

way of mistrust and division, not to mention the sad loss of Dana's uncle — we all have our personal burdens in addition to the pandemic. But as someone has said, we are not well-equipped in our culture to deal with the added challenges of this time.

I have known a number of people over the course of thirty-eight years of ministry who have lived for many decades without any serious challenge of health, work or family. It is a wonderful thing, in some ways, to be so blessed or fortunate — I am not sure “blessed” is the right word. But in other ways, it is not so fortunate, because working through struggles early on teaches us how to adapt and persevere. Many times, when people face a great challenge for the first time late in life, they just aren't very well-equipped to do so.

In like manner, most of us are not well-equipped to deal with isolation, job loss, widespread health risks and the loss of control over our lives we had or thought we had. The Greek verb translated as “troubled” in John 14:1 — *tarassein* — is used to describe his response to Lazarus' death in John 11:33 and how he felt thinking about Judas' betrayal in John 13:21. That is how troubled his disciples' hearts were as they thought of his absence. That is how troubled our hearts are now.

Lindsey Jodrey suggests an interesting and helpful strategy for coping with our new experience. She suggests we learn from people who have had to deal with chronic illnesses because unlike the able-bodied, they have had to deal with the kind of limitations, fears and constant stress that come with COVID-19. In particular, she consulted a seminary friend named Alisa whose daughter has multiple disabilities and a terminal illness (from workingpreacher.org).

Alisa says that one thing she has had to do is come to grips with the reality that she cannot save her daughter. Living with a daily reminder of her limits in regard to what matters most is maddening. It is easy to get stuck fighting these limits and pondering unanswerable questions, but it is futile, faithless, distracting and daunting, she says. The very idea of control is a delusion anyway, an idol, a robber of joy.

There is wisdom in this perspective and help for our current reality. There are limits to what we can control in life. There always have been. We are just more aware of this reality now. We can't save ourselves from this virus, though there are things we can do to help. So, we feel more vulnerable,

and this is not a good feeling, but it is a feeling that squares with reality and it is helpful to acknowledge this.

But another important thing Alisa has learned from her experience of dealing with chronic illness is something about what is most important in light of our vulnerability — love. In the end, it's all that really matters. Commenting on this insight, Lindsey Jodrey says that love never rescues anyone from death, but it covers them, nurtures them, consumes them in a way that always matters.

So, in this time when our limits are obvious and our hearts are troubled, when we cannot develop an action plan or wave a magic wand to make everything better, what we can do is love one another in practical ways, and we are doing that.

While in isolation, Carrie D'Antignac, who would normally be working many days of the week in our Clothing Ministry, has been crocheting and, as of a couple of weeks ago, had completed over 200 toboggans for adults, as well as many coats and dresses for the tiniest clients in our Clothing Ministry. Barbara Jacobs, who has had multiple family members dealing with illness in this time, has been sewing masks for anyone who needs them, over 200 of them now. Mary Hauser has been making masks too; I don't know how many.

And people are expressing love in other ways — running errands, delivering food, making calls, writing notes. Like quite a few other FBC members, I received a delightful note this week from Asher Sterling Helms, who will turn four in July. Mom and Dad may have helped, but the artwork, signature and spirit of love are his. It brightened my day.

A thank-you note to all the ministers from Pat Simpson contained this quote from Charles Dickens — the pure, the bright, the beautiful, the streams of love and truth, the striving after better hopes, these things shall never die. Indeed, they shall not, even at a time like this, especially love. Our hearts are troubled — it is healthy to acknowledge this — but we are still able to love each other, and this is what matters.

And yet, while it is healthy for us to be honest about our fears and to realize the enduring significance of love, it is also wise that we claim Jesus' words of assurance. Words alone do not calm us, but what is conveyed by these words does.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says, “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father’s house there are many dwelling places.” It is an assurance of our place in eternity. Jesus is saying that no matter what struggles we face in this life — and we will face struggles, as the story in Acts 7 about Stephen being put to death because of his faith reminds us — we have a future with God that cannot be denied. Stephen sees a vision of God and Christ just before his death to assure him. Jesus offers this image of an eternal dwelling place to assure us.

There has been a good bit of energy wasted on translation here, but then, the church has a long history of wasting energy. Those of us who grew up with the King James Version of the Bible learned that in God’s eternal dwelling place, there are many “mansions” which sounds quite different from dwelling places. A member of another church I served quit coming to worship when the ministers there, long before me, quit using the KJV, and it was largely because of the translation of John 14. “I’ve got a dwelling place in this life,” he said to me quite seriously, “I don’t want a dwelling place in the next life. I want a mansion!”

Among the many ironies of this perspective is that the word “mansion” in Old English — which came from the Latin *mansio* which came from the Greek *monai* — did not refer to a palatial dwelling. It referred to a simple dwelling place, for example, in one case to the tiny utility apartment where the gatekeeper lived. That is not what my friend had in mind. The bigger irony, of course, is that this is a metaphor for eternity, not an architect’s rendering. What Jesus is saying is that there is a place for us with God after this life. No matter what happens here, we’re “okay.” That’s a helpful word for the first disciples and for us in a troubled time like this.

But if we dig a little deeper, there may be more to this word of assurance. Scholars have noted that the word *monai*, dwelling place, comes from the same root as the verb in John 15 translated as “abiding” (*meno*). While developing the metaphor of the vine and the branches, Jesus counsels his followers to abide in him and his love just as he abides in God and God’s love. Dwelling place might also be translated as abiding place. And we might also conclude that both the promise and the recommendation here is to abide in God in this life and the next. In other words, what Jesus offers troubled

disciples to calm their hearts is the gift of abiding in God — now and forevermore.

It is what he offers us today, much more than a simple “there, there” — the comforting, encouraging, hope-inspiring companionship of God. I know your hearts are troubled, he says, it’s understandable, but they don’t need to be. I am going to leave you, but God will be with you, you will not be alone or “orphaned” (to use the word Jesus does later in the text). And as you dwell with God now, you will in eternity. It’s not just pie in the sky, as some might say, it’s pie now, or peach cobbler or crème brûlée, whatever we prefer.

The best analogy might be of a parent comforting a child during some crisis like a storm, the loss of a loved one, the aftermath of 9-11, and we might add now — the realities of COVID-19. The parent can offer words of assurance, but often what is most helpful is for the parent to stay with the child and hold him or her. My mother did that when my grandfather died of cancer. I was ten, we had been very close, it was difficult to imagine not seeing him again, but my mother stayed with me and held me so that I was not alone. Jesus says that God does this very same thing for us —God dwells with us, abides with us, holds us in God’s arms. More than any words or even the best promises of eternity, this Holy Presence calms our troubled hearts, even now.

During a virtual meeting this week, I was reminded of a wonderful insight of Franciscan Richard Rohr. He said that we dare not get rid of the pain (in any difficult experience) until we have learned what it has to teach us. We dare not get rid of the pain until we have learned what it has to teach us. We can learn a great deal from our challenges, even this one. We’d love to get rid of the pain and back to normal as soon as possible, but let’s not miss the opportunity to learn what our limits are and what matters most in the way of love, and let’s not miss the opportunity to deepen our trust in God, to recognize the One who is dwelling with us now, calming us and giving us hope. For these lessons will benefit us long after the challenges of COVID-19 have passed.