

My Soul Is Troubled

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 21, 2021

Readings: Psalm 51:1-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Sermon text: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say?

It ain't easy. It takes time. It will never be perfect. And you are not alone.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord. But they are not here yet. Or rather, as is true of all biblical prophecies of the coming of the kingdom, already, but not yet.

The law may be written on our hearts, but it hasn't yet erased temptation and sin. We struggle, as Paul put it, with our all too human flesh. We are troubled, as Jesus himself knew, in our souls.

Whatever else motivated the young man in Atlanta to shoot eight people—whatever forms of hate against women, and Asian Americans—it seems he felt that he should be able to overcome sexual desire and he couldn't. So he hated himself and turned that hate against what he perceived to be the sources of temptation. He was misguided in this by his religious teachers, a fundamentalist Baptist church. They put too much emphasis on sexual sins, too much confidence in human willpower, and too much judgment against those who who are weak, or at least appear so. It was, as William Barber put it, theological malpractice to teach that an individual who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, believes in a biblically sanctioned moral code, has the Holy Spirit within, thereby should be capable of overcoming sin and evil. On his own. All at once. By age twenty-one. Any slip, back sliding, giving in to temptation is a sign of weakness, evil, and it needs to be pulled out by its roots. And here's a quote from Jesus to prove it.

Well, that's not how I see it. That's not the Jesus I know, nor the religion I have learned and teach. The Jesus I know never turned away anyone needing to be healed, never said you are a lost cause. He knew that temptation is never over—he was tempted in the beginning of his ministry

the desert, he was tempted in the end in the garden. He knew his friends and followers would deny and betray and abandon him in the hour of need —yet it was they to whom he appeared and said peace be with you. He taught to pray for strength but ask for forgiveness—because he knew we need both. Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do. That’s my Jesus, the one I follow, not always well, never perfectly. But as Lennon and McCartney sang, it’s getting better all the time.

Yet, as I have reflected on what I believe and teach I wonder if I—or mainline protestantism, and the modern world more generally, also can convey a distorted picture of the way of spiritual growth. One that is too individualistic, too much a matter of God and self. Of getting it right in our minds, but not integrating it into our lives. So easy to judge others, and not oneself.

For example. A number of us have been working on a guided retreat for Lent called *Inner Peace in Divine Love*. We meet online on Tuesday evenings to talk, but the real work is done alone the rest of the week through readings, prayer and reflection. The dominant theme is that we are surrounded, upheld, embraced by the love of God, and we are asked to return that love with the gift of self.

This past week on the first day we were asked to reflect on the image from the letter of James: Every gift descends from above, like the sun’s rays. We are given birth, as he puts it, by the word of truth, so that we might become a kind of first fruits of God’s creatures.

The second day we were guided by a text from John 4: God’s love not only showers us like sunlight or spring rain, but wells up in our hearts like a fountain or spring. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well who him a drink that the water he gives will become in her a spring of water of water gushing up to eternal life.

A woman of long and often hard experience, she knows a good deal when she hears one. Give me this water, please, so I won’t have to come back here again.

I’m not sure that is exactly what Jesus meant, but he makes a similar statement in John 7, speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Booths, Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one

who believes in me drink. And as the scripture says, Out of the the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

So we have the images of God love descending like sunlight and rain— from above—and God's life springing up from within, like a spring or continually replenished well. You see the vertical connection. And this is made clear in this morning's gospel text as well.

In John 12, Jesus is back in Jerusalem but this time for the Feast of Passover—and to face his own death on the cross. He knows the time has come. Even Gentiles are being drawn to hear the Word. It is time to move past the individual messenger, the single person, the historical Jesus, the single grain of wheat, to the word spread more broadly, first by the apostles and then by all those drawn to him, to bear the hundredfold fruit. And Jesus tells the people this will happen only after he is lifted up from the earth. John suggests he meant to indicate the manner of his death— lifted up on the cross to die. But we also know that Jesus will later be lifted up from the tomb, from the depths of hell, back to earth, to bring the good news of his resurrection, and then lifted again to heaven, to be with the Father. This will trigger another great cycle when the Holy Spirit is poured out on Pentecost—like sunlight, like spring rain pouring out over all flesh, in fulfillment of the prophecy—so that all people, indeed all creation may be drawn into one great soul, the cosmic Christ and into the very being of God.

So here's how it seems to work: the love and power and purpose of God come down from on high; the love and healing and teaching of Jesus pull us up to follow him, and the love and power and consolation of the Spirit draw us together to a higher calling. A better world. The kingdom of heaven, the redeemed creation. On a personal level, I am a heroic saint, not a defeated sinner.

All good. But as I contemplated this up and down movement of the spirit, I was struck by the question of how it works horizontally, as it were. How does my personal spiritual journey involve others and the world around me? And, in light of the tragedy in Atlanta, how is an individual supposed to overcome all the conflicting desires, personal weaknesses, and confusing messages from peers, elders and the world?

I read a moving account in the March 10 issue of *The Christian Century* of a philosopher and theologian named James K.A. Smith. Confident in the powers of reason as a young man he pursued advanced degrees in philosophy and theology. He believed reason and logic could change people's hearts and minds. He discovered otherwise—not only with others but himself. He found himself in mid-life falling into a season of dark depression. None of his vaunted skills of mind or attempts at prayer could get him out of it. He was puzzled about what was happening to him. Nothing in his external circumstances should cause such sadness or disappointment. To the contrary. But, as he asked himself “why am I sobbing in the middle of the afternoon? Why am I either a monster of anger or a lethargic shell? Why do my wife and children feel a million miles away, and why do I keep pushing them even farther?”

Reason had no answers. Faith seemed helpless. He knew God. He believed in Jesus. But somehow he could not get out of the dark pit of depression.

As he tells the story it was the hand of a friend, a Christian counselor, that helped him. It made him think of a scene from the television series *The West Wing* in which the White House chief of staff Leo McGarry reaches out to his deputy Josh Lyman, who is struggling with PTSD. Leo tells him a parable:

The guy's walking down a street when he falls down a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, “Hey you! Can you help me out?” The doctor writes a prescription and throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts, “Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?” The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves. Then a friend walks by. “Hey Joe, it's me! Can you help me out?” And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says “Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.” The friend says, “Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.”

It wasn't easy and it wasn't quick. But with the help of his therapist—and his powers of reason and trust in God—he found a way out. And that suggests that God showers us with gifts not only from above and not only from within but from others. We are not made to be solitary explorers, solo climbers, single-handed heroes. On the contrary. We are all in the well

together. The light is coming down, the waters are rising up—but unless we reach out and hold on to and help each other we may drown separately, each trying to individually crawl their way out. Go it alone and you will get lost when the darkness falls. By helping your neighbor you lift yourself. This is true religion—whose root meaning is to bind together, the self, God, neighbor, and world.

This is the idea expressed in Buddhism by the Bodhisattva, who rejects going to nirvana alone, but stays in the cycle of life and death to help all sentient beings escape from suffering.

This is the truth of Christ going to the cross. True, he is alone. But only going on ahead, the first of many—the first fruits—so that we all may be drawn to eternal life. So we work and sacrifice— not for ourselves alone but for the sake of the world. And this is what Jesus meant when he said, repeatedly, if you love your life you will lose it—but if you give your life for the sake of God and your neighbor, you will gain it.

Remember: It ain't easy. It takes time. It will never be perfect. But you are not alone

See you next week, when we start to gather again! Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Easter! I almost said, alleluia.

In Christ, Amen.

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