

Troubled (About the Right Things)

John 14:1-7

Rev. Dan Schumacher

It was the night of the Last Supper. As they entered the apartment where they were told to meet, their host demanded that they let him wash their feet. So they all sort of side-eyed each other while slipping their socks and shoes.

As they took their places at the table, their host started rambling about how he was going to die and where he went they would go also. They couldn't really tell if it was a promise or a threat.

During dinner things got really weird. Judas reached for the same loaf of bread as Jesus and then fled the room as if he'd been demon possessed. In front of God and everybody, Jesus told Peter that before morning he'd deny Jesus three times. You could read Peter's humiliation on his face — cheeks red, biting his lip, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

By that point, the whole room was so anxious that it looked like everyone had ants in their pants — but Jesus just kept on talking about not being troubled. Leave it to Jesus to talk about the one thing nobody wants to talk about...

If you ask me, the Last Supper sounds like the most awkward and uncomfortable dinner party ever recorded.

At the last church I served previously, there was a rather eccentric woman named Adella who one Sunday invited Christen and I and our Senior Pastor, Sterling, and his family over for lunch. When we arrived to her beautiful row home in the historic part of town, she met us at the door with hat and gloves on. She held out her hand to me and said, "A gentleman always kisses a lady's hand." I awkwardly obliged, but as I pulled a cat hair out of my wished she had washed the gloves before arrived.

Once Sterling and his family showed up, she pointed his adolescent children to the overly small table on the porch where they'd be eating. All preteens sitting at a FisherPrice plastic table made for toddlers — they looked like a company of giants sitting at that white and blue table.

Adella then invited only Sterling and I for a walking tour of her house. She was most excited about a portrait of herself in a guest bedroom. She cracked the door, invited us in, and we were greeted by a life-sized portrait of Adella... in the nude... "What do you think? Isn't it glorious?" she asked. "I am literally speechless," I said. "It is a conversation piece..." Sterling added.

On the way back to the dining room, Adella informed us that we would be eating spinach soufflés for lunch. She was vegan, she said, and that's what we'd be eating — no ifs, ands, or buts. By this point, no one had the courage to tell her that vegans don't

eat eggs. As we ate, I about spit my soufflé across the room, when I caught sight of Sterling's wife, Laura, trying to discretely remove a cat hair from her food...

To this day, it was the most awkward dinner party I've ever attended. I bet the Last Supper was worse.

Jesus insisting on taking the position and posture of a servant? Insisting on talking about and acknowledging his own death? Insisting that one of his own would betray him? Insisting that another would deny ever having known him? It's hard to imagine attending a more uncomfortable dinner party.

And then, after all of that, Jesus says to his disciples, "Let not your hearts be *troubled*" (John 14:1).

Even if I was just a fly on the wall of that dinner party, *troubled* is exactly what my heart would have been. So maybe it was the exact word that Jesus' disciples needed to hear. Maybe they needed reassurance. Maybe they needed Jesus' promise of "where I am, there you will be also" (John 14:3).

Surely by the end of that meal, their hearts were troubled — even if they didn't fully understand what Jesus was talking about — so, "let not your hearts be troubled" was exactly what they needed to hear.

But is it what we need to hear?

I don't mean to contradict or stand in opposition to what Jesus said, but it seems to me that one of the major problems of the church in North America today is that it is insufficiently *troubled*.

Brett Younger recalls an Independence Day that he celebrated on Coney Island at the Annual Nathan's Hotdog Eating Competition in 2018. He writes:

"Thousands of us, many wearing wiener hats, gathered to cheer the dogfight for the mustard yellow belt emblematic of frankfurter-eating supremacy. The Brooklyn Community Choir sang because someone thought gospel music would be a helpful addition to the festivities. The announcer, George Shea, is a poet. Here is some of his notable commentary:

'His good cholesterol is low. His bad cholesterol is high. His BMI is borderline presidential.'

'He stands before us like Hercules himself. Albeit a large, bald Hercules at an eating contest.'

Joey Chestnut, the pride of the red, white, and blue, claimed his eleventh title. (Lebron James has only won four NBA titles.) Joey inhaled a staggering seventy-four hot dogs in

ten minutes – a little less than one every eight seconds... he consumed 22,000 calories and 1,332 grams of fat. The carb count stirred the hearts of patriots: 1,776 carbs. That's right – 1776 [and on July 4th, no less]!"

Younger goes on: "I love an extravaganza that makes you never want to eat again as much as the next person, but this festival of belching and burping raises questions. Is overindulgence a feat to be celebrated? Should binging be considered a sport? Should anyone eat seventy-four hotdogs in ten minutes while children starve?"

Younger says that sometimes we cheer for the wrong things. Our society gives itself to wretched excess. Our insatiable appetite leaves us without an appreciation for what is truly good (*Funny When You Think About It*, 149-150).

I suspect that the same problems can and have slipped into the pores of our churches.

Several years ago now, a book came out entitled, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. The book is based on a single verse from 1 Chronicles which reads: "Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.' And God granted his request" (1 Chronicles 4:10).

The book details how to rely on Jabez's single-verse prayer to unlock your true potential; to pray yourself into material wealth; to claim your territory; to be free of illness and pain; to realize your lot in life is not to be poor, but to prosper. *Stop eating cheese and crackers and come to the banquet!*

Never mind promised us material wealth for following him. Never mind that he never promised us a pain free life. Never mind that when a would-be disciple approached Jesus, Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20).

