

## **Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

John 14:1-7

At the end of John 13 and in the beginning of chapter 14, the disciples are full of anxious questions. The disciples, who were a little slow at the best of times, are even more confused than usual. And that's because Jesus has announced to them that he is going to leave them. Out of the blue, Jesus has told them he is going to leave, and he is going to die. It's not clear that the disciples understand that his leaving means death, but that's certainly what Jesus is talking about. It causes the disciples to burst forth in anxious questions. In 10 short verses the disciples ask 3 frantic questions: Lord where are you going? Lord why can't we come with you? Lord, if we can't come with you tell us the way to where you are going?

I find the disciples' reaction here very believable, because what the disciples do here is what most human beings do in the face of death and crisis. Death and crisis wakes us up from our comfortable routine and makes us ask the big questions. Think of the sorts of questions that go through our mind when someone we love dies unexpectedly: Questions of providence: 'Lord why did this person have to die now, what's your purpose here?' Questions of meaning and purpose: "Lord what was this person's life for? What did her life amount to? What does my life amount to? Lord, life is so short, what is the way that I should direct my life? What is your purpose for me in the time I have left?" Questions of destiny: where is this person right now? What does she see and hear? Is she with you in your house? If the bell should toll for me, would there be room for me? Death is a time when we not only mourn a person and give thanks, but we find ourselves asking questions about the meaning and purpose and directions of our own life.

Why does death cause so many questions? Well, it has a way of showing us how little we can control and how little we really know. Death shows us that we are small and clueless. We live most of our life affecting the manners of a person who knows where they're going and what it's all about, but death stops us in our tracks. We live most of our life proclaiming our beliefs in a strong voice in the indicative mode, but sudden death knocks us back into a quiet interrogative. We are perplexed. We have questions. Even the best and most faithful of us are shaken.

Here's a comfort for you: it's not just Christians who feel uncertain at death. Atheists and agnostics are set on edge too! In his book, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Julian Barnes tells the story of Somerset Maugham, the famous British writer. Maugham lived his life as an agnostic and he was completely convinced that death was the absolute end of life. 'When you die you fall into Nothingness,' he said. Game over. End of story. It was his agnostic creed. He proclaimed this creed loudly to anyone who would listen, and he had an ethic that flowed out of his creed. He said that because life was a short meaningless adventure, you should live your life in a state of humorous resignation. 'Be a cheerful cynic,' was his counsel.

But as he approached death all that changed for him. The questions started. He began to wonder if maybe he was wrong. Maybe there was more to life than stuff and matter. Maybe there was such a thing as a soul and life after death. Maybe there was a spiritual dimension to life. In fact, his agnosticism suffered such pangs of doubt that he had to call in the atheistic version of a priest. A J Ayer, the great British philosopher was a great spokesperson for atheism, sort of the Richard Dawkins of his day, and he was summoned to Maugham's bedside to reassure him that death was the end, there was no such thing as hell, that there would be no judgment. A J Ayer, atheist priest, came to Somerset Maugham's bedside to answer the anxious questions and provide gentle assurances. So Strange.

But then, remarkably, at the end of his life A J Ayer had his own crisis of "faith." A few months before he died Ayer had a near death experience, during which he saw a great creature of light. When he woke up he said to his attending physician that he had seen a divine being. Now it was Ayer's turn to be uncertain. Unfortunately, he never turned to God in his last months; he still claimed to be an agnostic. But he did say that

maybe he was wrong, that maybe there was life after death, and maybe there was more to life than atoms and molecules.

That is what death does: Death makes all of us ask the big questions of life: Where are we going? What is the way? Are we on the right path? Death makes our hearts troubled.

So Jesus comes to these 11 men, perplexed by his sudden announcement of departure. Jesus looks into the faces of these 11 men full of what do we do now questions. What comfort does he bring? What does he say to them and us? "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust God and trust me. In my Father's house there are many rooms and I go there to prepare a place for you. I will come again and take you to myself."

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." It's what we would expect him to say, I suppose. Jesus is always telling us don't worry, don't be afraid. But this time, when Jesus says, "Do not let your heart be troubled," it has a special resonance. The Greek word used by Jesus here is *Tarassein*. It's a strong word for troubled; it means to be agitated, to be shaken, to have heaving in your heart and soul. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> and final time this word will be used in the gospel of John, and while Jesus tells the disciples here not to be troubled, the interesting thing is that in the other three times the word is used, Jesus is the one agitated, Jesus is the one troubled, Jesus is the one who undergoes a heaving in his heart and soul! So Jesus tells his disciples, 'Do not let your heart be troubled,' but in the 3 previous chapters his heart has been troubled three times!

Here are the other three occasions: The first one happens at Lazarus' funeral. Jesus comes to the wake and sees all the people wailing and crying over their dead friend and it says in chapter 11:33 that when Jesus saw all the weeping he was "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Jesus' heart was troubled.

Just a little later, in chapter 12:27, he was talking about his impending crucifixion with his disciples. Only in John Jesus doesn't directly tell them he's going to die, he talks instead about his hour approaching. Jesus tells the disciples that his hour has come, and he tells them how he feels about that: "Now my soul is greatly troubled." Jesus' heart was troubled.

And then the last time he uses the word is in chapter 13:21. It's the Last Supper. He's sitting with his disciples around the table, He's just finished washing their feet, and now he tells them that one of the 12 will betray him, and as he announces it we are told that he was troubled in Spirit. Jesus says "One of you seated here with me will betray me and as he says it his voice shakes. Jesus' heart was troubled. So: In chapters 11,12 and 13 Jesus' heart has been troubled, but now he tells his disciples, "Don't let your heart be troubled." What's going on here?! Doesn't this seem inconsistent? Is Jesus failing to practice what he preaches? No, I think this inconsistency is completely intentional. I think the gospel is in this inconsistency.

Did you notice a common thread for the time Jesus was troubled in heart? They all had to do with death: The death of Lazarus his friend. The reality of his own death. His betrayal by Judas which will lead to his death. The trouble that Jesus wrestled with is the same trouble, the same questions that afflict all of us at death. Jesus is sharing that very human anxiety that shakes us all when death strikes. Jesus is sharing the trouble that plagues all our hearts at the time of death.

But he's doing more than that. Most of the time when someone tells us not to do something that they themselves do, we think that person is a hypocrite. There's one exception to that. Suppose you have something you're really worried about, maybe a debt that's too big for you to pay. You have no idea how you're going to meet your obligations. You're terribly worried. But then a friend comes along, a very good friend, and he says to you, don't worry about the debt, and the reason they say it is because they want to pay it for you. They will take on the worry, they will take on the obligation. They will deal with the bill collectors and the banks. They will be troubled for you. We don't call that hypocrisy; we call that salvation. We call that grace.

Jesus doesn't just share our troubles; he is troubled for us. Jesus doesn't just share our troubles, he carries them. The disciples are paralyzed because they don't know what to do. How are we going to live? What way will we travel? How will we know what is the right thing to do? How will we carry on? Like us, in the face of death, the disciples are frightened and they are full of doubts. But Jesus says, 'Do not your hearts be troubled, let me worry for you. Let me struggle for you. Let me suffer the anguish for you. Let me die for you.

I'm going to take care of everything. I will go to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, and there are many rooms there, enough for all of you, and when I'm done I'll come back for you and take you to that place. Relax! It's all taken care of. I am the way, the truth and the life. You feel the weight of questions and doubt in your life. You feel the weight of your worries? Let me handle those. That's why I came. You don't need to figure out all the things. You don't need to have all the answers, you just need to keep your eyes on me.

I recently heard a story from a member of our congregation that reminds me of Jesus' words. Years ago, in an earlier part of her retirement this member was visiting Florida during the winter with her husband. Every morning during their trip, they would get up together and walk the beach. On one of those trips she found a beautifully preserved Sea Urchin. She was really excited. She picked it up, brought it home, and placed it on the mantle. They enjoyed the trip so much they decided to buy a condo on that same strip of beach. Her husband said to her, now you can find lots of those sea urchins. But she never did. They would get up in the morning and walk the beach and the beach would be covered with shells, but in all the walks in all the years that followed, she never found another sea urchin.

A few years later her husband got sick and died. And the widow felt all the feelings and felt all the questions that come along with death. Her heart was troubled with all the usual questions. But then on the very first day when she got up the courage to take her morning beach walk by herself, she went out on the sand, and guess what she found? A sea urchin. And not only did she find a sea urchin that day, for several days in a row she found an urchin on the beach. She took it to be a sign, and so do I. She took it to be a way of Jesus saying to her, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust God, trust also in me. I have gone ahead to prepare a place for you where you shall be at home with me."

I suppose we will always have questions in the face of death but remember these promises: Jesus has a hold of you, Jesus has gone ahead of you, Jesus has prepared a place for you and you will be OK.

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