

# Words of Comfort & Hope: The Untroubled Heart

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## John 14:1-14

This weekend, we have been celebrating our grandson, Ben's, 7<sup>th</sup> birthday. Seven years – where does the time go? And every year on his birthday, my mind goes back to the day he was born. We were there, in the delivery room, when he was born. It was a long labor and not an easy birth, but when we knew that baby and mom were doing well, I called my father, now a great-grandfather. When I told him he now had a healthy new great-grandson, the first words out of his mouth were, “Great! Now I have one more person I have to worry about!” Got to love those jolly Scandinavians!

But I don't want to be too hard on my father. The apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. Worry and anxiety about any number of things – including Ben – haunt so many of my days, and I'm not alone.

James Martin, a Jesuit priest, comments on what he sees as an entire society whose members' emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual lives are in a frenzied state. In his words, “The more I listen to people, the more I hear them speak about their lives using the same words: overworked, overbooked, stressed-out, nuts and insane. ‘I have no time for my family. I have no time to pray. I barely have time to think.’

“Some of this pressure may be the result of an economy in which more hours are demanded from employees. Some of it can be traced to increasing pressure from technology. Newer forms of communication mean you are never far from anyone intent on contacting you. But some of our busyness is the inevitable outcome of a world where over-activity is praised... Extreme busyness is a badge of importance. If everyone else is busy and stressed, who are we to opt out? What would happen if we weren't overworked? What would we do with ourselves if there weren't some task at hand?” Who am I when I'm not working and anxious and stressed-out?

Then, if we have the time amidst the many pressures of a 24/7 life, we come to church and what do we hear? “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” In the midst of frenzied and anxious lives, we hear Jesus inviting us into a calm space in the midst of the storm.

It is important to understand that Jesus is speaking to some folks with very troubled and anxious hearts. Jesus and his closest disciples are at table together, their last night together. He has told them he will soon be leaving them and they cannot imagine what they will do without him. What will life be like? What will happen to us? Thomas speaks for all of them when he cries, “Lord, we do not where you are going? How can we know the way?” He is worried that they will have to live the rest of their lives living on a thin diet of fond memories. And Jesus responds, “Believe in God; believe also in me. You want to know the way? I am the way...” What do you think? Is that enough? “Believe in God; believe also in me.” Is that enough? Are you already feeling calmer and more at peace?

Charlie Brown has once again failed to get his kite air-born. He is beating the ground next to his fallen kite and crying out: “I can't get this stupid kite in the air! I can't... I can't!” Lucy hears all this, comes up to Charlie Brown and says, “Oh, come on now, Charlie Brown. That's no way to talk. The whole trouble with you is you don't believe in yourself. You don't believe in your abilities. You've got to say to yourself, ‘I believe that I can fly this kite.’ Now go ahead, say to yourself, ‘I believe that I can fly this kite.’

He gets up from the ground and thinks to himself, “I believe that I can fly this kite.” “All right,” says Lucy, “now say it out loud, say it over and over.”

“I believe that I can fly this kite,” he says, “I believe that I can fly this kite. **I actually believe that I can fly this kite!**”

“You do?” she says, “I'll bet you ten-to-one you're wrong!”

Lucy represents what is so often our anxiety-filled experience of the world: build you up just to tear you down; don't look back, someone might be gaining on you; one slip up and you are finished; nice guys finish last. No wonder Charlie Brown, and a whole lot of people, are miserable so much of the time. But there is another way.

A story told by Mark Ralls, a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina: “I love you little, I love you big, I love you like a little pig.” During my visit to the nursing home that afternoon, I must have heard this sweet, odd rhyme more than a hundred times. I was sitting in the atrium, talking to a distinguished older man I had come to visit. He was a church member and I enjoyed visiting him. But that particular day we were not alone. Near us sat a woman, another resident, wearing a nondescript pastel blouse and a broad smile.

“Though the woman sat close enough to touch, she expressed no interest in us or in our conversation. She just stared out the window and said those childlike words: “I love you little. I love you big. I love you like a little pig.” Did she ever say anything else? Of all the words to remember, why these?

“As I was leaving, my curiosity got the better of me. I searched for a nurse and, feeling a little sheepish, approached her. ‘Could I ask you a rather odd question? The woman who sits in the atrium. She says this little rhyme over and over. Do you know why she does this?’”

