**Living With an Untroubled Heart in Troubling Times**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**May 10, 2020**

**John 14:1-14**

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God; believe also in me. These are words of comfort and affirmation. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what will unfold post Passover. And despite the confusion in both Thomas and Phillip and the author’s agenda to explain, yet again, who is in their midst and his relationship to God, it is these words of comfort and affirmation that are familiar to many. Don’t be afraid. Believe. And if there was a message that might comfort, affirm and ground us at this particular time in our shared history with every citizen of the world,it is the counsel to trust and believe.

Many of us are captive to a host of fears and it is not always easy to harness or contain those things that frighten us. A fear of snakes may be easily controlled by simply avoiding those places where one might be encountered, but spiders are less easy to avoid, as are rodents. But the person who has lived through an assault, or suffered unemployment, had an addiction or been taken advantage of may find the fear of recurrence more difficult to control. I answered the church door one day and was met by someone new who had heard about our grocery cards.

As we navigated the process and he was mentally adding up just how far the cards would go at a grocery store he asked me if there might be some soft drinks in the building that I could give him. I replied that there were not. I told him about some places that he might access for food that could free up some room on the card. He was familiar with all of my suggestions and then he shared that he was just out of rehab for alcoholism and there were places that he avoided because of their proximity to bars and liquor stores. He was afraid that the temptation would be greater than his power to resist. Fear is very real and while some fears may be within our control, others are not.

This is Mother’s Day. In the United Church we use this day to celebrate the Christian family and the church family that is the congregation. It would normally be a day when good wishes were exchanged mother to mother and parishioner to minister. I would have wished all women a happy mother’s day because even if one has not had the privilege of birthing and raising children many women become a type of “other mother” to nieces, nephews, godchildren and neighbours. Had circumstances allowed I would have opted to have reflections read by members of the congregation and interspersed with pieces of music provided by choir, Director of Music and members of the congregation with musical talent. But the church is empty save for the person behind the camera and me. And we are all living with uncertainty to a degree that is as precedent setting as the very reason that is keeping us distant.

Restaurants that usually have reservations and receipts on Mother’s Day that are often equal to Christmas Day will not be open. Mothers who are accustomed to going out for brunch with family will mark the day differently. And our worship will unfold without the participation of the laity and the sharing of musical gifts and talents. These are different times in which we are living. We wonder when the restrictions will be eased and the economy opened up? When will our children and grandchildren be able to return to school and our lives resume in the “new normal” of post pandemic? When will we be able to make plans for vacations and celebrations? When will the lives lost to disease and violence be celebrated? How do we navigate the reality and live with untroubled hearts and faith in troubling and uncertain times?

I struggled inordinately last week to deliver my sermon in the wake of the Nova Scotia tragedy. The families most closely affected cannot open up their homes to receive family, friends and neighbours who would otherwise cross the threshold to proffer a hug and to share in the grief. People sick in nursing homes have died alone without their loved ones at their bedside to reassure and comfort. Persons in Intensive Care following surgeries are being denied the presence of their loved ones to aid in the hope and healing; their families can only get as close as the waiting room door. I cannot begin to imagine what it would be like to wake up in hospital and not see the faces of my husband and children in the room; sharing the experience in faith, hope and love; filling in the blanks of lapsed memory and encouraging me to not lose heart. Living with an untroubled heart is never easy, but it has been exacerbated by distance and isolation. And when our hearts are burdened and troubled and we find it challenging to distance ourselves from fear’s pull, we must remember the rest of the verse from John 14 verse 1: believe in God and in the son. The will of God never leads where the grace of God cannot keep.

My grandson Zachary and I sent a message of condolence to a Facebook page to the Government of Nova Scotia following the incident of April 18 and 19, sharing our sadness and offering our thoughts and prayers. Within minutes we received a response thanking both of us by name for our thoughts and the reciprocal wish for us to take care. I never expected to get a response and the fact that a grief stricken and shocked province, having to deal with both a pandemic and a senseless act of violence could find the place for gratitude touched me deeply. It made me weep, but these were not the tears of defeat but were tears of humility.

