

Easter 5A May 10 2020  
John 14:1-14  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you dearly Beloved of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Jesus says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*" Let's pray: Dear Lord, you know our every thought, mood, and feeling before we are even aware of them ourselves. Look upon us with the eyes of your mercy, give us comfort and sure confidence in you, defend us from all danger, and keep us in perpetual peace and safety; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Why does Jesus say, "Do not let your hearts be troubled"? Why the heart?

The answer lies in understanding the historical importance of the heart in the scriptures (particularly the Old Testament).

The physical activity of the heart was thought to be what caused the limbs to move. A stopped heart indicated paralysis, not death (1 Samuel 25:37; 2 Samuel 18:14). Eating strengthened one's heart (Genesis 18:5; Judges 19:5) and was associated with its recovery (1 Kings 21:7; Acts 14:17; James 5:5). The "heart of the sea" (Ezekiel 27:25-27) and "heart of heaven" (Deuteronomy 4:11), talk about the inaccessibility of the heart; an area incapable of exploration.

The heart is the centre of emotions, feelings, moods, and passions: joy (Deuteronomy 28:47; Acts 2:26), grief (Psalm 13:2; Lamentations 2:11), ill-temper (Deuteronomy 15:10), love (Philippians 1:7), courage (2 Samuel 17:10; Psalm 27:14), and fear (Genesis 42:28). A swollen heart breeds arrogance (Isaiah 9:9), which is in stark contrast to the gentle and lowly heart of Jesus (Matthew 11:29).

The heart's function as the source of thought and reflection highlights its intellectual capacities (Isaiah 6:10; Mark 7:21-23). The heart understands (Deuteronomy 8:5; Isaiah 42:25), provides wisdom to rule justly and wisely (1 Kings 3:12; 10:24), and discerns good and evil (1 Kings 2:49).

The heart also represents the idea of will and conscience (1 Samuel 24:5; 2 Samuel 24:10). The request for a pure heart is the desire for a new and more perfect conscience (Psalm 51:10; Matthew 5:8). Since the heart is the centre for decisions (2 Samuel 7:21), obedience, devotion, and intentionality, it represents the total human person.

Within the heart, human beings meet God's word (1 Samuel 12:24; Jeremiah 32:40) and thus it is the location where conversion takes place (Psalm 51:10; Joel 2:12; Acts 2:37). The heart is literally the centre of our being and existence.

So, what troubles your heart today? What is throwing the core of your being off balance? What is causing you to lose your centre? Despite what Jesus says about not letting our hearts be troubled, my heart is troubled and I know yours is too. 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 departure from this world. Feet have been washed. Judas has left the table and stepped into the night-time of betrayal. Peter will issue a threefold denial. Thomas is lost and asks, "How can we know the way?" Philip has lost his centre and can't see what's right in front of him. "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," he says.

And Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled?" Is he joking? Is Jesus really serious about that? Doesn't he see what is happening in our lives and our world? How can Jesus say that with a straight face when St John tells us earlier that Jesus was troubled at seeing Mary and the Jews weeping at the death of Lazarus (11:33), that Jesus' own "soul is troubled" (12:27), and that Jesus "was troubled in spirit" (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 in constant arrhythmia?

It's easy to understand why this text is often used at funerals. Death troubles our hearts and we need shelter from the storm of our emotions. But Jesus is speaking to us right here and now. He speaks to the very circumstances that trouble our hearts today.

Think about times when your heart has been troubled. Maybe it is now. What does that feel like? We all experience it in our own ways but do any of these, sound familiar: lonely, paralysed, anxious, depressed, afraid, overwhelmed, powerless, off-balance, out of control, disconnected, spinning thoughts, instability, despair, grief, tears, anger?

In the midst of a troubled heart the unspoken question is this: Will the centre hold or will everything collapse? Thomas and Philip are feeling the collapse. It sometimes feels like the world is going to. 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 about a future condition. He knows the troubling has already begun. He can see it in us because he's experienced it within himself. Yet, he also knows that our lives and the world are not defined by what troubles us.

What if not letting our hearts be troubled begins with looking into our hearts and naming what troubles us? Facing ourselves, our lives, our world. That's the most difficult thing Jesus asks of us in today's gospel. I don't know about you but sometimes I don't want to see. I don't want to name. It's too difficult. Too painful. Too real. 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 names our predicament. We've lost our centre. How do we regain it? Where do we go when it seems everything is collapsing around us?

Here's the paradox. We have to lose our centre in order to find it. Huh? We have to lose *our* centre to find *the* centre.

If your heart is troubled, then it's time to re-centre. Re-centring doesn't mean our hearts won't be troubled. It doesn't necessarily fix whatever the problem might be. What re-centring means is that our lives are tethered to something greater than ourselves. It means that our hearts are anchored firmly in God's Divine Life and he won't let us free-fall into the abyss. Jesus reminds us that there is a centre and it's not us. It's not Australia and her laws and constitution. It's not the church and her creeds and doctrines. It's not our success, accomplishments, position, or power. We don't have to be the centre nor do we need to establish it. Realistically, we can't. Instead, we awaken to it and we already know the way to the place; this centre where Jesus is, because he says so himself (John 14:4).

The difficulty we have is that we're like Philip who says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." We have fallen for the lie that the Father is apart from, outside of, and somehow distant from himself: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:10)? We have been blinded and can't see that, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). We have been muted and do not answer when St Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19)?

Dear Saints, believe, see, hear, and know that the centre is within us. The Father's house is within. The kingdom is within. Wherever you go, there is the centre. Whatever you face, there is the centre. Whoever you are, there is the centre; regardless of what troubles, there is the centre. Wherever you are, there is the centre. Not because you are the centre, but because God who dwells within is the centre. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

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 after-life; some sort of celestial dormitory for those who have enough right belief and right behaviour. I'm talking about the dwelling places where God's life intersects our own: mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, healing, love, beauty, wisdom, hope, courage, joy, intimacy.

These are the dwelling places, the places of re-centring for troubled hearts. Every time we express these divine attributes in our way of being, our words and our actions, every time we become aware of Christ's presence and peace-giving love, we regain our centre, restore balance, and take up residence in the Father's house. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places."

How might such centredness, balance, and harmony within yourself help you see and respond to your troubles or the troubles of the world differently? "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 I hear those words, I imagine a neon sign flashing:

"Vacancy."

"Vacancy."

"Vacancy."

And I hear a soothing voice beckoning: "Come inside." "Do not let your hearts be troubled." "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." "I am Jesus." "I'm here, and I've got you covered." Amen.

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