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John 14:1-14
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BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Which of God's commandments would you say is the most difficult for you to obey?

Maybe you would say, "The commandment, 'Do not lie' is most difficult, because when I'm in a tight spot, and I can twist the truth just a little, it seems harmless."

Or, you might say, "The commandment not to covet is really difficult to obey in a materialistic society like ours. If somebody I know gets richer or they achieve a status that I want for myself, it's hard not to be jealous of them."

Maybe you might point to Jesus' command not to lust as one being very difficult to obey in the sensual society we live in.

Or what about Paul's commandment: "Do all things without grumbling?" Maybe you always thought that complaining was your spiritual gift. So, there's no way you could obey that commandment, right?

Indeed, there are many difficult commandments. But, I think one of the hardest commandments to obey is: "Do not let your heart be troubled," the first verse of the scripture text I just read.

There's so much to be troubled about: the threat of war and terrorist attacks, political corruption, crime, violence, economic pressure.

If you weren't feeling troubled before, I'll bet you are now.

On top of the various national and international troubles, there are many “what if?” scenarios.

What if I get cancer? What if I’m in an accident? What if my spouse leaves me? What if one of my children dies? What if I lose my job? What if I lose my friends and am rejected at school?

All this and much more can bring on real heart trouble. That’s why some pundits have said that we live in “The Cardiac Age.”

Everyone seems to have heart trouble – of one kind or another.

However, your heart trouble may not be based upon national or international concerns or “what if” scenarios.

Your worry and fear may be intensely personal. You may be a single mother wondering how to be a good parent and provider.

You may be a parent or grandparent agonizing over the rebellion of your children and/or grandchildren.

Maybe you’re barely making ends meet and are feeling overwhelmed with your financial obligations.

Maybe you’re dealing with chronic health problems and you’re weighing the myriad of options for treatment.

Maybe, on this Mother’s Day, you are wondering how much longer you will have your mother around, or in my case, will I see my mother again when I get to the other side?

And you need a bridge over troubled water.

Well, if your heart is troubled and you're feeling confused, concerned, and overwhelmed, you're in good company. In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, Jesus' disciples felt the very same way.

At the ripe young age of thirty-three, their Lord is leaving them.

The disciples were not expecting this, even though he told them multiple times. They were counting on Jesus being around for a very long time.

They were anticipating Jesus to set them free from Roman oppression, and they were preparing to rule and reign with him.

Now it finally begins to dawn on them that Jesus really is going to die, and their hearts are heavy and deeply troubled.

Fortunately, Jesus addresses his disciples' heart trouble with some heart-to-heart words.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Note that the reason we should not be troubled is **NOT** because Jesus is going to magically make all the bad, no good, horrible circumstances go away.

He **IS** still going to be arrested, tortured and executed. Rather, we are not to be afraid because these circumstances will not be the end of the story.

I love the way this passage presents the very human, natural, fears and questions of the disciples.

In a few words, Jesus paints a wonderful word picture of the life to come: my Father's house; many rooms; a prepared place; a prepared way to get there; a trusted guide; not being left alone to find our own way; ending with being with Jesus again.

Jesus addressed his followers then as he addresses us now... with that word of assurance: *Do not let your hearts be troubled.*

Jesus is indeed our bridge over troubled water!

Yet, comfort is not the only feeling prompted by this passage, is it? There are other words in this text that make many of us uneasy.

According to John, Jesus said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

John 14:6 is perhaps the most misunderstood and misused of all the so-called clobber verses. (*a clobber verse is a verse some use to convince a "nonbeliever" to believe ... or else!*)

This verse is seen on bumper stickers and church sign boards and even at sporting events.

After quoting that verse, what else is there to say? How could any non-Christian argue against *I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me?*

Unfortunately, many people believe that these words really should be understood in the narrow sense to declare that only Christians will be welcomed into God's kingdom.

Everyone else? Sorry. No dice. Your ship has sailed.

But, is that what Jesus meant? Such thinking sparked the blood-letting of the Crusades and helped pave the road to the Holocaust.

Numerous Christians have latched onto these words to justify their intolerance of other faiths.

A number of years ago, that pastor of the tiny fundamentalist church in Florida made good on his promise to burn the Koran.

A YouTube video of the burning quickly made its way to Afghanistan touching off violent protests.

More than 20 people, including seven United Nations workers, were murdered in the mayhem.

It is impossible for me to imagine that Jesus, who constantly emphasized the centrality of love and forgiveness, would want his teachings to be used to provoke violence.

Still, many people of faith – especially Christians, Jews and Muslims – are prone to believe that their religion is the only true one.

Muslim fundamentalists justify terrorism. Christian fundamentalists have called on the U.S. government to declare war on Muslims. Orthodox Jews declare that only *they* are God's chosen people.

Too often people of faith boast, "God is on our side! Only people who believe as we do are right."

Do you ever wonder how many people today keep their distance from religion because they think it requires them to be intolerant of other beliefs and to have contempt for people from other faiths?

Now, I have to say, that I believe that Christ is the best revelation of God and the way for me.

But I try to remember that it is very easy to slip into the mindset that God acts in ways that are especially beneficial to me.

You may have heard the story about the guide who is giving a newcomer a tour of heaven.

