

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Sarah Freyermuth

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Jesus said to the disciples “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

That’s kind of a tall order isn’t it?

Our Gospel today comes to us from the middle of Jesus’ farewell discourse, or as I like to call it, Jesus’ very Midwestern goodbye, where he spends four whole chapters sharing his final teaching before his death with his disciples. And these disciples are hearing his words at a time of incredible chaos and uncertainty! Even though they don’t quite understand what he’s saying, Jesus will not stop going on and on about the fact that he’s about to leave them. Jesus has just explained that not only will Judas betray him, but the oh-so-devoted Peter will deny him—not just once, but three times! It’s in response to this, in response to the disciples’ feelings of confusion and uncertainty and fear, that Jesus says “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

I think the part I’ve always struggled with the most in this verse is the word “let.” Because it makes it sound as if the disciples had a choice. Could Peter really simply choose to not be upset after hearing that he was going to deny Jesus, the very person he’d dedicated his entire life to, three times? Can we really wake up each morning and simply choose to not be troubled by what’s going on in the world around us?

And even if we could, I'm not sure we'd want to. We live in deeply troubling times, where, just like in the disciples' world, injustice and violence and fear surround us. Within our context, simply choosing not to be troubled feels less like faith and more like privilege, more like turning away from the most vulnerable, which surely isn't what Jesus is calling us to do in this passage.

No, I think I finally began to understand this passage better after a particularly powerful visit I had when I was interning as a hospital chaplain a few summers ago.

One day, I went to meet with a patient who was very sick, so sick she likely wouldn't be leaving the hospital. And so when I asked her how she was doing, I expected her to tell me about all the pain and grief and fear she was no doubt feeling. But she surprised me when she instead said, very matter-of-factly, "Oh, I'm not troubled. I mean I'm sad and I'm scared alright, but I know that God's got me."

It was such a profound statement, that on the brink of death, she was able to separate the emotions she was feeling, the troubling circumstances all around her, from the deep abiding faith she had in God. And up to that point in my internship, most people on their deathbed had wanted to talk about heaven. I had even had people quote verse 3 of our Gospel passage to me, saying how comforted they felt by this beautiful image of Christ going ahead to prepare a place for them. And so when I asked her what she meant by "God's got me," I assumed that I would hear her say something similar.

But of course, once again, she surprised me. She started talking about her church, about how even now there were a couple of people who were on their way to the hospital to meet her. And then she said something I'll never forget—she said, “God brought me into a community of people. I take care of them and they take care of me and together we do God's work and that's not going to stop now. So I'm alright.”

There's a detail in the Greek translation of this passage that can help us make sense of what she was saying. Theologian Laura Holmes notes that the Greek here does not easily translate into English, because though the “your” of your hearts is plural, the word “heart” in the Greek is actually singular. It would be better translated as “You all, do not let your heart—your one communal heart—be troubled.” Which means that Jesus isn't speaking to the disciples as individuals, telling them not to feel upset by the very real suffering that is happening within and all around them. No, he's speaking to them as a community. He's telling them that even as each of them individually may struggle, together they can experience peace and wholeness not in some distant future, but here and now. When Jesus says “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he isn't admonishing us for feeling fearful or angry about the injustice and pain of our world. Instead he's reminding us that we can choose to turn toward one another, that we're invited into a community that will hold one another's burdens and doubts, that when we live into community our shared heart will not be overwhelmed by this world but will remain rooted in the promise of the resurrection, in the promise that life and wholeness will always overcome death and fear.

The woman I met in the hospital understood this. Her heart was not troubled, not because she wasn't sad or afraid, but because she knew she was being held—by God and by her community—here and now.

And it's at this point that we might start thinking, “well that's a really nice idea, that in community our heart can remain steady amidst the troubles of the world. But how do we actually do that practically?” That question is similar to what Thomas asks in our Gospel, when he says to Jesus “How can we know the way?”

Jesus answers with something that is both an astonishing word of grace and a challenge for us today. He says “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Over time, this verse has been horribly twisted and wrongly made out to be a blanket statement of Christian exclusivity. But when we actually read it within the context of the larger passage, we can see that this is Jesus at his most pastoral, issuing the disciples an incredible promise. He's assuring the disciples, who feel like he's leaving them, who feel like the world is unraveling all around them, that they already have everything they need to live into a deep and abiding relationship with God. He's assuring all of us that even when we individually feel lost and alone, even when we look around at our broken world and wonder where God is, we have a roadmap for how to live in a way that brings us peace and wholeness here and now. This roadmap stretches across the book of

John, where we have seen a Jesus who reaches across social boundaries to give water to the Samaritan woman, where we have seen a Jesus who welcomes those cast out from society, a Jesus who feeds the hungry, a Jesus who challenges exclusion, a Jesus who built up a community and taught them to take care of each other saying, “love one another as I have loved you.”

In this verse, we are reminded of the incredible fact that God loves us so much that God became enfleshed in Jesus Christ to give us a roadmap toward peace, to show us that we are invited into community to live out the values of liberation and justice and care for the vulnerable that Jesus embodied. And to show us that each time we as a community practice living into these values—each time we welcome the stranger and feed the hungry and truly love one another as Christ loves us—we get closer to becoming a community that can hold our shared heart steady in the midst of a troubling world. We get closer to becoming a community that acknowledges fear and grief but does not let it have the final say. And we get closer to becoming a community that is rooted deeply enough in God’s love that we can face whatever comes, together—and in doing so, begin to make hope and comfort and justice more possible in the world around us.

And so, with this promise in mind, I want to invite us all into a moment of reflection. I invite you to close your eyes, to take a deep breath, and then to ask yourself, “What is troubling my heart right now?”

And as you hold that, hear this: you were never meant to carry this trouble alone.

Who in our community can help you hold what feels heavy right now?
And where might you be that person for someone else?

Jesus said to the disciples “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” And maybe the word “let” here is actually an invitation. An invitation for us to trust that we don’t have to face the grief and uncertainty of our world alone. An invitation for us to respond to fear like the woman in the hospital, who in the face of death fully trusted that **through** her community, she would experience Christ’s comfort and peace and wholeness here and now. Maybe the word “let” is an invitation for us to enter into a community that embodies Christ’s liberation and justice and peace—and in doing so, holds our shared heart steady. Not because the world isn’t troubling, but because through this community, we begin to embody the very hope that can change it. **Amen.**