

Texts: Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-7

Tension gives rise between today's two readings: trouble vs. no trouble. In Acts, Stephen, the first martyr of the church, had worked the Jewish leaders up into a frenzy, by speaking convincingly about an alternate salvation narrative centered on Jesus Christ, in utter opposition to the accepted beliefs of the Jewish establishment. The Jewish faith and the Christian faith split here, wide open. They are overcome with rage toward this outspoken nobody. The Jewish council members, Luke reports, "were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen." They shrieked and covered their ears. They grabbed him, took him out of the city, and stoned him to death. This is the world the early church faced: serious trouble, persecution, and murder.

Meanwhile, we flip back to our reading from John. Same world as Acts. We find Jesus launching into his final teaching before he will be arrested, unjustly tried, suffer on the cross, and die. He begins with curious, seemingly out of place words: "Don't be troubled." Really? Trouble runs rampant. Tragedy looms. Pain and death are about to gain the upper hand. "Don't be troubled", Jesus says. Stephen, in Acts, as we look back, never appeared troubled, even as he was taken away and stoned to death for speaking truth. He even echoed what Jesus spoke from the cross: "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" And then he died. But he never looked troubled. How about that?

The exact translation from the original Greek, in Jesus' opening line is: "Let not your [plural] heart [singular] be troubled." One heart, shared by many. One common heart, we share, we connect with. All of us are in this thing together. May our collective, unified heart, that pulsing center, the lifeblood of who we are, be untroubled. How about that?

Stephen, at the point of dying because of faith in Jesus Christ, showed no sign of being troubled, as trouble broke out. He "stared into heaven, saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side." "As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, 'Lord, accept my life!'" He died, by all indications, calm, confident, collected. And the church kept on going forward; its heart, on multiple fronts, calm, confident, collected. And the church keeps moving forward.

My favorite Gospel of John commentator, Dale Bruner, adds an extra word in his translation of Jesus' opening line: "Don't let your heart be **too** troubled." Be troubled, but don't overdo it. When we get disturbing news. When our world is rocked. When we must confront our own susceptibility to failure, our recurring inability to live up to the ideals we hold dear. When we come face to face with the church's long track record of falling short, of handing out unnecessary hurt, of falling to sin. When we are forced to deal with our much too obvious flaws, do not be too troubled. Be troubled, yes, but not forever. Be troubled by the things that rightfully disturb us, learn from them, take proper action, but don't let our heart stay troubled forever.

In my ministry, I've known people who have decided to leave the circle, withdraw from the church, because they've become too troubled. Someone spoke a hurtful word. The minister did or said something they oppose. Our denomination decided something disturbing. And they became too troubled and they detached themselves; broke from the heart. It hurts. Don't let your heart become too troubled.

Stephen showed its potency. Jesus taught the way; is the way. "Trust in God. Trust also in me." Pisteuo is the Greek word for believe or trust. It's an important word in John's Gospel; he uses the word 98 times in his 21 chapter book. It's a big word. For John, pisteuo, trust or believe, is all about action, movement; it's dynamic. The noun form of the word is never used; it's always verb. Do trust, do believe. Do not let your heart be too troubled. Trust in God. The alternative, which is breaking trust, is troublesome. Breaking trust hurts the heart. It is **not** the way. Do trust.

And then, Jesus, in his final talk, turns to outcomes. Jesus then incentivizes trust in God, and trust in him. There's plenty of room for all of you in my Father's place. I am leaving here to get things ready for you there.

Our imaginations love to get there first. The divine accommodations. Heavenly amenities. Seeing all our loved ones we yearn to be reunited with. Our beloved pets too. Our youthfulness reborn, full health and vitality restored, forever. We know already what heaven is like: we'll be at the top of our game! Jesus stops us right there. Another thing about trusting in God and believing in Jesus. In doing those faithing verbs, we move beyond I, me, myself. Those 98 faithing verbs reinforce that it's time for us to get over ourselves. Trusting in God and Jesus attaches us to a broader, collective heart, able to endure all kinds of trouble. All kinds, with Jesus at the heart.

My Father's house, he says, is the place. And the specifics which Jesus actually gives. The important thing for us to know. The expectation we can hold onto, knowing exactly where we're going. Jesus says, "When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too." And there we have it: no location, no amenities, no menu of delights, no physical condition, no social circles. Heaven is the place. What is it? What's it like? Who all is there? Jesus tells us: "I will take you to – be with me." The ultimate. Paradise. The incentive for trusting. The heavenly reward for believing: "I will come and take you to be with me." The heart is not broken by death. Heaven is to be with Jesus. On earth as it is in heaven.

In my children's message two weeks ago, I made two very pathetic attempts to disguise myself; once with a pair of sunglasses and then with a finger/moustache below my nose. The children easily saw it was me. On our vacation, Robin and I had the privilege of helping out, a couple times, at the 12 Baskets Café, in Asheville, NC, where our son Andy manages a team of volunteers, arranges for rescued food to be picked up, delivered and served, where guests are welcomed and brought food for free at their tables on plates and cups donated by a local potter. Robin and I easily saw Jesus there, there really was no disguise. In the genuine kindness and the shared dignity, in the

attentive caring, in the welcome for all, and in one strong heart that pulsed, with loving connections at its center. Jesus had no disguise. No matter what the storms of life are, no matter how much trouble comes our way, there is a safe harbor where we are all welcome, valued, fed, and loved forever. There is Jesus. On earth as it is in heaven.

May our heart not be troubled.