

Sermon: "A Word for the Troubled Heart"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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NOT A GOOD DAY

There's a popular children's book entitled, "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day". Here's a sample of what that day was like.

Alexander awoke to find chewing gum in his hair. (He had forgotten to take it out the night before.) As he got out of bed he tripped on his skateboard. While dressing he accidentally dropped his sweater in the sink, as the water was running!

School was terrible. His afternoon visit with the dentist was unpleasant. At dinner that evening there was only food that he disliked. On television there was only kissing, and Alexander hated kissing!

His bath was too hot, soap got in his eyes and his favorite marble went down the drain. He hated the only clean pajamas he had, and his Mickey Mouse night lamp burned out.

To top it all off, even the cat refused to sleep with him. It really was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

We've all had days like that, days when nothing seemed to go right. Even ministers have days like that. The copying machine won't work, and it's time to do the bulletins. There are six important appointments scheduled for you at the same time.

But, we know that if we just hang in there, tomorrow will be a better day. We'll regain our confidence and settle down to a more normal routine.

REAL TROUBLE AND FALSE COMFORT

But, sometimes real trouble come, trouble that lasts for more than a day or a week. That's the kind of trouble we're talking about this morning. It is a pain that will not soon leave. It is that lonely and abandoned feeling that comes when the worst happens.

I read that when Winston Churchill lost the election for Prime Minister, he was inconsolable. His wife tried to cheer him by saying, "It may well be a blessing in disguise." The miserable Churchill replied, "At the moment it seems quite effectively disguised."

When we are in the presence of someone who has a troubled heart, we sense the pain and sadness. We feel uncomfortable and think that we have to say something, usually some shopworn phrase like that used by Churchill's wife. "It may be a blessing in disguise. Time heals all wounds. You just need to pray about it." And so forth.

Unfortunately, most of those old sayings are not very comforting words for the person with a troubled heart. In fact, sometimes those phrases even make things worse.

THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

In those difficult times the greatest comfort is found not in words but in what I would call the ministry of presence. When the heart is broken the best thing we can do for a person is to let their pain become, in a small way, our pain.

But, of course, even the most sympathetic and caring person is limited in what he or she can do for the person with the troubled heart. The person who has experienced great loss will still be faced with many hours of loneliness and despair no matter how supportive friends and family may be.

That's why today's passage can be so helpful to us when we face the dark night of the soul. It is truly a word of encouragement for the troubled heart.

A BAD DAY FOR JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

Jesus' disciples were especially in need of reassurance when those words were first spoken. Nothing was working out as the disciples had hoped.

Instead of being a conquering hero, Jesus had proclaimed himself to be a suffering servant. The political and religious leaders had rejected Jesus, and everyone knew that they were intent on killing him.

In fact, one of his own disciples, Judas had left supper early that last night to betray him.

No wonder the disciples were troubled. They found themselves in a desperate situation, and the words of Jesus did not make them feel any better. Jesus said to them, "I won't be with you much longer. I'm going away, and where I'm going you cannot come." (John 13:36)

It was Peter who asked the question that we all ask in the face of tragedy. "Why Lord? Why can't I go with you? Why must we be separated? Let me come. No matter what happens I'll be faithful."

But, Peter was not ready for what lay ahead. He would not have the courage to follow Jesus on the road to the cross.

And so, Jesus only added to their sense of foreboding when he told Peter, that he would not be able to live up to his promise. Three times he would deny his Lord before the morning. Separation and failure was inevitable. (John 13:37-38)

But, this separation would not be forever. This separation would be the first step in a process that would bring hope not only to those first disciples but also for generations to come. Jesus said, "Don't give in to despair. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me."

THE SON OF GOD

What could give the disciples hope in such a desperate time? Their hope lay in what Jesus had proclaimed very clearly from the beginning of his ministry. Jesus was God's Son. Twelve times in today's Scripture lesson Jesus refers to God as his Father, and before the 14th chapter of John is finished, Jesus will refer to God as his Father 11 more times.

In the ancient world the father/son relationship was very important. A common saying in those days was "nobody understands a son like his father, and nobody understands a father like his son." Whatever a father knew, he passed it on to his son, things that he would not tell anyone else.

So, when Jesus called God "Father" he was claiming a special relationship that no one else had. Jesus was (as John put it in the beginning of his gospel) God in human form. Jesus was God's love letter to the human race. Jesus shows us what God is like and conveys the Heavenly Father's word of hope to the world.

GOD'S PRESENCE

In today's lesson Jesus gives his disciples two precious promises from the throne of his Father. First, Jesus promise his disciples that though he must leave them for a while, the power and presence of God would always be with them. In John 14:18 Jesus tells his disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Jesus was promising his disciples that the Spirit of God in Christ would always be with them. They would not walk alone.

Isn't it interesting how children who are adopted often have a burning desire to find their birth parents when they grow up? For some it becomes almost a quest. This sense of loneliness was expressed well in the old spiritual,

"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child."

Indeed, that song has its roots in a harsh reality. Some slaves were taken from their family at an early age and were, for all practical purposes, orphans.

But, many found hope in the promises of Scripture and in particular the promises of this passage. God in Christ was their Father. Though the trail was long and weary, they kept faith. They knew that God was still with them.

In our hours of loneliness and despair, we need to remember this promise as well. We might feel like a motherless child. But, we are not. God in Christ does not leave us as orphans. His Spirit is with us every day. No matter how discouraged we may feel God ministers to us through His eternal Presence.

ROOM FOR ALL

That's the first promise for the troubled heart. God in Christ is always with us. And the second promise for the troubled heart is related to the first. God in Christ makes a place just for us in his household.

