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ANYTHING

John 14:1-14

May 10, 2020

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Perhaps nowhere else in all of Scripture do we have two more-contrasting chapters that must have made the disciples head spin.

In Chapter 13, while gathered in the Upper Room, Jesus informs the disciples that he will be betrayed by one of them, that Peter will deny him, that he is leaving them, and finally that he will be “glorified”, code word for “killed”. After this disturbing news, Chapter 14 begins with Jesus telling them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The word for troubled means agitated or stirred up, literally to be shaken back and forth. Of course, troubled is precisely the correct emotion after the dreadful news that Jesus has just shared with them.

This is akin to a doctor informing you that a loved one has just been diagnosed with cancer and that they will die, but then in the next sentence saying, “Don’t worry. Don’t be troubled.”

Jesus has given them news that everything they have hoped for is coming to an end.

The amazing rush at being with this miracle worker... no more;
their sense of purpose through following him... evaporated;
their yearning for equality and justice... vanished
their hope for freedom... gone;
their desire for a new world... dashed.

They had put so much of themselves into following him: they gave up their livelihood; they left their families; they risked their lives. And now it seems that they have sided with a “loser.” They might have felt worse off than if they had never met him. The culmination of their efforts will be pain, loss, emptiness, death, nothing.

Have you ever hoped so desperately, so seriously, invested all of your will, your money, your time into something only to have it come to

nothing? Certainly, you felt troubled, worried agitated.

Perhaps it is only Jesus who can make this dramatic shift in tone and information and not appear utterly callous and disingenuous. As Jesus continues, he truly does give them news that can lessen their anxieties, although it certainly increases their confusion.

He tells them his Father’s Place is wondrous, that he has room for everyone, and that he will return to bring them there.

The disciples are so jumbled by these contrasting messages from Jesus they say, “We don’t know where you’re going, how can we follow you?” “Show us this ‘father’ you’re talking about and then we will believe you.”

At this point, I can picture Jesus scanning the room, looking each of them in their eyes while saying, “If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.” This is meant as a supreme gift from Jesus – when times get hard: after he has left them but before he returns. He expects them to lean upon this promise.

This particular promise from Jesus has lodged in the minds and hearts of thousands, millions, billions (?) of believers and non-believers alike. Those without faith love to say, “Jesus, I want a million dollars!” and when they aren’t rewarded, they claim it is proof that there is no God. We know that faith is never that simple and that God is not some magic, lottery-number-winning Genie waiting in a lamp to grant our hearts’ desire.

On the other side of the belief spectrum there are those followers of Christ who do take this literally and believe it with all their heart. Unfortunately, this is perhaps just as problematic an approach as the atheists. For when they don’t receive their hearts’ desire, they assume it’s a

result of their lack of faith, terrible guilt ensues which becomes a key point of leverage for scores of charismatic frauds who prey upon those desperate for belonging, who use this presumed failure of faith to bend them to their wicked thirst for power and corruption... Jim Jones, David Koresh, and more. The list goes on.

But there is a third temptation, that is just as problematic, and unfaithful, as the first two. And it is perhaps the place where most of us fall. We choose to ignore this promise.

We choose to ignore this clear offer of supreme grace that Christ has given us. Without realizing it, we assume Jesus was overpromising his disciples to make them feel better.

Like the parent who mistakenly tells their five-year-old child you can have any flavor of ice cream you want... but you can't really, because Baskin-Robbins is all out of bubble gum ice cream!? This child was left deflated and scarred for life... Not truly but there is a change isn't there? The child is not quite as willing to believe the parents' grandiose promises.

I remember when Liz was little. Our bedtime ritual would last a least forty-five minutes. I would read her a book. Then Wendy would read a book. Then we would bring her a snack. Then she would want us to lie down with her. After a while I would get horribly restless and try to tip toe out. "Daddy, where are you going?" At this point I tried the parent trick. "I will be back in two minutes. I promise."

