

Sermon for 5-10-20
Gospel -- John 14:1-14
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"When life gives you more than you can stand, kneel."

Those words adorn one of my favorite coffee mugs -- and when I hold it in my hands and sip from it, I feel warm and fuzzy. I sip coffee from this mug, but I also sip comfort and love.

The mug was a gift from two of you -- from John Richardson and Ron Dowling. Last fall, when I broke my ankle and was stuck at home for two months, wallowing in boredom and self-pity, John and Ron called one afternoon and said "We're bringing dinner tonight, and we won't take no for an answer. What's your favorite place for takeout?" And sure enough, right around 6:30, they showed up bearing gifts of Chinese food, and dark chocolate, and this special mug.

What they were doing -- although they may not have realized it in the moment -- was pastoral care. They were providing pastoral care for the pastor! And it was exactly what I needed.

The most meaningful thing John and Ron gave me that night was not the lo mein noodles, or the fancy chocolate, or even my special mug. It was their presence. They sat down at the dinner table with my little family, and we ate and talked and laughed together. I shared with them some of the anxieties and frustrations I was feeling, and they listened. They didn't try to fix my problems; they listened, and reminded me of some things I already knew -- that I was loved and precious, that God was present with me through every moment, and that this experience (like every other experience), would pass.

That's pastoral care! Listening, holding sacred space for emotions and hopes and fears, being fully present to another person's spiritual deserts and valleys, providing gentle reassurance and affirmation. These are the essence of good pastoral care.

And friends, that's what Jesus is doing in today's reading from John's Gospel. Jesus is providing pastoral care to his friends, the disciples, on their last night together.

This part of John is called the Farewell Discourse. Chapters 1 through 12 of John take us through 3 years of earthly ministry -- 3 years of Jesus calling, and teaching, and feeding, and healing. Three years of divine revelation; 3 years of the Word made flesh walking and talking and dwelling here on earth as a human being.

Twelve chapters of ministry, and then: the Farewell Discourse. Chapters 13 through 17, all on one night. It's like time stands still. And Jesus, the Good Shepherd of his sheep, the greatest pastor the world has ever known, stops time and sits with his disciples in this scary, uncomfortable, unsettled place... and loves them. And reassures them. And cares for them.

It's tender, and gentle, and beautiful. And it's exactly what they need; and maybe it's exactly what we need, too.

They've eaten their last supper together. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, and instructed them to do likewise. Judas has left. He has left the room, he has left his friends, he has left the safety of his life-giving relationship with Jesus to go out and do what he's going to do. Peter has declared that he will "lay down his life" for Jesus, and Jesus has told him that, in fact, before the next morning Peter will deny his Lord not one, but three times.ⁱ

Jesus knows what's coming -- the interrogation, the trial, the abuse, the abandonment, the execution. But the disciples don't. They don't understand, they cannot fathom what Jesus is telling them. *You're leaving us soon? We can't go with you? We have to carry on without you? No! Please, Jesus, don't go!*

I love what Philip says in verse 8: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."ⁱⁱⁱ Grasping at straws, Philip? It's understandable; it's what we all do in situations like this, when our lives and our futures seem to change in an instant, and so much is outside of our control. We dream we're in a free fall, and we startle awake to find ourselves clinging to the bedsheets -- because when everything's falling apart, we will grab onto *anything* that might give us some tiny

semblance of control or normalcy. We tell ourselves that if we could just have *this one thing* to hold onto, everything will be okay.

It doesn't work, of course; but we still do it every time.

Thomas and Philip and the other disciples are standing on the edge of a precipice. They cannot see what lies ahead. They do not know what the future holds. They're trying to imagine their lives and their mission without Jesus, and they can't do it. Their minds cannot process such an enormous, earth-shattering shift. *How is this even happening?*

Friends, **we are right there with them**, aren't we?

Every morning I get up and look at the latest news and think ***how is this even happening?*** Every day at some point I throw my hands in the air and look heavenward and ask God ***how am I supposed to go on like this? How are we supposed to go on like this?***

We can't go to church. We can't have communion. We can't sit in a coffee shop and talk; we can't hold hands and pray together; we can't visit each other. We can't give hugs. We can't see our friends and family members (unless it's through a screen). And we have no idea how long it will last, or how bad it will get, or what our lives will look like in 2 or 6 or 12 months.

We are right there, on that precipice, looking out into the fog ahead, with no clue what's really out there and nothing to hold onto... or so we fear.

But this, friends, **this** is where Jesus comes in, right into the middle of our fears and anxieties, our pain, our frustration, our grasping at straws, our emotional free-fall. Jesus sits with us as we grieve for our lost routines, our canceled plans, our old day-to-day reality that has evaporated into thin air. Jesus is here with us, right in the thick of our grief.

And he says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled."ⁱⁱⁱ

He says: "you know the way."^{iv}

He says: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."^v

He says: "From now on you... know him and have seen him."^{vi}

We already have everything we need. Because we know Jesus, we know the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. Like the disciples, we have encountered Emmanuel, God-With-Us, the Word made flesh. My encounters with Christ and your encounters with Christ may have looked and felt and tasted different, but through him we have been reborn, made new, united as members of one living holy body - his Body. And he has promised us that nothing can strip us of that abiding intimacy, that relationship, that love.

Not grief, not fear, not change, not separation, not sickness, not time, not despair, not tragedy... nothing, not even death itself, can steal our Lord away from us. He will never abandon us. He keeps his promises.

We don't need to grasp at straws. We already have the only thing we really need.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ John 13:37 *NRSV*

ⁱⁱ 14:8

ⁱⁱⁱ 14:1

^{iv} 14:4

^v 14:11

^{vi} 14:7