

John 13: 21-32

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.'

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Troubled in Spirit

Why was Jesus “troubled in spirit?”

Jesus, one of the most centered people the world has ever known, acknowledged to be that by people of all faiths and none? Jesus, whom Christians see as the example of one grounded in prayer, whose life was lived as seamlessly with God as a vine lives in its soil? Jesus, aware in a deep and profound way -- a way many of us yearn to glimpse ourselves -- that there is a God of Eternity who will ultimately prevail? Jesus -- convinced to his core that God will -- in the words he uses at the end of this passage -- ultimately be “glorified”? Jesus, who trusts that God is powerful enough to shine through radiantly in a universe that can seem dark as night?

This Jesus who knew God so thoroughly, trusted God's promises so fully, had the strength to live the way he lived because he had no doubts of God's goodness and constant presence....Why was *this* Jesus -- of all people -- “troubled in spirit?”

Of course the disciples might be called “uncertain.” But Jesus “troubled in spirit”? It seems a bleak appraisal of a man convinced God will be glorified in the end.

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We could choose the easy answer. Jesus was a human, and how would any of us feel when we know we are about to die? When we know that our dearest friends will betray us? When we know that the life we have loved will be brutally cut short – for no good reason – such a waste!

Any of us in this situation would be troubled in spirit. Maybe it's how you're feeling today – a troubled spirit because of all that's going wrong, all the pain you suffer, what seems like the sheer futility of your efforts. What a waste.

All these are very good reasons to be troubled in the spirit. I think this is part of the answer. I am one who believes that Jesus, the human man that he was, treasured his life, loved it passionately. He relished the delight of being with friends, sharing a meal and telling stories. He loved walking the fields and hillsides over the sea, admiring with astonishment the smallest sparrows – how their feathers overlap in a miraculous pattern, how they can be airborne in an instant.

I've never thought – as some suggest – that Jesus *wanted* to die, that he found life here a thing to be easily set aside -- a non-thinking sheep led dumbly to the slaughter. It doesn't make sense that Jesus effortlessly faced his friends betraying him and dying on a cross. That view makes him more of a robot than a human. That view -- of Jesus as robot to God, accepting death with no flicker of regret – slashes a deep chasm between him and the rest of us humans. It demeans the value of this precious life. Jesus did *not* want to die so young, I am convinced.

But still, these things that we can imagine so well - that would cause any of us to be “troubled in spirit” - these things still all revolve around Jesus being “troubled” because of what *he* would lose and why: that he would die, that he would be betrayed by a friend – like the stomp of a boot in one's face – that he was losing something precious for himself.

Yes, if Jesus were focused first and foremost on himself, on what he was going to have to give up, what he was going to have unfairly stripped from him, on what he justifiably could rail against, then there is a long list of what could have made him, at this moment, “troubled in spirit.” It's a no-brainer.

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But oh my friends – the profound power of this story is not simply that Jesus was fully human like us, that he fully suffered in the way any of us do, though that is an important lesson.

No. What is most astonishing about this story today, is that what “troubled Jesus most in his spirit” had nothing to do with himself. It had everything to do with Judas. Jesus was worried and troubled in his spirit for this man, Judas.

Jesus is troubled in his spirit because he is wracking his mind: what more can I say? Is there anything more I can do for Judas? Time is so short.

It's not that Jesus wants to keep Judas from betraying him because that will save *Jesus'* own neck. It's because Jesus wants to get through to Judas, in order to save *Judas'* own neck. To save him from the horror which Judas does ultimately come to, when he wakes up to what he has done. Jesus loves Judas through and through to the very end, and will keep trying to reach him.

What does Love do when it is troubled in spirit about another? Love never stops reaching out and trying to connect, in love.

In the passage right before this one today, Jesus drops to his knees and washes the feet of all the disciples, including Judas. Though he is their master and their teacher, to be honored and respected, he acts as their slave. He renames them "friends."

And then in today's passage, he does the most loving thing of all: Jesus is honest; Jesus feeds Judas; Jesus understands Judas completely; Jesus gives Judas free will; and then Jesus lets Judas go, not blocking his way.

That's a profound love. A love that will not force itself on us. A love that will not berate us or make us do something from guilt. A love that keeps offering itself to us, but never compels us.

Jesus is honest. Jesus says out loud, One of you will betray me. There is no hidden agenda. When Jesus is asked who the betrayer is, Jesus honestly identifies Judas. God's love is honest with us.

It knows us through and through. It doesn't need us to pretty up our feelings, to pretend we aren't disappointed or angry or fearful of God, all things Judas was undoubtedly feeling about Jesus – a man he thought was going to a great liberator Messiah, or at least a far different leader that he turned out to be.

God's love is honest. It will work with whoever we are. However misguided we may be, whatever we're feeling, whatever we've done or left undone.

Love doesn't not berate or punish or shame - although all those avenues were open to Jesus. William Barclay, a New Testament scholar, convinces me that Jesus likely was talking quietly to Judas, directly to him, because if the other disciples had fully grasped what Judas was up to, they would not have let Judas leave the room alive. Jesus was honest with Judas, but must not have spoken to Judas in hot anger, or with a raised voice. Jesus did not speak to him in a way that publicly humiliates Judas, but in way that give Judas another chance to change his mind.

Barclay even suggests that the "beloved disciple," the one who was invited to sit right next to Jesus at the Last Supper that Passover night, in the place of honor next

to Jesus, was Judas himself, so that Jesus can talk quietly with him one more time. Barclay explains that the custom was to sit on the floor, at a low table, "reclining," as the passage says, lounging on their left arms, so that their right hands were free to eat. Judas himself would have his own head nearly resting close to Jesus' breast, so close that Jesus could dip a piece of bread in the cup and feed it to Judas, as we are fed with communion. That gesture – of hand feeding another – is a gesture of honor and intimacy in the Middle East – --getting a choice morsel from the host himself, like offering a taste of your delicious meal to your spouse across the table.

And then, in the end, Jesus understood Judas perhaps better than Judas understood himself. Jesus knew that Judas had convinced himself of what Judas must do. So finally, Jesus let him go. Jesus gave him – as he gives us – the wonderful, terrible gift of freedom. Jesus will never force our love.

What troubled the spirit of Jesus? That Love had not reached Judas, though Jesus tried until the end.

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As a teenager, one night, because of some issue long forgotten, I was outraged at my mother and full of fury. I stand in our upstairs hall, a long, straight corridor, and my mother is coming up the stairs as I am yelling. When she comes into my view I scream at her – the one who gave me birth – and I say, "I hate you! I hate you!" Her face is pale, she looks very tired and pained. Her answer is quiet. Looking into my face she says, "I know you do. And I still love you."

That is the power of Love. That is the action of a Love that was "troubled in spirit", not for herself, and the shameful way I was treating her, but was troubled for me, and would not stop reaching out in love.

We may be uncertain, like the disciples were, but God is not. God's love endures forever. It will let us question and quarrel, doubt and even depart, but it will not end.