

John 14:1-3

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'

Becoming One with Jesus

Happy Mother's Day! Thank you, mothers, for the many times you've dealt with our colds and flues, cuts and bruises, heartaches and heartbreaks, nightmares and nausea. Thank you for telling us we could when we felt like we couldn't; thank you for telling us you loved us when he had a hard time figuring out why. Thank you for being like Jesus to us.

What a wonderful way Jesus begins our short Gospel reading today: "Do not let your hearts be troubled," yet I would bet that a lot of people come to church precisely **because** their hearts are troubled. Why are they troubled? Probably they have examined their lives and found something lacking or failing. Often it's past sin – some horrible deed from their past for which they are truly ashamed and they worry that there's going to be hell to pay for whatever it is. God's gonna look at their resumé, find that lapse in righteousness, dismiss them and move on to the next candidate. To this Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house there are MANY dwelling places."

But the church is not always enthusiastic about sharing that good news, that there are many dwelling places in God's house. One sect of Christianity actually affirms that there are only 144,000 "dwelling places" in God's kingdom, and considering the current population of the earth and the entire past and future population, the chances that any of us were among those 144,000 were not very good. There are others that claim that there is a little more room in that kingdom, that if your theology is right, according to them, that you have a room in the hereafter. Well I don't know about you, but I think that claim doesn't exactly jibe with Jesus' opening statement to his disciples here, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." What if I think outside the box? What if my beliefs aren't exactly what that church declares to be orthodox belief? We've all heard the joke about the people who believe themselves to be the only ones who make it through those pearly gates, the ones who dwell in that very quiet sector of heaven, and Saint Peter has to tell everyone who walks through that area to be quiet because those folks believe that they are the only ones there. I think that joke speaks a lot of truth to us; how many people are out there who think that they and others who think like them are the only ones who qualify for eternal life.

And we laugh at such jokes because we have all met people who believe themselves to be the only ones who qualify for eternal life, but raise your hand if you feel a little uncomfortable laughing because you think that those folks *may be right!* Maybe you are going to miss the boat, and maybe you should embrace their understanding of things. Maybe you'll feel a little more confident then.

And to all this, Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Let me share with you the context of these words that Jesus speaks to us in today’s Gospel lesson: This is the night on which he will be arrested, and the following day he will be tried, mocked, beaten, and executed. He has gone around this room where his closest followers have gathered, and he has washed their feet. He tells them to do likewise, to wash one another’s feet, to love one another as he has loved them. He explains to them that he must go away and that where he is going they cannot follow right away. They’re going to be without him for awhile, and they are distraught. And so Jesus tells them not to be afraid. He says this to the guys who are going to be running for their lives when soldiers come to arrest their Jesus, the ones who will be huddling in that same dark room after Jesus’ execution, scared that the soldiers will be coming to arrest *them*, to execute *them*. But Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Sometimes we’re like those disciples, feeling afraid, though not because we think someone is coming to kill us, but because we’re afraid that we will not be going to the same place as Jesus goes. Even though Jesus says, “My dad’s got room for you,” we wonder if he really does. Jesus says, “I’m coming to take you to that place,” and yet we fear that Jesus won’t be coming back for us. We have a hard time trusting Jesus. And shame on anyone who teaches people to be afraid, to doubt Jesus’ promise! You know in the Bible, God appears to a lot of people in a lot of ways, and each time he makes his appearance, people shudder and quiver and quake, and to all this he say, “Do not be afraid.” Our guilt and our shame seem to get the better of us, and there are plenty of people, Christians included, who prey on our fears, on our guilt and shame, suggesting that we may not be worthy of God’s kingdom, or our theology may not be exactly what it ought to be, and so our eternal lives are in jeopardy. There is a verse that comes shortly after today’s gospel reading, just three verses ahead, when Jesus answers Thomas’ inquiry as to how the disciples will know the way to the Father, and Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus was intent on comforting his friends who were distraught over the impending loss of their Lord, and so he assures them that **he, Jesus**, is the way... and the truth, and the life – trust in me, Jesus says, and everything will be fine. But there are those in the church who would use these words of comfort as a way to exclude anyone who doesn’t buy into their particular theology. There are those who say that Jesus is not consoling his friends here but instead warning us to get your theology right, *or else!* To this I reply, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. **Believe in God; believe also in Jesus.**”

