



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for May 24, 2020
“Overcomers: Victory over Grief”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: John 14:1-4

A Funeral for a Good Friend

On Good Friday I received a call from a good friend of mine letting me know that her mother had recently died and they wanted me to do her funeral. I have known the family for years. We were together at Buechel and then again at St. Paul. My friend’s mom was a wonderful lady.

The Covid-19 restrictions had all kicked in. The funeral service, which was held a couple of days after Easter, was different than any I had ever done. Upon arriving at the funeral home I soon realized that her three adult children would be the only people in attendance. I made four.

The seats were spaced six feet apart. I stood by the casket and shared of the hope in Christ. Again, it was just a couple of days removed from Easter. We also took time to celebrate my friend’s great life. The sorrow and grief was real that day, highlighted all the more by the fact that there were only four of us there. During any other season the place would have been packed.

I read from John 14 that day. It was more than appropriate. John 14 is that great passage where Jesus offers the hope and promise of eternal life to those who so believe. Let’s hear that passage now.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” (John 14:1-4)

Jesus Laid It All Out

Jesus wanted to lay it all out for his disciples. He knew full well what was about to take place. He knew he would not be long for this world. The cross loomed large. Just previous to this passage Jesus makes it clear that his death was imminent. *“My children,”* he said, *“I will be with you only a little longer.”* (John 13:33)

Even though he had been talking about such things for a long time, the reality of that was a bitter pill to swallow. Peter then chimed in and asked, *“Lord, where are you going?”*

And with that Christ replied, *“Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but will follow later.”* (John 3:36)

We know that disciples were indeed grieved upon Christ’s death. Can you blame them? Their whole world had come crashing in around them. They had given up so much to follow Christ. They had given themselves over to his leadership and had such high hopes for what he had to offer, not only for their lives, but for the life of the world.

Those hopes were dashed, or so it seemed, as they cowered away full of grief upon Christ's death on the cross. They had seemingly suffered a great loss.

Christ, though, offered a grand promise before his passing. He wanted his disciples to be encouraged even though he would soon be gone. He said to them, "*Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God; believe also in me.*" "*Let not your hearts be troubled, **just believe,***" he told them.

A Lot of Loss

Let's face it these days of the Covid-19 Pandemic represent a lot of loss for every one of us. We have had to give up what was once considered normal for a "*new normal*" that is constantly changing. We have lost the enjoyment of pulling for our favorite team, going to a movie, and enjoying a play or a concert. Those due to graduate have had their plans dashed. There have been no proms, no awards ceremonies, and no commencements like we've known them. Guys, we are really sorry. Just so you know we look forward to honoring our seniors next week during 11:00 a.m. worship.

A lot of people have lost their jobs. Thirty-nine million at last count have filed for unemployment. We have been "*staying at home together,*" which represents a loss of freedom for every one of us. We haven't been able to sit down at our favorite restaurant, shop at our favorite store, or even get our haircut. You need to know that my hair doesn't get long, it just gets more and more bushy. Just sayin'!

To top it all off we haven't been able to gather for worship. I have so desired to come together for worship. I fear that until Covid-19 hit that I might have taken getting together for worship a little for granted. How about you?

Above all things, some have suffered very direct loss. There have been many who have died on account of this virus. Over five million worldwide have tested positive for Covid-19, with over 1.5 million of those in the United States. Nearly 330,000 have died, with over 93,000 of those here in this country. In Kentucky, we have sustained just under 400 deaths. The friend I buried just two days after Easter was one of those.

Mourning Our Losses

Let's be honest with ourselves, we are mourning our losses. We're doing that individually and collectively. Certainly those who have lost loved ones are doing that, but so is everyone else in one form or fashion.

Even if you haven't had a loved one to die, and thankfully we have had very little of that to have hit our congregation, there is still loss to mourn. Those losses are called "*living losses*" and we have all sustained them. We listed quite a few of those just a minute ago. Depending on how we deal with them, they can shake us to the core of our being.

Take for instance the degree to which we have been quarantined. Of course that varies from person to person and family to family. Some have strictly quarantined, while others have pretty much come and gone with some restriction. Regardless, we have all been affected.