“The nurse smiled and repeated the words: ‘I love you little. I love you big. I love you like a little pig.’ She had obviously heard the rhyme hundreds of times and wasn’t the least bit tired of it. ‘That’s Thelma,’ she explained. ‘She taught first grade for over thirty years. Her little rhyme was her own special way of greeting the children each morning. As she helped them remove their coats, she would whisper those words in every little ear. It was her way to let each child know he or she possessed a special place in her heart.’”

Says Pastor Ralls: “Thelma’s mind was ravaged by dementia, but here was this single holdout from her memory. I marveled at this... She gave her students a sustained cherishing... This is why she greeted each one with a hug and a rhyme – and that is why, even now, she can’t seem to stop greeting them. As they pass through her consciousness, she keeps them in mind. They reside in her. And for those who accept this rarest of gifts, she resides in them.” It’s John 14!

Thomas and the other disciples want to cling to the perceived safety of time and location. They want to know when and where Jesus is going and how they can get there with him. Their hearts are troubled because they perceive that their time with Jesus has come to an end. But Jesus is inviting them and us into something deeper, something longer lasting than time and space. Much like Thelma with her students, he is inviting us into relationship - a relationship in which he loves us, makes room for us, knows and is known by us from everlasting to everlasting – a relationship in which he resides. “Believe in me...”

Here is what New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, says about believing: “For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was very important. For me, what that phrase meant was believing things about Jesus. To believe in Jesus meant to believe what the gospels and the church said about Jesus. That was easy as a child, but became more and more difficult as I grew older.

“Now I see that believing in Jesus means something very different from that. The root meaning of ‘believe’ does not mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings. It means to ‘give one’s heart to.’ The ‘heart’ is the self at the deepest level. Believing in Jesus means to give one’s heart, one’s self, to Jesus, the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God... Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one’s heart, is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus to being in relationship with Jesus. For ultimately, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present.”

In this text, Jesus is inviting us into a way – “I am the Way” – that is beyond both secular and religious conventional wisdom. He is inviting us away from a life of requirements and measuring up – whether to culture or to each other or to God – and into a life of relationship with him. His path, his way, says Borg, “Leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-preoccupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from life centered in culture – again the life of expectations and requirements – to life centered in God... it is the path of reconnection and transformation in this life.”

Today I am not pretending that I am offering a cure for all that ails you. We will all know more than our share of days and nights with troubled hearts. Just Thursday night, after working on this sermon, I had trouble sleeping: I was worrying about the Confirmation Retreat – would I be ready?; I was rather depressed we had to postpone our sock hop fundraiser; I was wondering how to squeeze enough time from a busy weekend to be with our daughter, Becky, who is visiting from Portland; I was worried about this sermon; I was even fretting about those kidnapped girls in Nigeria. The way of the troubled heart is the way I know all too well.

And yet, you know what this text says to me? It tells me that there is more than enough room, even for one such as me, in the heart of God. “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places.” God in Christ has sought to build a dwelling place in the lives of ordinary people, to make whole the earth and each of our lives by seeding them with a measure of heaven. God intends to abide with us and stay with us... I love you little, I love you big... Thus wherever we are – here, there, anywhere – becomes holy ground. Says Fred Craddock, “Will you claim this ground for yourselves? Please claim it for yourselves. Take some time and enjoy and appreciate and live your faith. Don’t hurry, scurry, hurry. Live more simply and get rid of junk; you don’t need a lot of stuff and you don’t need to be entertained all the time. Spend some time enlarging the inner world of your life... Make room... Serve faithfully, speak truthfully, pray every day, simplify your life and leave everything else to God. We don’t have to catch a plane, we don’t have to rent a bus. What we have to do is claim the promise: ‘My father and I will come and take up a room in your life.’ We now are the Holy Land, and none of us will ever be forgotten.

I recall an old verse:

*Said the robin to the sparrow,  
Friend, I wonder why ‘tis so,  
That these anxious human beings  
Rush around and hurry so.  
Said the sparrow to the robin,  
Friend, I think that it must be  
That they have no heavenly father  
Such as cares for you and me.*

May we live our lives and practice our faith in such a manner that we prove that sparrow wrong.