

May 14, 2017

John 14:1-14

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I want you to pick up that cranberry-colored hymnal in front of you, and open it to page 317 in the front.

This page holds one of my favorite prayers, one that's been attributed to the worshipping community at Holden Village. Just follow along and listen to the words of this prayer.

“Oh God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

I would guess that every single one of us gathered here today can think of some situation in our life that needs this prayer. We are called to ventures of which we cannot see the ending; by paths untrodden, and perils unknown. In other words, we all live with the anxiety or worry about what's going to happen next in our life. About what lies ahead. Because as we have learned, we might have a general *idea* of the direction of our lives - but none of us knows what's going to happen next. The future is always a little bit uncertain, no matter how well we plan it – no matter how hard we work to set ourselves up for success – no matter how much we try to control it. None of us really know what lies ahead.

I think there are times in our lives that feel more like that than others, when. When the next steps are really hard to imagine.

A pastor friend of mine is a single mother whose daughter is 18 years old now. They are planning and preparing and celebrating as Emma gets ready to graduate and leave for college. It's a wonderful, exciting time. But it's also terrifying for them both. My friend will face an empty nest (a parsonage with 6 empty rooms in fact!), and she can prepare for that mentally...but there's really no way to prepare fully for that. And Emma is more than ready for this next step in her life, but of course wonders how she'll manage; who she'll meet; what challenges will arise. We can only plan so far, and then just have to step out with courage.

That's just one example. But we can all think of a situation that needs this prayer. A cancer diagnosis. A family conflict. A career change or a move or a death...these are times when it's hard for us to see the way forward. It's hard for us to imagine how the situation will resolve – or how it might be OK somehow.

This is the very common human problem Jesus is talking about in this Gospel reading today. Because Jesus is saying goodbye to the disciples.

They're gathered together for support and strength. They know their leader Jesus has made people mad, and that he is facing increased pressure and threat. Jesus knows where this is all headed – he knows he's already made a turn toward the cross, and that soon his earthly ministry will be over.

And so, as a loving leader, he's trying to give them the words of comfort and hope that he knows they're going to need for the difficult days ahead. He's preparing them for his death. But more than that, he's preparing them for their own future without him. Because Jesus wants them to know that after he is physically gone, his work needs to continue, through them. They will be his body. They will do the same, great things he has been doing. They will be responsible for preaching good news to the oppressed, healing those in need, feeding the hungry.

But of course it's hard for the disciples to hear any of this. When Jesus tells them that he's leaving – that he's "going ahead," they don't really understand. They want the road map. They want to know where he's going, and how they can get there to this safe place where Jesus will be.

I think that's what we all want, isn't it? When the way forward is unclear...when the future is unknown, we long for things to just be clear. For the path to be clearly laid out and free of obstacles. We want there to be a way that allows us to avoid pain and risk and disappointment.

Jesus doesn't promise us that things will be easy, or offer a way out. No, he will die, and they will grieve. But he does promise this most wonderful thing – that he is going ahead of us.

Wherever we go; whatever lies ahead – Jesus is already there. Jesus will not leave us to walk alone, but will be with us on the way.

Saint Julian of Norwich, whose feast day happened last week, was a rare woman of her time. She lived in the 1300s and she had visions and mystic encounters with God that she wrote about. In one prayer she wrote, "All will be well; and all will be well; and all matter of things will be well."

I think that's what faith is. It's a deep sense of knowing that no matter what happens next – all will be well – on a deep level. Because Christ has made a home in each of us. And he has prepared a place for us in God's own heart, and nothing can separate us from that relationship.

When we wake up each morning, we don't know what the day will bring. Well, sometimes we *do* know – sometimes we know what the day is about to bring is going to be hard. But what good does it do for us to live in fear? Jesus says in Matthew: “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Clearly, no! Worry does not give us life, and in fact it can be toxic. Worry can rob us of the abundant life that God desires for us.

So Jesus encourages us, saying “do not let your hearts be troubled.” Don't let fear overwhelm you. And instead, replace that worry with trust that God will be with us in all things, and that in the end, all will truly be well. Think again about the situations in your life that seem impossible to resolve – the situations that keep you up at night, and try replacing your worry with trust that God will make a way – that Jesus is there ahead of you.

There's something very freeing about that. If we ultimately don't have to fear the future – then we can be free to go out with good courage. We can be free to take risks in Jesus' name. To do his work of healing and preaching and feeding. Why not?! Why not act boldly and risk going outside our comfort zones. Risk giving our time and money away. Risk talking to people who frighten us.

These are the deeds Jesus empowers us to do! This is the work that we *can* accomplish when we don't let fear or anxiety stand in our way.

Jesus is already ahead of us. He's in our college dorm rooms. He's in the interview. He's in the oncologist's office. He's at the grave, and beyond. He's already there ahead of you, in whatever uncertain future you can't see right now. He's also ahead of this congregation – making a way and a future. So as we discern our ministry together, as we grow and change and dream – we can do so with confidence that all will be well.

We need not fear, but be bold to pray: *Give us faith to go out with good courage. Not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*