

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 10, 2020 (5th Sunday in Easter, Year A)
John 14:1-14

A woman was diagnosed with a terminal illness and was given three months to live. As she was getting her things in order, she contacted her pastor to discuss some of her final wishes. As the pastor was just preparing to leave, the woman suddenly REMEMBERED something very IMPORTANT to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly, "I want to be buried with a FORK in my right hand."

The pastor stood there puzzled, not quite sure what to say.

The woman explained, "In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the MAIN course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'keep your fork.' It was always my favorite part, because I knew that something BETTER was coming... like deep-dish pie or velvety chocolate cake. Something WONDERFUL! So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the FORK?' Then I want you to tell THEM: 'Keep Your Fork.....the best is yet to come.'"

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you and will come again and take you to myself. So that where I am, you may be also."

These are familiar words. They were MEANT to give COMFORT. Jesus spoke these words on the night in which he was betrayed, in the upper room. They're words of promise and hope, because the disciples were STRUGGLING that night. Jesus had JUST predicted Peter's DENIAL, and JUDAS' BETRAYAL, and the disciples weren't sure what to MAKE of all of it. So, Jesus speaks these words to give them COMFORT and HOPE.

Today, we hear his words with the SAME hope as when Jesus FIRST spoke them. There's a REASON we so often hear them at funerals. The great COMFORT for us in these words is that God has the FINAL say. We trust in Jesus' promise that he prepares a place for us, that WE will be where HE is, that he IS the way, the truth, and the life.

UNFORTUNATELY, his words are often misunderstood. He said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," but some have taken that to mean that Christians are NEVER to be affected by ANYTHING. They're supposed to be HAPPY ALL the time, no matter WHAT is going on. They think that even when someone's world is FALLING APART, a Christian is supposed to be SMILING like an idiot.

But AREN'T we SUPPOSED to be troubled? JESUS was. The gospels tell us that he was troubled by SUFFERING. He was troubled by DEATH. He was deeply disturbed in his spirit.

So shouldn't WE be troubled too? Should the death of Ahmaud Arbery disturb us? When a young black man out for jog is hunted down and murdered in cold blood in broad daylight, and NO one is ARRESTED for 2 MONTHS until a viral video actually SHOWS the murder, isn't THAT supposed to TROUBLE us?

20 million people lost their jobs last MONTH. There are more people unemployed in this country than at any time since the Great Depression. We SHOULD be troubled.

And you know the numbers. More than 1.3 million people have been confirmed to be infected, just in THIS country, and more than 78,000 have DIED here. THIS is a time when our hearts SHOULD be troubled.

So, what does Jesus MEAN when he says, "Do not LET your hearts be troubled"?

Many years ago, Eric Clapton, one of the greatest living rock guitarists of all time, wrote a heart wrenching song about the death of his son. His son was only four years old when he fell from a 53rd-

story window. Clapton wasn't home when it happened, and for months afterward, when he was SEEN in public, he was VISIBLY SHAKEN by it. He took nine months off from his music, and when he returned, his music had CHANGED. The hardship had made his music softer, more POWERFUL, and more reflective. He wrote *Tears in Heaven* about his son's death. It is a song of hope:

(Show song unplugged)

Oh, he WAS troubled.

"Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees.

Time can break your heart, have you begging please, begging please."

HARDSHIP has a way of getting our ATTENTION. PAIN SLOWS us down. Very few of us, AFTER facing a trial, come out the SAME way we entered in.

I can't imagine the pain that Clapton felt. But he FOUND HOPE, and he SHARED it with the world.

You see, heaven doesn't mean that NOTHING HERE in THIS life MATTERS; it means that we know the END of the story. There's a HOME PREPARED for us, and Jesus will come and BRING us home to be with HIM forever. And we can ENJOY this life all the MORE

We can't take Jesus' words out of CONTEXT. Jesus HIMSELF WAS troubled. So, when Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," we are meant to HEAR his NEXT sentence WITH it: "Believe in God, believe also in me." We WILL be TROUBLED by things happening in our LIVES, and in this WORLD, but do NOT slip into despair, do not fear, do not lose hope. "Believe in God, believe also in me."

Peace doesn't mean there WON'T be ANY PAIN; it means we can SEE the other SIDE of it.

A century ago John Henry Newman wrote an evening prayer that we still use today, but not for evening prayer. We use it for the final commendation of the dying at their bedside, and with the family at the committal at the graveside, because it expresses so WELL our HOPE, in the MIDST of our pain. I'd like to close with that prayer. Let us pray:

O Lord, support us all the long day of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In other words, "keep your fork." Amen.