

John 14:1-14     You Believe

Our text encourages us not to be troubled at heart. Nonetheless, sometimes we are troubled; angry, afraid, unduly selfish? We know that the anxiety which leads to anger and fear and greed is a thief which steals away fulness and joy. One wonders why?

In one sense there are at least as many answers to this question as there are people, which means there is no one answer. We each have our own experiences and are wired a little differently and respond in different ways to the circumstances of our lives.

In another sense, we *are all human*, and have common traits and similar situations and ought to be able to make some general statements.

This past week on a whim I re-read an old sermon by the great German philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich called, "The New Being." He spoke of a hostility towards others common among people and offered an explanation that may be applied to our question. The suggestion is this, in the words of an exact quotation:

" . . . they feel rejected by us, we feel rejected by them. They tried hard to make themselves acceptable to us and they failed. We tried hard to make ourselves

acceptable to them and we failed. And our hostility grew."

He goes on, "One is hostile, consciously or unconsciously, toward those by whom they feel rejected. *Everyone* is in this predicament."

I have equated this hostility with anger, fear and selfishness. While one may explain using another metaphor, one may understand the troubled heart in terms of acceptance and rejection.

It is possible to act out this sense of rejection as anger towards God (or nature or the world), or towards others, or even towards the self; or as a constant fear, or a pre-occupation with the self. This description is not the predicament of the sick, but of the relatively healthy, that is, you and me.

Furthermore, if we see in our religion an attempt to make ourselves acceptable, to God and each other, then our religion fails us and becomes distorted and leads to further trouble.

The Situation

For Jesus and his friends, the situation at the foundation of their anxiety had reached a climax. They were in the Holy city for the occasion of the Sacred

Festival of the Passover, and it was not just any Passover, but they hoped that at *this* celebration, the Messiah would establish the Kingdom once again, which is to say they hoped their leader would be accepted but instead, he was rejected and only a disaster was looming. They sat in the shadow of that disaster.

Jesus set out to comfort and encourage them. And the words he used are those that have been read before us this morning. I will focus our attention only on the first verse of John 14, he told them,

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, you believe in God, believe in me.”

What Jesus said to them in their anxiety over their situation, he also spoke to every person in every situation. It is God’s word to us today. But there is some ambiguity in his words.

### Ambiguity

The ambiguity arises for three reasons: first because the difference between the indicative and the imperative mood. The indicative states what is, the imperative gives a command. “You are ballplayers,” a coach might say, “Go play ball!” The forms of the indicative and the imperative are identical. It isn’t clear

which is meant. Both could be imperative. “Believe in God, believe in me.” The first could be indicative, and the second imperative, “You believe in God, believe also in me.” These are the two found in all the translations I checked.

The second source of ambiguity is the other word that we sometimes use instead of “believe.” That word is “trust.” They both translate the same Greek word, so this ambiguity appears only in English, in which the word “trust” has a weightier connotation. It is firmer. Belief is the acceptance of something. Trust is firm belief.

Finally, when we say we believe or trust, we may mean one of two things:

Acceptance of a truth, like that rain is wet or health is good; and confidence in a person

Here in John, Jesus speaks of the confidence in a person kind of trust, and tells us that we are confident in the person of God, and then encourages us to go ahead with that instinct.

### You Have Been Accepted

And then what he tells them is the foundational truth of the gospel that is at the heart of all Christian teaching

and preaching. He tells them that they have been accepted, for that is what it means that he is going to prepare a place for them and will return to take them. He tells them they know the way and when they press him he tells them that *he* is the way, that he is in God and God in him. These might seem like forbidding words, but they are not really, they mean;

You have been accepted. They mean that in the appearance of Jesus, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, it is revealed that God has accepted, not rejected us! And that acceptance is not our achievement - but the gracious gift of God. Because we have been accepted the root of all the trouble; anger and fear and selfishness is destroyed.

Easter

Part of what it means to be human is that we tend to forget that we have been accepted. It doesn't always *feel* like acceptance.

I think of the old Allman Brothers' song I heard on the radio the other day, "Whipping Post," at the end when the music stops and the whole crowd joins in the refrain, "Good Lord, I feel like i'm dying." Maybe it is the music that brings a smile, or just being together with a big crowd of people who know how that feels.

Easter is the message that we have been accepted, and resurrection is the news that even when we give in to the residual sense of rejection that remains in us throughout this life, we are restored to that all-encompassing acceptance that destroys the root of fear and anger and selfishness.

At one and the same time, Jesus tells us that we believe and who we believe in, *and*, commands us to believe.

This text is very meaningful to me. It is one of several that have calmed and encouraged me through difficult times. If it is okay, I offer my translation, which I listen to each day.

"Do not let your heart be troubled, trust!

In those words the world's troubles and my own are brought down to a manageable size, And the anxiety that leads to anger and fear and selfishness is eased, and one can breath again; and live the fulness of life, both now, and forevermore, amen.

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