Of course, I wouldn't come back after two minutes. She caught on to this false promise. Which both made it harder to tip toe out the next time and less likely for her to believe other parent "guarantees" in the future.

(Once Matthew came into the picture, we took a much more straightforward approach. One story, we were out of the room, no matter what.)

I am afraid that, in some ways, we have become like children that are too afraid to trust in Jesus' words and make bold requests in his name.

Before we progress any further in this exploration, we would benefit from a closer look at the passage.

First, Jesus wasn't promising "anything" but rather things related to the works he had been doing. In the preceding verse Jesus says, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact will do works greater than these..." Jesus is promising that he will empower the disciples to continue his ministry after he has gone. In other words, despite what it may feel like, his ministry is not coming to an end, rather it will continue through them.

Secondly, Jesus was promising this to the disciples. Not to us. He also gave them the power of exorcism and healing, none of which we would lay claim today for ourselves.

This leaves us with some interpretive work. We have the contingent word of Christ, his promise to the disciples, not to us, of profound empowerment. But, like all of scripture, there is an abiding word passed down through the generations for our lives today – and that promise is made clear in John's first letter.

Over the course of several decades, we notice that John tweaked this promise made for the disciples to one for all of us. For the disciples, Christ promised anything, for us, that he will *hear us*. In John's first epistle we read,

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his name he hears us.
(1 John 5:14)

The promise is that God is always listening and that prayers never fall on deaf ears. It is not a promise about what God will do, only that God is carefully paying attention. But I don't think the fact that "anything" is not available to us serves as an excuse not pray to God, with a courageous spirit, for bold acts and wonders.

We should be praying with childlike belief that God will heal the sick,
that God will bring forth a cure through our medical world,
that God will use this time to heal our fractured nation and world,
and that Jesus will use us as he used the disciples to make the world over into the Kingdom of God.

Such bold prayers and bold requests demonstrate that we actually believe in a God of action, of intervention, and of presence; that God is the same today as God was yesterday and will be tomorrow! There is no reason that God cannot do these things, right now, for us and for our world.

Our prayers in this time should not be timid or meek, but boldly calling for what we know to be God's will:

Healing and love for all.

Granted, this seem horribly bold. It risks the same ice-cream-like disappointment so many have suffered from. And even more, we may not feel up to trying to spur an infinite God to action. After all, God will choose to act with or without my prayer. Right?

Granted, we may never understand how our prayers, how my little prayers, influence an infinitely wise and loving God to act and change the world.

But still we do so.

We do so

because many people of faith

much wiser

and faithful

than me

have made these bold prayers

since the dawn of humanity.

We do so because, despite what seems reasonable or possible as James tells us, the prayers of the faithful do avail much. Even Benjamin Franklin, in his unusual faith, had this to say,

Gentlemen, I have lived a long time and am convinced that God governs in the affairs of

men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? I move that prayer imploring the assistance of Heaven be held every morning before we proceed to business.

Franklin believed we should not timidly ask but implore! Such bold prayers reflect the bold faith that scripture calls for, sometimes bordering on presumptuousness, like the request of the great heroes of the faith:

Jacob who wrestled with God... and demanded a blessing;

Abraham who tried to save Sodom... and successfully bartered a better deal;

Moses who whined about hard work... and convinced God to bring more help; and

Mother Mary wanting the celebration to continue.... insisted!

On this Mother's Day, it is the example of the mother of our Lord who proves the boldest. She doesn't ask or plead but, like mothers do so very well, simply instructs her son, assuming he will obey, "Get more wine, son. Keep the celebration going!" This miracle of Jesus turns out to be the beginning of Jesus' ministry, of Jesus' miracles.

Perhaps, in some way beyond our knowing, your prayer, my prayer, our prayers, the prayers of others all boldly sent to heaven might be the spark, the beginning of something new. Proverbs tells us the righteous are as bold as a lion. Let us pray to God for the healing of the word with the boldness of a lion, or rather a lioness – like Mother Mary – who set the spark that changed the world.