

Surrounded by God

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

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During the past year, Lewinsville has been on what we have been calling a “journey into the heart of God.” Over the last 5 or 6 years, we have been articulating our purpose as a congregation, our WHY statement for our congregation, as being “to love and serve God by responding to human need.” We’re on a journey into the heart of God, and we exist to love and serve God by responding to human need.

It has occurred to me recently that these two things are the same journey.

We are not talking about two different journeys here.

It is not as though we switched directions, mid-drive, that we started out responding to human need and then decided we actually wanted to go into the heart of God.

They are the same path. The journey into the heart of God is a journey of responding to human need. Responding to human need turns out to be a pathway into the heart of God. The heart of God, according to our faith in Jesus Christ, is centrally concerned with human need and human hurt. Both of these things – the journey into the heart of God and responding to human need – have to do with vulnerability, suffering love, honoring and tending to the wounds we have accumulated over our lives, standing with those who are pushed to the side and scorned in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our congregations, and in our society, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice. That is the path of the Christian faith.

What we know is that all too often, this is a path that is *not chosen*. A lot of people, and it may well be that a large part of ourselves, does not want to walk the path of being with human hurt. A couple of weeks ago, when we were reading Matthew 7, we read that Jesus spoke about the “broad and easy path” that leads to destruction, he was referring to the world’s typical paths of seductive comfort, avoiding painful grief, the path of competitive violence with, and scorn for, those who are different. Jesus spoke of the “narrow path that leads to life,” which was his path, the path into the heart of God – the path of loving your enemies, forgiving those who sin against you, standing with the poor and the vulnerable in a way that is both tender and strong.

Jesus’ heart, which is the heart of God, a heart that is very tender and very strong, a heart that is attentive to the people and the parts of all of us that are vulnerable, is much on display in our reading today from John 14. In this text, the vulnerable ones are his disciples. They are freaking out in John 14, because John 14

takes place in the context of the Last Supper. Jesus is giving what scholars refer to as his Farewell Discourse. He is telling them that he is leaving them, that he will be betrayed, arrested, and violently put to death. The disciples are freaking out, because their Lord and Friend is letting them know that he is leaving them.

This is why Jesus says, multiple times in John 14, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And we may pause here to notice that this is one of the great comforts in reading the Bible. Sometimes, I think that we can feel, when our own hearts are troubled, when we're upset, when we're freaking out, that this is a sign that we aren't doing something right, or that we're being weak or faithless. But when we read the Bible, we see throughout the Scripture, over and over and over again, the words "Do not fear," "do not be afraid," "do not let your hearts be troubled." These words keep coming, and we begin to realize that you only need to say these kinds of things to people, if the people you're saying them to are already afraid. Which means that the people in the Bible were often afraid. Just like us.

If the person you're speaking to is feeling strong and secure and confident, it would not occur to you to say, "There, there, honey, it's going to be OK." The only reason you need to say, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" is if the people you're speaking with are really upset in some way. And since the Bible is filled with words from God, words from Jesus, words from the angels, saying, "Do not be afraid," this lets us know that our ancestors in the faith lived with fear A LOT.

So when we, in our own lives, are experiencing fear, or concern, or anxiety, or upset, or rage, or anger, or disagreement about something that you're facing, know that we are in very good company. Being upset about something does not mean that you are doing something wrong. To the contrary, it means that you are squarely in the middle of the people whom Jesus addresses, and it means that you are precisely where Jesus' presence in your life can be a great, great help. His love surrounds us.

What Jesus says to his disciples, who are so visibly upset, is that though he is physically going away, he will not leave them "orphaned." And with this word, Jesus touches the raw fear of abandonment that was gripping his disciples. Abandonment can be one of the things we fear as well. We can fear that abandonment is happening to us if we suffer a really great loss, if something bad happens to us; we can fear abandonment if we feel called to a path that our parents or our friends disagree with, if we get in a disagreement with a loved one, we can fear that we are going to be abandoned and cut off and left alone. This fear of being abandoned can live deep down inside of us, where it can drive all kinds of negative thinking.

So our Lord speaks directly to that fear and says, "I will not leave you orphaned. That will not happen. The Father and I will send the Holy Spirit to be with you. Forever. The Spirit of truth, the Spirit of genuine authenticity and reliability, will be with you to guide you and live in you, forever."

In our journeys of faith, we do not respond to human need because we're awesome people. We don't do these things out of our own resources of goodwill and politeness. Our own resources are far too shallow, and they will predictably run dry when we are under significant stress.

The reason we respond to human need is because we have experienced the ways that God has responded to us in our own human need. We love because God first loved us, as it says in 1 John 4. God surrounds us with the divine presence. The reason we come alongside those who are bruised and beaten and pushed to the side is because God has come alongside us when we were bruised and beaten and pushed to the side, and most of us can point to one or two people who did that for us in our lives, who called us when we were hurting, or visited us when we were lonely or confused, or stood with us when our backs were up against the wall. Having had that kind of love shown to *us*, we now feel drawn to respond to human need that we see in others.

I will tell you that you all did this for me when my father died, and you're doing it in a different way now, with my upcoming sabbatical, this summer, this time of rest and renewal. That is a gift of love with which you are surrounding me. On Mother's Day, we remember all of those who have mothered us along our life's journeys – whether we think of our mothers in our families of origin, or of people in our extended family who provided maternal guidance and nurture, or of teachers, youth advisors, coaches, neighbors, pastors who extended motherly presence into our lives. When we consciously receive this kind of love in our own lives, we can pass it on to others. Today, we are ordaining and installing new church officers here at Lewinsville. God calls men and women to particular ministries of leadership, nurture, service, and governance – all of which express the heart of God.

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul says that in God, we "live and move and have our being." Our entire lives are lived *in God*. The triune, relational God is the matrix within which we exist. According to Acts 17, we cannot *not* be in God. God surrounds us. We live our lives in God's heart.

So, as is so often the case, the questions for each of us today are two. The first question, always the first question, is where in your life is God touching you with divine mercy and grace? In what aspect of your life are you upset about something, are you tempted to become afraid or troubled? What does it feel like to hear Jesus speaking directly to that part, and saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I will not leave you orphaned." And then the second question, which is probably more like the first question than we would ordinarily think, is "Towards whom is your heart being opened? Whose vulnerability cries out to you? What suffering in the world is your heart drawn to?" May God's love for you, and your love for the world, continue to deepen and grow together. To God, and to God alone, be all glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.