The guide takes the newcomer past a number of different rooms where people are having the time of their lives.

The guide points to the room where the Baptists are having fun ... dancing.

He points to a room where the Methodists are enjoying a ... glass of wine.

And, he passes a room where the decently- and-in-order Presbyterians are enjoying ... unaccustomed chaos.

They pass room after room.

Eventually, as they approach the last room, the guide says to the visitor:

“We must be quiet now: these are the (*insert whatever intolerant denomination you like at this point*). They think they are the only ones here.”

Isn't that the way it is for many people of faith? When they picture heaven, it is filled with people who are more or less like themselves.

When Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me," it sounds exclusive.

But, there are other passages where Jesus strikes a very different note.

Earlier in John's gospel Jesus says, that he is the Good Shepherd and his followers are the sheep. And then adds, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." (John 10:16)

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, we find a story about a Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter. His first response to her is to say that his ministry is directed only at his people, the Jews.

Yet, after she begs for help, Jesus heals her daughter and tells the woman that she possesses great faith, despite the fact that she is a Canaanite.

And, of course, there is Matthew's dramatic scene of the last judgment in which Jesus separates those to be included in God's kingdom from those who will not.

His basis for separating them, though, never mentions what people believe.

He says those who will enter God's kingdom are the ones who "fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the ill and visited those in prison."

It's vital that we remember the context of today's passage. It is part of Jesus' farewell speech to his closest followers, a few hours before he is snatched away and put to death.

He is not conducting a seminar on the legitimacy of other faiths.

Nowhere does Jesus show any knowledge of Hinduism, and Islam would not emerge for 600 years.

Jesus is not judging other faith traditions; he is comforting his closest friends and encouraging them to remain faithful to his mission after he's gone.

Jesus immersed himself in God. He studied and lived the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus is "the way" not in the sense that only people who believe in him will be saved, but in the sense that he is a model.

He shows us a life that is totally committed to God. It is a life filled by God's love, God's wisdom and God's desire for justice.

Like I said, Christ is the way for me, but I do not believe that God is limited to only one way of reaching people. It makes sense that God would provide different paths for people to follow.

That doesn't mean that any path will do, or that they are all the same.

Following Christ leads me to respect people of other faiths, but to question any path that promotes injustice or fails to highlight compassion.

The *World Encyclopedia of Religion* identifies 10,000 distinct religions in the world. One hundred fifty have a million or more followers.

The claim that Christianity holds sufficient truth for salvation does not mean that it has to hold that truth exclusively.

Spiritual leaders like Gandhi (a Hindu) and Thich Nhat Hanh (a Buddhist) have come closer to the Jesus truth, the Jesus way, and the Jesus life than most of the Christians I know, including myself.

As C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* wrote,

“Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him?

“But the truth is, God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are.

[“We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”]

That brings us to the last critical verse in today’s passage that I would like to discuss this morning, one that is often overlooked. Listen again to verse 12:

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, *will do greater works than these.*”

Jesus challenges us to accomplish amazing things. He challenges us to outdo him in acts of compassion and works of justice.

That, obviously, is quite a challenge.

A few years ago, Baptist minister Tony Campolo was in Haiti checking on missionary work he supports.

He went to the little Holiday Inn where he always stays the day before he boards his plane to come home.

As he stepped out of the taxi to head for the entrance of the Holiday Inn, he was intercepted by three girls.

He calls them girls because the oldest could not have been more than 15.

The one in the middle said, "Mister, for \$20 I'll do anything you want me to do. I'll do it all night long. Do you know what I mean?"

He knew what she meant. He turned to the next one and said, "What about you, could I have you for \$20?"

She said yes and so did the other girl. The third one tried to mask her contempt for him with a smile but it's hard to look alluring when you are 15 and desperately hungry.

He said, "I'm in room 210, be up there in 10 minutes. I have \$60 and I'm going to pay for all three of you to be with me all night long."

He rushed up to the room, called down to the front desk and said he wanted every Walt Disney DVD that they had.

He called the restaurant and said, "Do you make banana splits? I want banana splits with extra ice cream, extra everything. I want huge ones, and I want *four* of them!"

The little girls came and the ice cream and videos came and they sat up watching the DVDs and laughing until about one in the morning when the last girl fell asleep.

As Campolo looked at the three young girls stretched out asleep, he thought to himself, nothing has really changed.

Tomorrow they will be back on the streets selling themselves to dirty, filthy men...

Because, there will always be men who, for a few bucks, will destroy little girls.

He did not know enough of their language to tell them about Christ, but God's Spirit said to him:

"For one night, let them be little girls again."

So, as I close, let me summarize what I hope you take away this morning. How about that – I have three points. I don't think I've ever preached a three-point sermon before! ☺

FIRST: Jesus counsels us not to be troubled, for he has our back and our future is secured.

SECOND: We need to know that we are not the only people on this earth that God cares about and has a plan for.

And THIRD: Jesus challenges us to be his hands and feet in this world and to carry on his mission. Jesus challenges us to break into people's lives by loving them as he would.

Remember, we can never know the lasting impact of an act of compassion.

And may we, in concert with Jesus, because of Jesus, be God's bridge over troubled waters.

So keep your eyes peeled for the next opportunity that comes your way and give it your best.

And then let God take care of the rest.

Amen!