

Scripture John 14:23-29 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

²³ Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe.

How many of you have been part of sad goodbyes? Perhaps it was because of an adult child leaving home. Perhaps it was because a visitor was leaving, or perhaps it was because you were getting ready to leave after visiting someone. Perhaps it was because of the death of a family member or friend. Regardless of the situation, sometimes goodbyes are not easy.

At first glance, this morning’s scripture reading seems completely out of place. We are more than a month past Easter and nearing Pentecost, yet today’s reading slings us back to the Last Supper.

In your mind, can you picture the scene? Jesus and his disciples have gathered in a private room for a meal. I suspect there is friendly banter and laughter because they have formed tight bonds during their adventures together. Peter is the butt of a joke about being hardheaded. Thomas is taking a ribbing for always being so skeptical.

But, as they are savoring the morsels of food and relishing glasses of wine, Jesus feels a suffocating darkness rolling over him. He finally shatters the festive atmosphere, blurting out words that send a chill through the room: soon – very soon – he will be snatched away from them.

The disciples’ anxiety erupts. How can they survive without him? Jesus has completely

- reshaped their lives.
- filled them with joy
- given them a purpose
- bolstered their expectations.

All of that will vanish if he leaves them. “No!” the disciples protest. They cannot bear the thought of being without him...

- Feeling fear and anxiety that can accompany the loss of a loved one
- Following up with the distress that hits with a dreaded diagnosis
- Not looking forward to the sleepless nights triggered by insecurity
- Or the helpless feeling of watching a loved one on a downward spiral

To his followers, both then and now, Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” To which many of us reply, “Jesus, you must be joking. We don’t choose anxiety and if we could simply flip the switch on our fears, we would do it in a heartbeat.”

When Jesus announced to his disciples that this would be his final meal with them, he could likely see their eyes grow wide with panic. He knew that his death would traumatize them, and they would face a crisis of faith. He was saying everything he could to reassure them that they could survive this time because they would not be alone. Jesus said, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

Jesus promised that they would have God’s Spirit with them always. Our passage is merely a snippet of a long farewell speech Jesus delivers during their final meal together. He tells them they will have God’s Spirit with them, but he does not imply that this is a protective shield that 1 of 3 will guard them from harm. He even warns them that their connection to him may lead to their own persecution.

Thus, when Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” he is not promising that nothing terrible will befall them. Instead, he is telling us something that sounds counterintuitive – that

- We can experience peace, despite trials.
- We can experience peace despite the daunting future we face.

The peace we experience when God’s Spirit fills us is not free of turmoil. God’s peace does not produce some sort of idyllic state of immunity from troubles. We wish it did, but we live in an imperfect world. There are hostile forces, and we are fragile creatures. Because there is freedom, God does not wipe away poor decisions we make or the bad decisions of others that take a toll on us. No one is exempt from accidents, illness and death. It seems more likely that anxiety is inevitable, and peace is elusive at best.

When we lose a loved one, the transformation of all of our lives goes with them. We are never the same. How could we be? We cannot hold the hand of our loved one, we cannot call them on the phone or what we would give to hear them laugh one more time. We question what life is about, we question what happens after death or if we showed enough love. We may have left things unsaid or never gotten the apology we longed for. We are sad, even if it was their time. We might feel guilty for not taking time with them, leaving us feeling less than who we could have been.

However, the one thing that can help us from feeling guilty that our faith is not strong enough is to keep in mind that the disciples did not march out of that upper room courageous and anxiety-free. The words did not take root in them instantly. When Jesus was tortured and executed, they ran. The author of John points out that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors, terrified that the authorities would come for them next.

So then, how do we understand this peace Jesus gives?

- It is an inward calm despite outward storms.
- It is not entirely worry free, but it is a feeling of confidence that we are in harmony with God and God will see us through whatever comes.
- It is the peace Jesus gives – not faith in terms of believing certain tenets, but faith in terms of trust – trusting God is with us and ultimately trusting God's guidance.

I compare this to describing one of my favorite catalogues. This particular one sells...

- Items made from recycled materials.
- Bookshelves made from old railroad ties.
- Doormats created from the left-over material from making rubber flip-flops.
- Oriental style rugs made from recycled plastic bottles.
- Aluminum wastebasket made from cans that came out with imperfect company logos and were tossed on the trash heap.

This is what God is in the business of doing – reclaiming tattered pieces of our lives and transforming us into something new – something we never would have imagined.

I have known people whose lives came crashing down when they lost their job, but in time, they landed in another field that gave them more satisfaction than ever before. I have known people who were devastated after the person they loved died unexpectedly, but over time, they were able to laugh and enjoy life again.

So, Like the disciples' hearing Jesus' farewell...

- When you fear what is coming, faith is trusting that God will infuse you with courage.
- When you feel too devastated to continue living, faith is trusting that God will strengthen your resolve to carry on.
- When sadness fills your soul, faith is trusting that God will help you feel joy once again.
- When you feel total despair about the future, faith is trusting that God will open doors you never imagined.

Trusting God does not vanquish the hardships of life; it prevents the suffering from defining us or destroying us.

Another colleague shared something they once read: “The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.”

Whoever wrote that was playing with us a bit, because we know that mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there is another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, 'This is crazy! I'm heading home.'

Friends, the life of faith can be like that – doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of trusting God seems far-fetched. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that, perhaps not knowing if they were coming or going. So, he told them God's Spirit would be with them.

Bitter winds can blow our way, but we can face them with courage and determination because we are not alone. In the community of faith, we have the support of our fellow climbers and the unwavering presence of God. We may be like the anxious disciples in the upper room or the frightened disciples behind locked doors, but we can also be like the bold

disciples who stand next to the empty tomb, not knowing whether we are coming or going, but knowing that whatever goes on, we will be supported by Love that comes our way. Amen!