Do you know how many copies of *The Prayer of Jabez* have been sold to date?

Over 20 million copies have been sold world-wide, and it remains the fastest selling book in history.

You may disagree with me, but if the gospel we are buying is *The Prayer of Jabez*, then maybe we are insufficiently *troubled*.

You know, the apostle Thomas has gotten a bad rap. "Doubting Thomas." That's what we've come to call him. But the traditional interpretations of Thomas don't jive with the disciple I meet in scripture.

Thomas shows up in the gospel of John three times.

The first time is right after Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, had fallen ill in Bethany. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had just tried to stone Jesus, so the disciples tried to talk him out of going to Bethany – which was next door to Jerusalem. But Jesus was determined to go, and it was Thomas in that moment who said, "Then let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16).

The traditional interpretation of this passage calls Thomas "fatally pessimistic." What I see when I read it is a disciple who's unwaveringly loyal to Jesus.

The second time is here at the Last Supper. Jesus tells the disciples about his death, then says, "Let not your hearts be troubled."

He goes on, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also."

And then Jesus says this: "And you know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4). I can't help but think that despite Jesus' words, the disciples were *troubled*. And I suspect that Thomas broke the heavy silence that fallen on the room when he said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5).

I doubt Thomas was the only one wondering what in the world Jesus meant, but he was the only one who was willing to admit his lack of understanding and humble enough to ask for clarity. But, again, traditional interpretations have not been kind to Thomas, saying that his question to Jesus was evidence he was "insensitive to Jesus' teachings and unwilling to believe." What I hear is not a man who was insensitive, but one who was deeply concerned that he fully understand Jesus, so that he might be able to follow him.

And, of course, Thomas' final appearance in the gospel of John is just a few days later after the resurrection. Jesus had appeared to the other disciples behind locked doors, but Thomas wasn't there and didn't get to see what they saw. They tried to convince him of the appearance, but he held his ground: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

So often this story gets interpreted as a story about the dangers of doubt and how we will need to have greater faith than Thomas if we're follow Jesus. But, again, I think it's unfair to paint a portrait of Thomas in this light. What Thomas wanted was to encounter the risen Jesus, himself – to have an authentic experience of Jesus, himself, and which one of us wouldn't want that?

Frederick Buechner said it like this: "Even though [Jesus] said the greater blessing is for those who can believe without seeing, it's hard to imagine that there's a believer anywhere who wouldn't have traded places with Thomas, given the chance, and seen

that face and heard that voice and touched those ruined hands” (originally published in *Peculiar Treasures*).

Time and again in scripture, Thomas is *troubled*. But the thing is, he always seems to be troubled by the right things – because he’s troubled by the things that trouble Jesus.

You see, only disciples who have faced the evil and pain and suffering in life can really know the power of the Lord who says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Some things ought to *trouble* us.

In the little German town of Dachau in World War II, there was a Nazi death camp. It is now a museum to the holocaust, and in that museum there is a photograph. It is a photograph of mother and her daughter being marched to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. There is nothing the mother can do to stop it, absolutely nothing, and so she commits the only act of love that is left to her. She walks behind her daughter and she puts her hand in front of her eyes, so her daughter will not have to see where they are going.

Some things ought to *trouble* us. And when they do, we ought to be moved to pray – and our prayer ought to sound like this: “O God, do not let that be the last word.”

Tom Long, tells this story:

“When we moved back to Atlanta several years ago, we were looking for a church to join and we decided that we would join a church downtown that had a marvelous ministry to the city and a good program. The pastor of the church invited all of us who were going to be joining the church to meet with the officers of the church on a Wednesday night for dinner. So, we came – we were in the Fellowship Hall seated at a big square table, all of us joining and all of the officers.

And at one point in the evening, the pastor asked us to go around the table and for each of us to say why it was that we were joining this church. Well, you heard the usual things that you hear:

‘Well this church has a marvelous music program... I’m a soprano, and I hope to be in the choir.’

‘We have a couple of teenagers, and this church has a great youth program.’

‘I didn’t like the minister at the church I was at, and I like the minister here.’

Until it got around to Marshall... Marshall’s story was that he had stumbled into the church high on crack cocaine. He had come into the outreach center and had begged for help. The head of the outreach center had said to him, ‘I am sorry. I am out of money this month. I can’t get you into a treatment program until next month. But if you stay

with me, I will stay with you.' And she reached out and took his hands and they knelt on the floor in her office and they prayed. He stayed and they got him some help.

Marshall said, 'I've been sober for three years. I'm joining this church because God saved me in this church.'"

Long says, "We all looked at each other sheepishly. We were there for the parking. He was there for the salvation" (a sermon entitled "Troubled?", May 22, 2006).

You see what I mean?

Maybe we're hard on ol' Thomas, because we are aren't sufficiently *troubled* by Jesus. Maybe what we need is to let our hearts be troubled a little more, so that we can remember that our church isn't supposed to be about prosperity or the prayer of Jabez or the parking, but about salvation.

Thank God for Thomas, because through his life we are reminded that to be the Church we must be *troubled* by the things that *trouble* Jesus.

Amen.