If your sense of self is tied to the relationships you have and defined by the social interaction you engage in, then you have struggled with loss of those interactions on a regular basis. You may have found yourself upset that you can't relate to others like you did before and, if not upset, then certainly sad. I know Cheryl and I have been that way in not being able to see Henry and Owen like we had been.

If your sense of self is tied to your work, then a layoff or even the possibility of a layoff brings on all sorts of stress and anxiety, and not just because a layoff represents a loss of income. Even working from home and doing work differently than what you did before can produce all sorts of stress and anxiety.

When you layer in these sorts of things and so many others, notwithstanding a deep concern for what future holds, no wonder this has been such a tough time.

Just Believe

“Let not your hearts be troubled,” say Jesus, *“just believe.”* Christ’s word to *“just believe”* is a word not only for the present, but for the future as well, stretching all the way to eternity.

The NIV Study Bible succinctly states, *“Trust is the antidote for a troubled heart.”*

Jesus knew that and that’s why he wants us to *“believe in God and believe also in him.”*

*“Let not your hearts be troubled, **just believe.**”*

Believe:

- That God has this.
- That God is seeing you through
- That God will bring you to a much better place.

Grieving Our Loss

It is a fact that where there is loss there is grief and as with all things grief is all in how we deal with it.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is famous for her stages of grief. She talks about:

- **Denial** where we avoid dealing with what we are thinking and feeling. We might even go into a degree of shock where we are simply unable to function. Fear also has a way of taking hold.
- **Anger** where we find ourselves upset, frustrated, irritable, and full of anxiety.
- **Depression** where we even plunge into the depths of despair. That’s never an easy place to be.
- **Bargaining** where we begin to emerge from our grief. We struggle to make sense of it all. We try and find meaning in what has happened. We begin to reach out to others and tell our story.
- **Acceptance** where we explore moving on and emerge into what lies ahead. We begin to put new plans in place.

Grief is never that simple and never that clear cut. I have found that people grieve all sorts of ways. They do it in their own time and on their own terms. I simply try and walk alongside them.

Make no mistake about it we are all grieving each in our own way. There has been too much loss for us to do otherwise.

*“Let not your hearts be troubled, **just believe.**”*

So then let's keep the faith.

- Let's put words to our losses.
- Let's name and claim them.
- Let's be sure to stay connected, not just to one another, but to God.
- Let's look to find a degree of meaning in the midst everything that's going on.
- Let's ask, *“What's God saying to me?”* and *“What am I going to do about it?”*
- And once this crisis is past, whenever that happens, let's move on stronger than before.

I will often share at funerals as families and friends consider a loss of a loved one that *“someday, with Christ help, you will emerge into new life, life that is different, but life all the more.”*

That sort of advice is more than apropos for what we are facing today in this midst of Covid-19.

When We Look Back on Things

And so, some day, hopefully soon, you and I will pause to look back on things and find that we are different people. Hopefully, we would have learned a lot about ourselves and how to live life more abundantly.

Maybe, just maybe, we would have learned:

- How to use our time more wisely. When everything clears you and I will be challenged to engage life differently. Maybe we will even find ourselves agreeing with the writer of Ecclesiastes that much of what we do is *“a chasing after wind,”* and, if that's the case we certainly don't need to be nearly as busy as we once were, involving ourselves in things that really don't matter in the grand scheme of things.
- What is really important. There has been a lot of talk these days about what is *“essential”* and *“non-essential.”* Most of that has been in reference to one's job. It is never easy to hear that what you do is *“non-essential.”* In such conversations, it's the job they're talking about and not you as a person. You are essential in every way and so are those around you.
- About God's undying love. Hopefully, we will be able to share all sorts of *“God moments.”* He has been at work, you know? His purposes are true for this life and the next.
- That God had this all along and that he was the one who saw us through and ended up putting us at a much better place.

Not to lose sight of our scripture for today, John 14:1-4 has everything to do with this life **and** the next. Jesus *“goes to prepare a place for you.”* Until then, *“Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in him.”* **Just believe** and by believing surely you will overcome.