

5th Sunday of Easter A
John 14:1-14
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places.' Let's pray: ...

[PowerPoint slide with sound effect of a beating heart].

What troubles your heart today?

The list is long and ugly. I think about all the prayers we've offered for the violence and suffering in the world. I think about all of the protests and wars raging around the world. I think about the condition of our healthcare, welfare, and financial systems. I think about twisted ideologies, violence, exploitation, and poverty. I think about stories of bullying and suicides. I think about Russia, North Korea, Sudan, and increasing tensions around the globe. I think about the nightmare of dysfunction in our political parties. I think about families who're struggling, spouses divorcing, children being raised in cars, and people who're hanging on by a thread.

Despite what Jesus says about not letting our hearts be troubled, my heart is troubled. None of us get through this life without a troubled heart. I don't think we can look at the pain of the world today, the suffering of a loved one, or our own wounds and hurts and not have a troubled heart.

That's the context in which I hear Jesus say, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." It's not that different from the context in which Jesus said those words. It's the night of the last supper. Jesus has announced his impending death. Feet have been washed. Judas has left the table and stepped into the night-time of betrayal. Peter will blurt out his threefold denial. Thomas is lost and asks, "How can we know the way?" Philip can't see the forest for the trees; "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," he says.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says. “Do not let your hearts be troubled?” Are you kidding me? Is Jesus really serious about that? Doesn’t he know what’s happening in our lives and our world? How can Jesus say that with a straight face when he was troubled at seeing Mary and the Jews weeping at the death of Lazarus (John 11:33), when he said to Andrew and Philip that his own “soul is troubled” (John 12:27), and when St John tells us that “Jesus was troubled in spirit” because he knew one of his disciples would betray him (John 13:21)? What is Jesus telling us? It’s not as though there’s an on-off switch for troubled hearts. How do we begin to make sense of today’s gospel in a world whose heart is constantly in arrest?

It’s easy to understand why this text is so often chosen for funerals. Death troubles our hearts and we yearn for balance, stability, and harmony. However, this gospel isn’t just about the afterlife. Like all of Jesus’ teaching, today’s gospel has something to say to us right here and right now. It speaks to the very situations that trouble our hearts today.

Think about times when your heart has been troubled. What did that feel like? We all experience it in our own ways but see if this sounds familiar: isolated, paralysed, overwhelmed, powerless, anxious, off-balance, out of control, disconnected, afraid, thoughts spinning in your head, no stability, despair, grief, tears, anger, confusion, frustration. Recognise any of these? In the midst of a troubled heart the unspoken question is this: Will the centre hold or will everything collapse around me? Thomas and Philip are feeling the collapse. Maybe you are too. Will the centre hold? That’s our question.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus recognises that our hearts are troubled. He’s not warning us about a future condition. He knows the troubling has already begun. He can see it in us because he’s experienced it within himself. But, he also knows that our lives and the world aren’t defined by what troubles us.

What if not letting our hearts be troubled begins with looking into our hearts and naming what troubles us? That means facing ourselves, our lives, our world. That may be the first and most difficult thing Jesus asks of us in today’s gospel. I don’t know about you but I sometimes find it’s too difficult and too painful to look too closely. It takes me too close to the edge of the abyss and a

free-fall into a collapsing life and a collapsing world. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas speaks for us all. We’ve lost our bearings. How do we get back on track? Where do we go when it seems that everything around us is collapsing?

Here’s the crunch. We have to lose *our* centre in order to find *the* centre. We have to let go of whatever it is we think stabilises our lives. All of the things we use to gauge how well we think we’re travelling; the concoctions we brew in an attempt to remedy the things that trouble our hearts. This is extremely difficult to do because it means we need to discard the little security blankets we knit for ourselves and cling to so dearly, which leaves us exposed and vulnerable. I get that.

But if your heart is troubled, then it’s time to re-centre. Re-centring doesn’t mean defaulting to whatever takes us to some imaginary happy place. It means remembering that our lives are tethered to something greater than ourselves. Remembering that our hearts are held secure by “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56)!” and we aren’t free-falling into the abyss. St Stephen exemplified this when he enraged the high priest and others by boldly telling them the truth about their self-deception and asked Jesus to forgive them even while they were stoning him to death. Stephen knew the way because his troubled heart was centred in Jesus.

Jesus wants us to remember that he is the centre – the way, and the truth, and the life. Not us. Not our country. Not the church and her creeds and doctrines. Not our success, accomplishments, position, or power. We can’t establish our own centre; we need to realise and trust what is, or rather, who is already there. Like St Stephen, we already know the way to the place of this centre because we too are filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact, Saints, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,” Philip says to Jesus. He’s bought into the lie that the Father is apart from, outside of, distant from himself. The centre, however, is within. The Father’s house is within. The kingdom is within. Wherever you go, you carry the centre with you, Saints.

I want you to listen carefully to these scriptures and dwell on them:

- “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you” (1 Corinthians 3:16)?
- “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:17).
- “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19)?
- “We are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Whatever you face, the centre is with you. Regardless of what troubles, the centre is with you. Wherever you are, the centre is with you. Not because you’re the centre, but because God dwells within you.

In the language of today’s gospel, the centre is the Father’s house and there are many dwelling places in this house. In the Father’s house there is a dwelling place for every troubled heart. I’m not talking about the afterlife, and I’m not thinking of some gigantic celestial dormitory. I’m talking about the ways God’s life intersects our own with his mercy, forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, healing, love, beauty, wisdom, hope, courage, joy, and intimacy. These are the dwelling places for troubled hearts, places of re-centring. Every time we think, live and express the divine attributes in our thoughts, words, and deeds, we regain our centre, restore balance, and take up residence in the Father’s house.

How might centredness, balance, and harmony within yourself help you see and respond differently to your troubles or the troubles of the world? “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

What if in the midst of troubles your heart could maintain a normal rhythm and beat with God’s life? “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” When your heart is troubled, try to imagine a neon sign blinking like a heartbeat and hear these words:

“Vacancy.”

“Vacancy.”

“Vacancy.”

There’re always rooms available in the Father’s house.

[PowerPoint slide with sound effect of a beating heart]. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.