

A sermon preached on May 10th, 2020 – Mothers' Day – based upon John 14:1-13a, entitled, "Becoming Comfortable with Uncertainty; Resting in the Expansive Love of God."

I continue to be struck by the way the Gospel readings speak with a particular poignancy in the present context of the epidemic and the feelings it evokes inside us. This morning we will hear words that Jesus spoke to his disciples the night before he died.

When Jesus spoke these words he was in that same upper room with the doors locked because there was great danger outside the walls. Powerful people who intend to kill Jesus were out there and Jesus knew he would soon die. He is preparing his disciples for the life ahead in which he will no longer be physically present with them.

Certain things have already taken place in that upper room before we reach this point. Jesus has gotten down on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples, like a mother giving her babies a bath. One by one, he washes them, including the feet of Judas who he knows will betray him, and Peter who he knows will deny him, as well as all the others who will abandon him. None of this takes them out of his love.

Jesus has just told them that he is giving them a *"new commandment"*, that they should love one another as he has loved them. On the surface it doesn't sound like a new commandment. The golden rule was right there in the Book of Leviticus: *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

What makes the commandment new is the reference point: We who would follow in the way of Jesus are to love another as Jesus has loved us, not as we love ourselves, because the truth of the matter is that often we aren't very good at loving ourselves.

The passage you're about to hear is probably familiar to you. It is commonly read at funerals and begins *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."* I've chosen to read Eugene Peterson's version from "The Message" in the hope we may hear these words afresh.

The Gospel reading comes from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning in the first verse. Listen for the Word of the Lord.

(Jesus said,) "Don't let this throw you. You trust God, don't you? Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father's home."

There is a lot of room in God's household. That's what we're getting at when we say each week, "There's always room in the circle." God's love is big and expansive, even though a lot of times people try to make you believe God's love is narrow and cramped – that unless you believe exactly what they believe there's no room for you. There's room enough in this love for disciples who will in short order abandon and betray him. And we who are called to follow in Jesus' way are called to live out as best we can this same expansive love.

If that weren't so, (said Jesus) would I have told you that I'm on my way to get a room ready for you? And if I'm on my way to get your room ready, I'll come back and get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the road I'm taking."

Thomas said, "Master, we have no idea where you're going. How do you expect us to know the road?"

Jesus said, "I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him. You've even seen him!"

Philip said, "Master, show us the Father; then we'll be content."

Thomas wants a roadmap to follow -- sort of like a new mother wanting a handbook that will tell her exactly what to do in every single situation. Philip wants a miraculous sign -- a clear vision into the glory of heaven.

They both want certainty. They want to be in control. And who can blame them? I think we can all identify with them. There is so much that is so uncertain in this time.

I hear a lot of people arguing over whom has a clear handle regarding what should happen in these unsettling times. Perhaps some humility would be helpful.

But Jesus doesn't give us his disciples -- or us -- certainty and control. He invites us to have faith -- to trust him in the midst of uncertainty. And frankly, this is a hard road to travel.

"You've been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don't understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, 'Where is the Father?' Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren't mere words. I don't just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act.

"Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me.

So this is the central claim of Christianity. Jesus reveals the heart of God. Jesus is God's love incarnate in flesh.

"God is love" is how the Gospel writer John puts it in one of his letters. He tells us we can't claim we love God if we don't love our neighbor in their need.

When Jesus gave his “new commandment” he said, “This is how people will know you are my followers, that you love one another.” It’s not by any claims we might make regarding absolute truth – it’s by the width and breadth of our love.

We want certainty. We want control. But Jesus invites us to let go of our need for these things and to love like crazy.

And in order to love this way, we have to **get comfortable with death** because the way of Jesus passes right through death. You don’t get to resurrection without accepting death, and not just the death that comes at the end of this life, but also the thousands of **little deaths** we confront in the course of our lives.

The death, for instance of the illusion that we can be in control – of ourselves – of others – of life itself. The death of our pride that thinks ourselves better than others. The death of our grudges and our need to be right. The death of the belief that it might be possible to protect ourselves from the heart break that is an inevitable part of life.

I came across an essay written by a woman named **Erin Raffety** addressing this experience we are sharing of the Covid 19 pandemic. She writes as a pastor, but more importantly as a mother of a **daughter named Lucia** with multiple disabilities and a terminal illness. Erin lives with the knowledge that eventually she will witness her daughter’s death.

I want to close my sermon by having my wife Sarah – the mother of my children -- to read portions of Erin’s essay in the hope that we might glean some wisdom about what it means to follow in the way of Jesus in this moment of time.

I've never been able to save my daughter, Lucia. It's a truth I've had to come to grips with. When you live at the edge of your limits as a mother and a person, you get kind of comfortable there, you make a home and a peace among those unanswerable whys. You realize to ask them is futile, faithless, distracting, daunting. The control that you don't have was never an idol to be worshiped, but rather a tyrannical robber of joy...

We can't save ourselves. We can't prevent this virus. If we could, we would have done it by now. Instead, our lives are shot through with daily reminders of our vulnerability...

A few months ago, over Lucia’s birthday, I flew unexpectedly to Wisconsin for a funeral of a dear family friend. Funerals are not really for the dying. They’re for the living to do

the work of grieving so they can gather the resources to go on living. That weekend, we were blessed to be together and reflect upon the life of a beautiful, faithful woman. "Your mother was so good at loving people," I said to my friend.

And is there really anything else? I began to wonder.

Grief and love are the twin conditions in which we've had to make our home in these coronavirus days. (Sometimes) it just seems like it's all grief on top of grief...

The paradoxical antidote, though, is to be like my mother's friend, Sharman—in the face of life's cruelty, to be ridiculously committed to loving people. The grief is that love never rescues anyone from death, of course, but it covers them, it nurtures them, it consumes them in a way that always and does matter completely...

I don't want to live with a false security that my child will always be there. Instead, with the full knowledge of life's impermanency, we can choose to love even more fiercely, generously, lavishly...

While we can't save ourselves, may we be reminded that the God who saves has been unleashed in the world as love incarnate.

Love will conquer death. Love will find a way.

Let us pray,

O God, help us to release the tight grip with which we try to hold on to our illusions – that we can be in control of our lives – that we can have clarity regarding what the future holds. Help us to let go that we may experience your joy. Grant us the humility to embrace our fundamental vulnerability in this world. Help us to put our trust in you, O God – and to seek to follow in the way of the one who shows us how to love. Grant us acceptance of the truth that death is the pathway to resurrection.

Help us, day by day, moment by moment, to choose love. Empower us to love fiercely, generously, lavishly in the face of all that would tempt our hearts to succumb to fear and despair.

And help us to recognize that deep down we really are knit together in your love -- we really are all in this together. In the name of our crucified and risen savior, amen.