

Sermon for Easter 5(A)
April 20, 2008
Christ Church, Andover
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Gospel: John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Yeah, right! Clearly, Jesus didn’t live in the 21st century! Hasn’t he heard about the economic slowdown? Hasn’t he heard about the war in Iraq, or the upcoming election? How about the sub-prime lending mess and the housing crisis? It’s hard to know how to live with untroubled hearts today.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” That’s easy for you to say, Jesus – sitting where you’re sitting. The world looks beautiful from there, doesn’t it – like a blue and white jewel on black velvet. But the world looks different from here. We see crumbling infrastructure, a deteriorating ecosystem, and poverty on a massive scale throughout the world. And you say, ‘do not let your hearts be troubled?’

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Nice pious language, something good for us all to strive for, sure; but meanwhile, I’m sitting here at my desk trying to make my income stretch to pay all these bills. I’m dealing with raising kids, getting them to baseball practice and dance lessons and choir rehearsal. I’m staying up all night to get my income taxes done last Monday night (!), then fighting traffic into Boston at 6 am, and you’re telling me not to let my heart be troubled?!

That’s what Jesus said. As I’m sure you know, most of the New Testament was originally written in Greek; and the word that is translated here as “troubled” is *tarasso* – and it means, literally, disturbed or anxious. When Jesus said, “do not let your hearts be troubled,” he was really saying, “don’t be anxious.” That’s something he said in another place, too – in the Sermon on the Mount – when he said, “do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or drink, or what you will wear... Can any of you, by being anxious, add one hour to your life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they neither toil nor spin, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” (Matthew 6)

Anxiety, of course, takes many forms, and when it meets certain criteria it’s even considered an illness (a mental illness) – and certainly people who have diagnosed cases of this disorder should be treated by the appropriate mental health professionals. But there is a sense in which our society, and perhaps even our whole world, suffers from a kind of generalized anxiety. And if that’s the case, it’s no wonder, then, that it filters down through everything else, and we often feel it at a very personal level, too.

Anxiety includes feelings that we typically recognize as fear, apprehension, or worry. Sound familiar? But it’s not just about paying the bills or getting through the traffic to work. Anxiety actually starts with a much more pervasive and (I would say) a more subversive

disorder in society; and this is where we have more in common with Jesus' day than our modern lifestyles and our anxieties about the traffic into Boston would suggest.

It all starts with what Jesus often called "the world" – which corresponds roughly to what contemporary thinkers are beginning to call "the phenomenon of empire." And just what do we mean by such a term? Empire is a mindset as much as anything, and it has to do with the presumption that domination and power (of one entity over another) are facts of life. Remember how in junior high school, you just got used to the fact that so-and-so was a bully, and you were just going to have to get used to it? So you devised strategies for dealing with it: you either learned to submit, avoid or appease the bully – OR, you became an ally in order to survive – OR, you became a bully yourself in order to compete. Empire is both a metaphor and the concrete reality of a world in which power is something that is exercised "over" rather than used in harmony with and for the benefit of all. It relies excessively on militarism and the use of violence to bring about and maintain order in the world. In Jesus' time it was the powerful Roman empire, and yes, that was a part of the reality in which Jesus lived and to which he was always speaking. Today it is, of course, our own United States that increasingly fits that description.

Anxiety is both a product of – and a tool of – empire, resulting from the violence, both passive and active, that is required when domination is the goal; violence that serves the need to keep enemies guessing, but also keeps its own people faithfully in its service as well. "Code oranges" and "code reds" keep us on edge, anxious, and make us willing to support the continuing build-up and maintenance of arsenals that can destroy the entire earth hundreds of times over. They keep us "sheep-like" and willing to go along with unjustified and unjustifiable wars. It all leads to an orgy of irrational dependence on militarism that fuels our economy and creates its own self-perpetuating need and justification for war and violence. Our material excesses have to do not only with weapons, of course, but with the stuff we're told we need to buy more of in order to keep our economy and our standard of living growing, even while much of the world languishes in poverty and increasing resentment; while these same excesses pollute our environment and degrade the very earth with which we were created to live in harmony. And it is that same perceived need for more "stuff" that keeps so many people in debt, anxious about paying the bills, anxious about living up to the lifestyle we're told we are entitled to live.

Anxiety is very much what it was in Jesus' day – not only a tool of empire, but the sort of ground on which empire is built and maintained – at the expense of any true sense of human community – what Jesus called "the Kingdom of God" (in contrast to the kingdoms of this world); what Martin Luther King just forty years ago called "the beloved community;" and what we might call by many other names that recognize the world God truly intends for us to build.

So when Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled (or anxious)," he was not playing the role of an advice-giving, self-help guru, TV pop-psychologist. He knew that such advice, or breathing exercises, or any of the other techniques we might use to reduce stress in our lives, would serve only to put a band-aid on a cancer. Instead he was talking about a whole other way of being, another way of being in community on this planet Earth – a counter-narrative to the narrative of empire, in which the assumption of empire, force, and domination is removed, and instead, we live with a new set of assumptions. "Believe in God," he says –

not in Caesar. “Believe also in me” – for I have come to show another way, a way that is not based in violence or in “power over”; but in mutual love, sacrifice, service to others, respect for differences, building community across boundaries, and finally living in love with your neighbor – who is the whole human family and the whole of creation.

He spoke these words in his final days with the disciples, to reinforce so much of the teaching he had given them. But still, they were slow to learn. When he said to them, “you know the way to the place where I am going,” Thomas said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” And then Jesus said, “I *am* the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Now some, of course, have done incredible violence to this passage by suggesting that Jesus was setting up divisions and creating an exclusive path to salvation that privileges Christianity over other religions. That kind of reading not only violates the spirit of all the rest of Jesus’ teachings, but also sets up the very kind of “us versus them” world out of which the impulse to empire and violence arises. Why can’t we simply read it as Jesus surely intended it, to say that “the way to this place, this way of being, that I have shown you is through the teachings I have given you. You might manage to appease or somehow live in a world with Caesar or other false gods, but you won’t get to the God who created the world and desires that you live in love and harmony with one another, except through these lessons that I have taught you.”

There’s a lot more to talk about in this passage, but I’m afraid it will have to wait for another time. But let’s hear again those first words from this part of Jesus’ final discourse: “Do not let your hearts be anxious.”

Perhaps the first step in our “recovery” (if you will) from our addiction to power, violence, domination, and the mindset of empire, is to no longer let it determine our own thinking about relationships, or even of the kind of world we think is possible on a larger scale. Power is not the defining category in relationships – love is. Domination is not a goal any more worthy of pursuing than hoping to be the number one bully in the schoolyard – justice and love and the well-being of all people is the goal, and it’s a goal that cannot be achieved through violence.

You and I cannot change the whole world’s thinking overnight, but we can begin to change our own. And when we begin to think in terms of and to assume a lifestyle defined by mutual love and service, we will feel less anxiety in our own lives. And let’s remember that the only answer to anxiety in ourselves and in our world is finally for us to begin to live not just for ourselves, but, as Jesus taught us in word and example, for each other.

Dr. Karl Menninger was a noted psychiatrist in the 20th century. At a question-answer session after a lecture, someone asked Dr. Menninger what a person should do if he felt anxiety, or what they called in that time a “nervous breakdown” coming on. Listen to Dr. Menninger’s answer. He said that if we feel [anxiety] coming on, we should: “Lock up (our) house, go across the railroad tracks, and find someone in need and do something for him.”

That’s the way, the truth, and the life. There’s no other way to the life God offers us.