Tears shed in the wake of tragedy, love shared in sadness and gratitude exchanged in hope has reminded me of what it means to be a part of a national family and a worldwide family. I am celebrating Family Sunday with new eyes for seeing this year.

The entire human family the world over is living with the restrictions imposed to protect us from catching the virus and spreading it. We all share the same fears and concerns about the future. We have the same questions about a second wave and immunity. We are all in this together even if some are further removed from the epicenter.

Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology and a pioneer in establishing the social sciences as a credible discipline to be respected, was the grandson of an orthodox rabbi. His curiosity about culture and society, coupled with his religious background became the foundation for much of his work, particularly in the role that society played in shaping a person’s religious and ethical outlook. He spent years in the South Sea Islands studying the religion of then primitive people in order to understand what religion was like before it was formalized with prayer books and professional clergy. In 1912 he published his book, Elementary Forms of Religious Life, in which he suggested that the primary purpose of religion at its earliest level was not to put people in touch with God, but to put them in touch with one another.

Religious rituals taught people how to share with their neighbours the experiences of birth and bereavement, of children marrying and parents dying. There were rituals for planting and for harvesting, for the winter solstice and the vernal equinox. In that way the community would be able to share the most joyous and the most frightening moments of life together. No one would have to face them alone. Perhaps as religion has become more organized we have become more distant from its humble roots of banding together to support one another in the triumphs and tragedies of life.

We have come a long way since that more pristine understanding. Even Judaism had become steeped in tradition by the time of Jesus. He was accustomed to worshipping in the synagogue on Sabbath and making regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem for festivals. But the text for this morning is a part of the farewell discourse as Jesus was preparing his disciples to live without his physical presence among them and to carry on in his name. There is something simple and pristine about his remarks; distanced from tradition, ritual, and liturgy. There is still a place for tradition, ritual and liturgy but there also needs to be a place for the mystery; the grief; the confusion; the fears that are also a part of life. Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God believe also in me. And when you are beset by fear: believe in God and in the Christ.

Like those more primitive peoples who believed that the sun would set and rise again. That seed plated would take root and grow. That babies would be born and people would die and they would all experience the phenomena together. They would rejoice in the new birth and in the harvest. They would weep together in the wake of loss and care for the bereaved.

Shannon Michael Pater has written, The disciples who gather with Jesus for his final meal are filled with confusion and disquiet. They have been following Jesus for three years. They had been looking for a Messiah and had thought that they found him. They believed that the Messiah was immortal and have heard Jesus say with his own lips that he will suffer rejection and death. They saw him as a liberator but now hear that he will be one more victim of oppression. They were prepared for the Messiah to usher in a time of peace but learn that the immediate future will include horrific suffering. If we strip away the confusion of Thomas and the request of Phillip and the seeming exclusivity of who gets to live in those mansions we are left with good counsel that might help us to navigate through the uncertainty, disappointment and confusion we are all experiencing: don’t be afraid. Believe.

These are unsettling times in which we are living and this may not be the way that any of us imagined celebrating Christian Family Sunday. Many of us continue to live with troubled hearts as the distancing, isolation and loneliness are taking its toll. The uncertainty about the future of the world is foremost on the minds of politicians and citizens alike. Opposition to ongoing restriction is on the rise as people engage in protest over the limitations on freedom. Small business live in fear of bankruptcy and closing. Our worship has unfolded without members of the church family in attendance. The questions about when it will all end are still unanswered and families are being denied the opportunity to gather together to share grief and to celebrate life. People are having to recover from diagnosis and procedures without the support of loved ones. We will have to navigate a new normal in time and there are unanswered questions about how long that will be and what it will entail. How do we navigate the reality and live with untroubled hearts and faith?

In the concluding paragraphs of his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Rabbi Kushner writes that there will never be a definitive answer to the question, but there may be more questions that will surface that will help to ground, encourage and affirm. That question is now that this happened how will we respond? What will do now that this has happened? The answer may lie in John 14:1: Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. May it be so for us. Amen.