

**“Moved by Pain”**  
**John 12:20-33**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**March 29, 2009**

There is a troubling in Jesus’ soul. A heightened anxiety, worry, a concern. One that’s easy to overlook. It’s easy to overlook because Jesus isn’t supposed to get worried; he’s not supposed to feel anxiety – he’s above all that. Jesus is supposed to be in control, commanding, preaching, healing, resisting, breaking with tradition and custom and sometimes law. Jesus is supposed to confidently tell us of the way God is, the way the world will be. He is supposed to be the steady hand, the one who carries us when we are too weary to walk. It’s easy to overlook the troubling in his soul because nothing is supposed to trouble Jesus.

It’s easy to overlook because that troubling, that worry, that discomfort, is bracketed by so much confidence. On one side of the bracket, he seems to say, “do not worry about death, it will lead to life, just as a grain falls into the earth and bears a much fruit.” Don’t cling tightly to your life, to your things, to your self-image, to whatever it is that seems important – only by trusting God with what is most precious will you preserve what you love. Do not worry about your position or status – the only thing that’s important is how well you serve God by serving me. God will honor everyone who follows me. Do not worry, do not worry, do not worry. Trust, trust, trust.

On the other side of that bracket, he seems to say, “I’m about to suffer and die but that’s not the end for me or for you. God will work new life out of my ending. Do not worry, do not worry, do not worry. Trust, trust, trust.

Bracketed by so much confidence it’s tempting to overlook that Jesus is troubled. John seems eager to overlook it, too. More than the other three gospels, John has all but deleted any sense of Jesus’ hesitancy. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all have Jesus asking God to remove the burden of the cross from him. But not John. John’s Jesus is so much a part of God that there are few hints of inner conflict, indecision, or pulling away from the cross. We don’t want to give Jesus permission to be troubled.

Maybe it’s hard to give him that permission because we’re wary of following anyone who gives a hint of insecurity, of indecision, of uncertainty about the path he has confidently told other they should walk. Jesus is supposed to be the one who has thinks God’s thoughts, who walks God’s ways, 24/7. He’s supposed to be perfect. And perfect means no insecurity, no indecision, no uncertainty, no troubling in his soul.

Yet with all of John’s liberal editing, deleting his plea to God to remove this cup of suffering, deleting his cries of anguish, deleting his cry to God, why have you forsaken me?; with all of that editing, even John can’t bring himself to blot out that last bit of troubling in Jesus soul. The verse stays in. And as much as I often want Jesus to be the strong arm that I am not, the consistently courageous human being that I am not, the rock who isn’t moved by anything,

still I'm glad to know of his troubling. Because that is where I often find myself standing in this life:

worried over how I am ever going to put away enough for retirement, and pay for my kids' education, and fix the roof, or the plumbing, and pay for the car, and the dentist bills, and insurance, and honor the financial gift that my family pledged to the church;

worried over how I am going to give my life over for the sake of a hurting world and make sure my marriage or my kids or my job or my future doesn't suffer as a result;

worried over whether my children will look both ways before crossing the street on the few critical times when it matters;

worried over my parents' health or my children's happiness or the choices they have or will make;

worried over whether I'm living my life in a way that makes a difference.

That's where I stand most of my life – buttressed and bracketed, yes, by strong affirmations of a God who is faithful, who will not forsake, who works life out of death, who works triumph out of defeat, who makes sure that those who choose a life of service over greed will have what they're after; yet still troubled – troubled by just how much that kind of faithful, selfless, meaningful life will cost me. That's where I stand most of my life. Bracketed by affirmations of God's faithfulness yet still troubled in my soul.

It helps to know that the one whose faith seems so immovable, still knows the troubling that we know. The one who stands bracketed by affirmations about God's faithfulness, provision, and assurance still is able to openly wonder whether that faithfulness is true in light of his own experience. "What should I say," Jesus asks, "God, save me from this hour?"

What should I say – "I don't want to serve others when so many in the world are only interested in grabbing what they can get?" "I don't want to wait for redemption when a few privileged folks seem to be snatching it for themselves?" What should I say – God save me from this hour, from this kind of costly living?