Jesus is not telling his disciples to believe in particular facts regarding his identity. He’s not asking them to ascribe any titles to him – Savior, Lord, Master, Messiah. He’s saying, “**Believe in me.** You know what I do; you know how I live. You know how I care; you know how I love; I heal, I forgive, I comfort, I stand with the poor and the oppressed and the sick and the marginalized; those who are denied food and medicine – I set up free clinics with no co-pays. I bring you truly **good** news; you know that the Father and I are one. Yes, I am the very nature of God. I just washed your feet! I love you; why would I reject you based upon your understanding

of the mechanics of sanctification or justification?” Jesus is saying, “You have seen me in action. You know who I am. Well guess what? The way I am is the way God is, so **do not be afraid, and do not let your hearts be troubled.**”

And there are some who might criticize me for not presenting God as a tough guy, as one who only rescues the few who “deserve” to be rescued. “Pastor Matt, didn’t Jesus tell us to ‘be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect’? Didn’t he warn folks about going to that place where there is ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (sounds like a few dentists I know). We have to get our act together and our theology straight if we have any chance of going to heaven or entering God’s kingdom, right?” And to these anxious concerns, I repeat what Jesus says; **“Do not be afraid, and do not let your hearts be troubled.”**

It has always puzzled me how people can profess that Jesus suffered and died on the cross to save us from sin and death *and yet they insist that now we have to do something or believe something* in order for that salvation to take effect, as if Jesus’ suffering and death wasn’t enough. My friends, it’s nothing more than human pride to insist on earning your salvation, to insist that you need to do something to prove yourself to God, and to believe that it’s even possible for you to “deserve” God’s grace. But hear the good news! Becoming one with Christ, and one in Christ, is not something we do. It is not our work! It is not our burden! It is God’s work. It is something that God in Christ does for us. Last week I mentioned that it is alright to take what we are given. Eternal life is a gift from God, and the only thing we have to do is *take it!* And the way we take it is by trusting in Jesus. Trusting in God’s love and grace.

But our own doubts and suspicions and pride make us wonder *what’s the catch? I can’t really be this easy, can it?* And there are plenty of people out there who will tell you *it isn’t that simple. You need to give me your money, or your time, or profess the same thing that I profess.*

And I’m here to tell you that it IS simple. God exudes perfect love, which is love without catches, without strings attached. God’s desire is that we love him the way he loves us, that our relationship with him would be exactly the way he created it to be, one of perfect love between us and between one another. Once we start tying strings to God’s love, it’s not God’s love any more. Once we start putting conditions on God’s grace it’s not God’s grace anymore. And if we believe that God’s love is conditional, that his grace must be earned, we are no longer able to have a perfect relationship with God. We may smile and sing “Hosanna” and “Praise you, Jesus,” but deep down we do this either out of fear that if we don’t we’re gonna end up in hell, or we praise God with hearts that are too proud, hearts that tell us, “I’m worthy of God’s favor. I’ve earned it, and I deserve an eternal reward.”

The fact is that no one IS worthy of God’s favor, and no one CAN BE worthy of God’s favor by their own efforts, and to think that we can gain acceptance from God by professing some theology stems from the same human pride that says, “Maybe I can’t be perfect in my walk with God, but at least I’m clever enough to have understand the mechanics of salvation; I least I have the right belief, unlike so many others.” It’s PRIDE pure and simple that tells us that we

deserve eternal life while others of different religions or denominations do not! The fact is that NONE OF US deserves salvation. And yet Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

All God wants us to do is to love him and to love one another. That's why he does NOT make ridiculous conditions on us for salvation; WE'RE THE ONES WHO DO THAT. Jesus' words keep ringing out; "Do not let your hearts be troubled...I'm coming for you."

And if we spend some time just languishing in God's amazing love, and realizing that a God who is so loving would not abandon any of us or consign any of us to death or to hell, we may just end up falling in love with God, and abandoning our fears and our pride, and so we can worship him in all truth, without any strings attached. Our worship will be motivated NOT by fear of damnation but by awe of his amazing love. And when our fears are gone and our love for God starts to resemble his love for us, we can get on with the business of loving others, even those who are hard to love. And then we can recognize not only the transformation in ourselves (as it becomes easier for us to love the unlovable) but we can see it in others as well – we can see the unlovable actual become lovable. And then we can gain a clearer vision of what God's perfect will for the world really is – that we would dwell together with God and with one another, eternally and in perfect justice and perfect peace which are driven by a perfect love.

So do not let your hearts be troubled...EVER. Don't let anyone persuade you that Christ's love isn't enough. Don't let anyone convince you that the cross is insufficient. Rest assured that God loves you without any condition, that he has proved it for us on the cross, and that in Christ we can rest in the certainty of God's perfect love for us. All we need to do is trust in what Jesus says to us. Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled.