

Troubled Hearts

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John 14:25-31

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Good morning and welcome once again to our service of worship on World Labyrinth Day. Well, technically yesterday, which was the first Saturday in May, was World Labyrinth Day but since we are here today, we will celebrate it today. As I explained in my article in the *May Beacon* which went out this past Friday, World Labyrinth Day is an international event sponsored by The Labyrinth Society with its partner organizations around the world. The intent of this event is to bring people together from all over the planet in celebration of labyrinths as a unique tool for meditation, prayer through movement and the practice of grounding oneself within the labyrinth's unique configuration of walking paths known as circuits. The goal of this international labyrinth walk this year is to create a "wave of peaceful energy" encircling the planet as it turns in space and as the cosmos swirls around it. Immediately after worship this morning I invite all who are interested in making the walk with me to remain here in the sanctuary for some very brief instructions on walking the labyrinth with an intention.

Our Church Operations Coordinator, Jerin, is the one who discovered World Labyrinth Day just this past week so all this is quite last minute and, might I say, quite serendipitous. I say this because up until this WLD event popped up on Wednesday, I had really been struggling with what I wanted to focus on this Sunday in worship. I do try to plan my sermons out fairly far ahead most of the time but there are moments when that just does not work out well. This is where being in ministry as long as I have been comes in handy because I am now able to recognize these moments as God nudges. It's sort of hard to describe these God nudges when it comes to moments like this for me. Perhaps you've heard of God winks? That's sort of the same thing

but simpler in many respects. A God wink is when something almost miraculous happens in that you happen to be in just the right place at just the right moment for something wonderful and totally unexpected to happen. Sort of like catching the fly ball at a Red Sox game when it comes right to you when it never should have. Or, on a more mundane level, managing to hit every traffic light green when you're rushing to make it to a sick family member or an important appointment. It's something that never should have happened, but it did. And you find yourself smiling because of it.

A God nudge to me as a pastor is similar except it starts more with an uneasy sense that something is just off with my plans for worship or Bible study or my sermon. I have no definite sense of what IS off, but I know something is. That's what was happening to me as I've been pondering this particular worship service since mid-March. I just could not settle on a sermon topic I was happy with. My original intention was to pull out a story from Holy Week – specifically the story of Peter's denial of Jesus three times – and use it as a springboard for talking about how we all have our own ways of denying our relationship with Jesus, intentionally or not. A good idea but – as the young folks say – I just wasn't feeling it. Then I turned to the Lectionary readings for this Sunday and found the recommended Scripture text for preaching for today came from the story of the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts. This was intriguing because, as you might surmise, this is not an easy or simple story to preach about since it centers on a pious young man ardent in his faith who is stoned to death for that faith. Very dramatic, containing the makings of an exciting made for TV movie, but again, just not feeling it. I mean, let's face it, this is not an upbeat or positive story. It's a good one, but at this particular moment when so many of us are feeling overwhelmed by all the negative news swirling around our own government and the war in Iran, well, again. Just didn't feel like a good place to focus our energies this morning. Enter the news in email form from Mercy

Center in Madison, CT about World Labyrinth Day and its unique invitation to spend a little time this weekend daring to dream about world peace in a tangible way – walking the labyrinth – when we just happen to have our own labyrinth. Now that is a God nudge! More like a shove, really.

So, here we are. Looking at these beautiful, comforting and reassuring words from Jesus coming to us from the Gospel of John. John places this particular discourse of Jesus (a hallmark of how John portrays Jesus – long discourses or speeches about various topics) just after the foot-washing ritual John does with the disciples following what we think of as the Last Supper. Only John includes this particular event in his Gospel and he does so as the primary way Jesus chooses to illustrate for his disciples that they are to be servants of all, doing whatever is needed to bring the Good News to others. As the foot-washing draws to a close, Jesus begins explaining to the disciples that he has done this for them because he will be going away from them in a little while and they need to understand how vitally important their work will be after he is gone. Through his many discourses, he has taught them several key lessons in this last evening together:

- That where he is going, they cannot come.
- That he is giving them a new commandment to love one another just as he has loved them since it is this love for each other after he is gone which will distinguish them from everyone else.
- If they love Jesus, they will keep his commandments, no matter what.

It is important to understand here that Jesus is working very hard to make them fully appreciate that he is not going to be with them much longer and they will have to find the will and the strength to carry on without him. He knows they will be bereft and terrified, never a good combination in anyone. They will be mourning him profoundly at the exact same time they will be terrified the Romans will come after them

next. And Jesus was correct to be afraid for them. Contrary to what we might want to think about Jesus as a cosmic, divine figure, Jesus the man had no way of knowing what would happen with the Romans or the religious authorities after his death. He knew what they were capable of and he knew it would be up to the disciples to carry on the work of sharing the Good News in spite of whatever else was going on for them. In spite of heartbreaking, body numbing grief. In spite of fears that they would be the next to hang on crosses.

This is what Jesus is speaking to in this beautiful text we read this morning. He tells them first not to worry about remembering everything he taught them because God would be sending them the Advocate, John's word for the Holy Spirit, to teach and guide them through that part of their work. Then Jesus tells them what I think is the most precious gift he ever gave them, could ever give anyone: "*Peace* I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." Yes, he tells them, times will get very hard but you can do this because I am right this moment filling you with peace – my peace which only I can give. It is the peace of God, confident in God's love and God's power and God's overwhelming desire for you to survive to do the work at hand. Then he continues, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." That's it, dear ones. That's the key to it all right there. Troubled hearts are not strong hearts. Troubled hearts cannot receive fully the peace Jesus offers. Troubled hearts, fearful hearts tend to slam doors and close windows to try to keep the danger at bay when really, sometimes the danger – the ugliness – just has to be confronted and faced, head on. But, if they, if WE can trust in Jesus, then we will receive that strengthening gift of Christ's peace. We can fill our troubled hearts with God's love and use God's love as our armor – the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith as Paul describes it in the letter to the Ephesians (6:13-17).

Dear ones, we are living through challenging, even frightening days, when it is all too easy to focus on the scary things in the news and social media about wars and prices rising uncontrollably, about climate disasters and attacks on the rule of law. It's scary too often these days. Our hearts are indeed troubled creating shadows we live under each day. We live with a deep seated dread that never completely goes away. We worry about our future, not to mention the futures of our children and grandchildren. And we are right to.

But that can't be all there is to our lives each day. Such shadowy anxiety and existential dread is not what God wants for us. Not now, not ever. That's why God sent Jesus to us and we came to know Jesus as God's son. Jesus' whole purpose was to remind us always that God loves us unconditionally and we are to love God, and each other, just the same. Jesus also wants us to know peace as the arc of our lives, healing our troubled hearts of their fears, strengthening our confidence that God is still in the middle of all of this leading us always to the dawn of the next new day and the possibilities it holds for each of us.

Dear ones, Jesus is telling us we can offer our troubled hearts to him for healing and renewal. It only remains for us to accept this incredible, miraculous gift. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." This is what Jesus offers us every moment of every day. Are we able to accept it? Can we do that? Will we? Dear ones, as always, that is completely up to you. Amen.