Jesus may answer the question with a confident no, but the question still lingers, the possibility that God will not make good on the promises is still there.

And I'm grateful that it does linger because this is where most of us stand in faith – especially in these uncertain times - bracketed by affirmations about God's faithfulness to us and to our world. God's promise that there is enough food to feed the hungry, enough cloth to clothe the naked, enough riches to bring good news to the poor. God's assurance that I really can live a life of generosity and neighborliness instead of working frantically to protect myself.

Yet questioning in times of challenge whether that faithfulness is there for us, whether that provision will be there for us, whether there will be enough to meet the needs that we are facing. Questioning whether there will be enough for us to retire and still share with those who are hurting; whether there will be enough to last for those of us already retired and make way for the newest generations coming along. Questioning how we will pay for college for our children, keep shoes on their feet and clothes on their back and make sure every child has the same. Questioning whether our parents will be able to keep their home along with the neighbors next door.

In the midst of those questions, those uncertainties, Jesus gives us permission to voice them. Should I run away from God's claims about how there will be enough to go around?

Should I give up on God's claims that I don't need always to scramble to try to preserve my own life, my own security, my own future? Should I disown those claims when they don't seem to be reliable? Will God's provision be enough to sustain me in this crisis in this time? Jesus gives us the permission to voice those questions. They are the same questions that he's faced.

Jesus voices his private pain in the presence of his disciples, in the presence of his community. And it's striking what happens when Jesus voices his own personal pain. He doesn't just feel better for taking a load off his mind, for getting his angst out of system. This isn't first century group therapy. Jesus voices his question and God responds. A voice came from heaven – an answer to Jesus' plea, an answer to his pain. It is an answer that promises a way forward out of angst, out of indecision, out of powerlessness.

I was thinking about that yesterday in relationship to our meeting on the economy today after church. It's not clear what a church like ours in Baltimore can do about real wages that have been declining for most of us for decades while wages for the richest have skyrocketed. It's not clear what we can do about an ideology of every person for herself that stands against an ethic of community. It's not clear what we can do about foundational myth that business always does things better, that government is always inept at everything. It's not clear what we can do about manufacturing jobs that have disappeared, replaced with service work or with nothing, a shift that leaves our city stuck in poverty.

I was thinking about all of that yesterday while sitting in a presbytery meeting, feeling the weight of powerlessness. And then I saw a resolution that a single person had drafted supporting students and faculty and parents at Towson High School. Some of you know that Westboro Baptist Church is coming to town tomorrow – they're coming to harass students at Towson High School with signs that say "God Hates Homosexuals"; And the resolution passed the presbytery unanimously. And I marveled at how the church had come to a place where 30 years ago the church would have kept its mouth quiet. And I remembered the story of David Sindt who silently held up a sign at the gathering of the national church body in 1974; a sign that read, "Is anyone else out there gay?" That was the beginning of the More Light movement in the Presbyterian church. One human being, voicing public pain that was heard by God and led to action by a people who were hungry for it.

And just like the crowd around Jesus, many are still confused by this. Some thought the voice of God was thunder. Others, an angel. For all we know the disciples are confused by it, too. They don't understand how the voicing of private pain can prompt a holy response. Pain is something to be managed, contained, hidden, controlled, denied. But I don't think Jesus was surprised. No rabbi would have been surprised, because this is the pattern of biblical faith. God always responds when a people cry out, when they voice their private pain. The Israelites cry out under slavery and God makes a way for them to break out of Egypt's economy of oppression. The people cry out for food in the desert and God brings them bread. The sick cry out to Jesus for healing, and he brings them back into community. God is a magnet for the cries of human suffering. Anytime people lift up their pain, their worries, their petition to God, they get a divine hearing.

A hearing that leads them out of indecision, out of angst, out of uncertainty and into action. So I don't know what's next in this brutal economy of every person for himself. I don't know what the right agenda is, or what exactly the church ought to say or do in the midst of an economy that affects everything about our mission – our mission to the poor, the hungry, the hurting, to this community. But I believe, I know that we've been given permission to lift up the trouble that is in our souls, trust that when God's people do that, a way will be made, an agenda given, a new exodus reenacted.