Many of us remember the old King James translation of this verse. In my Father's house are many mansions. I used to think about heaven as a place where all of us would have a huge southern style plantation.

But, actually, this is a bad translation. The Greek word is better translated as "dwelling place" or "room" as it is in most modern translations of the Bible. The sense of the passage is this: there is a place for everyone in God's kingdom. God's kingdom is our true home.

Some commentators suggest that Jesus may have spoken these words in the shadow of the temple, which is also called the Father's house. Outside the sanctuary proper there were many shelters where the pilgrim might rest.

God and his "house" were literally a sanctuary for those who had grown weary from the long journey.

But, as always, Jesus was pointing to a greater reality. Behind the symbol of God's house, the temple, there was a heavenly place where there would be room for all.

A PLACE JUST FOR US

In addition to this, the place God has reserved for his disciples is more than just a place with enough room. It is also a place prepared especially for them, and Jesus promised that when the time was right he would come back and take them to this prepared place.

The great fear that many of us have about death is the uncertainty of it all. Someone once said that they wanted to go to heaven, but they didn't want to be on the bus that was leaving tonight! The apostle Paul may have been able to say, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." But, the rest of us are not so sure.

The Bible uses wonderful and imaginative symbols to paint a picture of life beyond this life because we cannot describe concretely what the human eye has not seen. (1 Corinthians 2:9) God's preparations are beyond our imagining.

But, this we do know. Whether we live or die our life is lived within the purpose and preparation of Almighty God.

WELCOME HOME

At a prayer meeting I once asked the group if they had ever had the experience of having special preparations being made on their behalf. One person told of a time when they visited some relatives in Texas. They had never seen these relatives before, and they had never been to Texas. As they arrived they were feeling a bit out of place.

But, when they made it to the home of their distant relatives, they found that they were waiting and had baked a cake that had the words, "WELCOME HOME" printed on the top in large letters. She said that those preparations for their coming did indeed make that place seem like home almost immediately.

I believe that the same sort of feeling awaits those of us who live and die in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. There will be a sense of homecoming, a sense of being where we are known and welcome.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO DIE?

Peter Marshall told the story of a little boy who was ill with an incurable disease. Month after month the mother had tenderly nursed him, read to him, played with him ... hoping to keep him from the dreadful finality of the doctor's diagnosis. The little boy was sure to die.

But, as the weeks went on the little boy gradually began to understand that he would never be like the other boys playing outside his window. Small as he was, he began to understand the meaning of the term death, and he too knew he was to die.

One day his mother had been reading to him the stirring tale of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, about the glorious battle where so many fair knights met their death. She closed the book and the boy sat silent for a few minutes, deeply stirred by what she had read. Finally he said, "Mama, what is it like to die?"

Tears sprang to her eyes and she fled to the kitchen, supposedly to tend to something on the stove. She knew it was a question with deep significance, and she knew it must be answered satisfactorily. So, she breathed a hurried prayer that the Lord would keep her from breaking down before the boy and that she would be able to tell him the answer.

Her prayer was answered. Immediately she knew what to say. She said,

"Kenneth, do you remember when you were a tiny boy and how you used to play so hard all day? Sometimes you were so tired at the end of the day that you didn't even undress. You would just tumble into your mother's bed and fall asleep.

That was not your bed; it was not where you belonged. You would only stay there a little while. Much to your surprise you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. You were there because someone had loved you and taken care of you. Your father had come with big strong arms and carried you away.

Death is just like that. We just wake up some morning to find ourselves in the other room. It is our room. It is where we belong and our Lord Jesus is with us."

The boy's face told her that he got the point. Never again would he ask the question. And several weeks later he fell asleep, and the Father's big, strong arms carried him to his own room.

RIDING ABOVE ALL THINGS

Jesus still tells troubled disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." We believe that the Spirit of God in Christ cares for us in this life and beyond this life.

In times of trouble there is absolutely no substitute for this deep and abiding trust in the love of God. In the good times we may say that we believe in God. But, it's the bone chilling dark night of the soul that puts that belief to the test.

The great leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther once confessed that he would have drooped and wilted if God had not refreshed him with his Word and Spirit. God's presence and power enabled him to (as he put it) "ride above all things." God's Word and Spirit can enable us to "ride above all things" as well.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that your life will be a bed of roses. Tragedy will come our way. All of us will struggle. All of us will be troubled in profound ways. But, we need not give in to our fears. There is a presence and a promise that will be with us all the way.

Samuel Brengle was a Salvation Army officer many years ago. One day when he was holding a street meeting in Boston, a drunk threw a brick at him.

Brengle was hit in the head and almost died. For eighteen months he was able to do very little. But, he was able to write some articles on living the Christian life. The articles were later collected and put in a book that became a helpful guide for many believers.

He asked,

"Who are the most impressive Christians that you know? Are they not the ones who have been hammered to the ground by trouble and yet they are not broken? They rise again to serve after the model of Christ."

THE WAY OF THE CROSS LEADS HOME

Jesus told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What was the way of Jesus? It was the way of the cross.

The way of the cross still leads us home. We too are called to take up a cross and follow Jesus. We too are called to willingly take on the pain of life as a way of bringing healing and hope to a suffering world.

Troubled hearts are unwelcome realities that come into everyone's life. But, those sufferings need not lead us into despair. They can lead us closer to God. In Jesus we learn a new way. We learn that death and suffering will not have the last word. Death has lost its sting and life is eternal.

Friends, don't be troubled or afraid.

There is a place prepared in our Father's house just for you.

May we live and die trusting in that precious promise.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN