

“Incline your ear, O Lord;
make haste and deliver us.” AMEN!

There’s a story about a rural congregation
that was having trouble finding a pastor.

Like most churches they wanted a
particular kind of person, but they
ended up settling for Pastor Dan.

Pastor Dan was a skinny and kind of dorky fellow.

His round glasses sat crookedly on his nose
and he lacked any coordination.

Some of us members talked about him and
concluded that he must not care about
his clothing because either his
slacks were too short or they
were too baggy around the waist

and he’d have to hold them up with one hand.

Often when we saw him, he was
either was expecting a flood or he’d have
to hold up his pants while he walked.

I think he preferred the high waters because that's what he wore most Sunday mornings.

That gave us something else to talk about because we could easily see his mismatched socks.

Pastor Dan distracted us in these ways and we settled for him.

So, after his first year with us we were excited to welcome a guest preacher while Pastor Dan went on vacation.

We invited everyone we knew to church that Sunday because surely this guest preacher would not distract us like Pastor Dan.

But on Wednesday that our excitement for Sunday fell flat.

One of our members died suddenly of a heart attack while working in his barn.

A few of us went over to comfort the new widow and offer anything we could.

You know, it wasn't long after we arrived that we heard the sound of a car coming up

the gravel driveway.

I peaked out the window just in time
to see a familiar pant leg
step out the driver's door.

Pastor Dan, with prayer book in hand
awkwardly exiting his vehicle.

He had left his vacation early to be
with his flock in the time of need.

Tears suddenly filled my eyes as I thought of
all the comments I'd made about our pastor.

The times I had been distracted by his appearance
and talked about how we settled for someone
less than we deserved.

Our pastor didn't look suddenly confident or
in control when he walked to the front door,
but none of that mattered,
he was there.

With belief and love he entered the living room
and when he entered, we felt
God's presence come in with him. (Pause)

"On the night when Jesus was handed over,

our Lord took bread, gave thanks and broke it...”

It would not be but just a few more hours after he'd said those words that he would face his own death.

Then, he spoke the words we just read in John's gospel:

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus spoke them directly to Peter and the other disciples in the upper room that night.
(Pause)

If you have been a part of a church community for any amount of time then you recognize these comforting words from Jesus.

They are often said at funerals... at times when close family and friends are gathered in quiet rooms at home, hospice, or hospital...

They are all moments in life when the grief we experience might not allow us to fully absorb the words Jesus said.

In such times of deep emotion and extreme vulnerability it can be

hard to listen fully.

So today, we encounter again
a very patient Jesus.

A rabbi that has shown up,
and connected human beings with God.

A savior with only a few more steps to take
before being arrested and executed.

A friend who spoke to those closest to him
about his coming absence.

A messiah who knew they'd be troubled,
but offered hope to them
for the new age that was about to begin.

Notice there is not any command to
“get it together” or “put on a brave face.”

There weren't any commands of self-help.

Nor was there a formulaic checklist
given to the disciples, or us,
in how to “get right” with God.

In fact, it is more of the truth to see
that as Jesus explains again who he is,

the more we find that we do not
have control of anything.

We aren't able to prepare a place for ourselves...
that's Jesus' responsibility. (Pause)

In the setting of this text we encounter 3 questions
that I think we would all want the answers to.

“Lord, where are you going?”
The question Peter asked.

“Lord, how can we know the way?”
That's the one from Thomas.

And #3: “Can you show us God?”
From Phillip.

In the troubling time of anxious hearts,
we discover Jesus patient and calm
with two answers:

Believe and Love. Believe and Love. (Pause)

Embedded in his reply is a text
that can be used to do harm.

It is in verse 6 where Jesus said,
“I am the way, and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father
except through me.”

A serious misunderstanding goes around
that this verse is meant to teach that one
has to believe a certain way or
else you are damned to hell.

When that requirement is put forth,
this verse is taken entirely out of
the context of Jesus speaking to the troubled
hearts in the upper room.

While such structure and formula for salvation
can be appealing, and it might even
be good for church business,
it is bad theology.

That closed minded interpretation ignores
the truth brought forth in the
upper room of troubled hearts.

That truth is believe and love.

To believe Jesus reflects God love,
forgiveness and patience for humankind.

To understand that the dwelling places
he spoke about are abiding places open for us

to come inside and see what God continues
to do.

To believe that Jesus words, healings and actions...
right down to his self-sacrifice is
a glimpse of the enormity of
God's love for the world.

You see?

That is the truth and the life pure and simple
whether one knows about Jesus or not.

To see that it all connects to
Jesus' new commandment that we
love one another the way Jesus loves us.

Belief and love leads us to ethical standards
that not everyone will understand.

Heck, we didn't always understand
(and will never understand everything) but
Christ was/is patient with us.

We can be patient, too,
as we reach out and help others. (Pause)

Because troubled hearts come in many packages,
and I will not pretend to understand or

explain where God is in the midst of
our nation's division.

How did evangelical and Christian
become titles for us to fear?

Evangelical means sharing the good news
“that God so love the world that God
gave us the Son... not to condemn the world
but that we might be saved.”

Being Christian should mean that one
follows Christ and does what he did.

And you know what the amazing thing is?

There are multitudes of people who
do the things Jesus did, say the things Jesus said,
and love people the way Jesus loves -

AND they don't even call themselves Christian. (Gasp!)

Ordinary people doing extraordinary actions of love.

This recognition sets for us what is
likely forgotten in the reading of Stephen's
murder in the Acts of the Apostles.

Stephen's witness and faithful perseverance,

in the midst of persecution, did not come
without love, and he wasn't able to do
what he did without a greater power within him.

We pray that we, and our loved ones,
are not called upon to make such a sacrifice.

Whether we are or not, we are all called to proclaim
the gospel to the world longing to know God's
unconditional love.

AMEN!