

LENT 1
“Letting go of Separation, Holding on to Relationship”
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Texts: Deuteronomy 31:6
John 14:1-6

Preached: 3/1/20

[IMAGE – Paul Tillich quote]

Paul Tillich, the great theologian of the 20th Century asked the question, “Who has not, at some time, been lonely in the midst of a social event? The feeling of our separation from the rest of life is most acute when we are surrounded by it in noise and talk. We realize then, much more than in moments of solitude, how strange we are to each other, how estranged life is from life. ... The walls of distance, in time and space, have been removed by technical progress; but the walls of estrangement between heart and heart have been incredibly strengthened.”

[IMAGE – Twitter response]

What’s amazing about that quote is that Tillich spoke those words in 1948, long before mobile phones, smart speakers, the internet or social media. How much more in our own time do we feel a sense of separation, isolation and loneliness?

[IMAGE – foggy, disconnected]

If you have a troubled heart, feel disconnected or struggle to feel comfortable with your place, you share a common lot with many of us. Most have doubts from time to time about how we fit in or whether we really belong. Everyone needs a place where they are welcomed and valued, a space where they can both contribute and be cared for, even when they are having a bad day.

[IMAGE – Deut 31-6]

God knows our fears, and promises that we do not go it alone...the LORD your God goes with you, never failing you, never forsaking. Jesus knows our grief and our questions, our longings and our losses. And Jesus will not abandon us.

[IMAGE – My soul is troubled]

When Jesus admonishes his disciples not to be troubled in heart, he knows well what it is to be troubled...three times leading up to this, we see the same word “troubled,” only referring to Jesus’ own turmoil, where he is troubled at the prospect of his coming suffering and death. To be troubled is more than the emotional experience of sadness, but rather reflects a profound sense of

upheaval created by death's power over humanity. Jesus encourages his disciples, as he prepares to face the very power that has caused him so much anguish, by instructing them to trust in him.
[IMAGE – sign of ashes]

We addressed this trouble on Ash Wednesday as we came together around the blazing fire our children built for us. We considered what things we might let go to lighten our Lenten journey, as well as things to which we should hold on. Of course we finished the evening with the sign of ashes – received with the words, “You are dust...and to dust you shall return.”

[IMAGE – a time to renew]

This season of Lent offers us a season of repentance, a chance to recalibrate our direction, refocus our commitment. But it also can be a time to reconnect...reconnect with the God who created us and loves us unceasingly, no matter what we have done or what we have failed to do. Lent can be a time of renewal...a call to confession, but also to community.

[IMAGE – letting go]

How might we answer God's call to let go of separation, isolation, and loneliness? Some of us are crippled by painful memories or feelings of shame and anxiety. And we choose to isolate ourselves from others. Some have been rejected or ostracized and so feel that one session or season of cruelty will never end. The temptation is to block out the world, turn in on ourselves and squander our time.

[IMAGE – helping hands]

But God invites us to use our time well, creatively, purposefully. Solitude can be a healthy and renewing thing, but it can be dangerous and destructive when we are bored and becoming more discouraged. Rather than dwelling on our own hurts, we can be honest about them and move past them. That doesn't mean ignoring our pain, but don't rehearse it over and over either. Shifting our focus to helping and serving others can be spiritually healing.

[IMAGE – bridges not walls]

When we change our perspective from needing healing to providing healing it's good for us and those we serve. And as we “do unto others” we begin to recognize God's presence. We begin to feel that promise of God – that God goes with us. We begin to understand that, “There is no place that you are that God is not.” Sometimes we are good at building walls and we need to better learn to build bridges.

[IMAGE – One]

Love is the antidote to loneliness...God's love for us and our love for others. You might find someone this week to whom you can say, "Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God and also in me." Or, "I know it's tough, but I know God loves you and so do I."

If we can let go of separation, can we hold on to relationship? Have you said to someone lately, "Thank you for being my friend?" What could you do this Lent to nurture a connection to a friend, to strengthen a relationship or to reach out to a peer in a fresh way? God wants well-being for us and smiles when we thrive in relationship.

[IMAGE – across the river]

I want to show a quirky little video about friendship...it's actually the story of one particular, unique friendship. The video comes out of China. It has nothing to do with the Corona virus. In fact, it perhaps shows a positive view of China, when all we have heard about that country is either about the crisis that began in Hubei province, or before that, that China is only our biggest foe in a nasty trade war. This story touched me on multiple levels.

[IMAGE – foot on bucket]

The video has sound, background music, which seems traditionally Chinese, as well as simple dialogue, also in Chinese. So to understand what is going on, you have to read the English subtitles...but those are short and easy. The video is titled "The Friendship That Built a Forest." It's less than 3 minutes long:

VIDEO – "The Friendship That Built a Forest" (available on Vimeo)

[IMAGE – crossing the bridge]

These two friends, best friends have been planting trees since 2002. They changed a wasteland of cobblestones and sand, into a forest of over 10,000 trees. Planting trees became their mission...they said of their endeavor, "It may be hard financially, but we're so delighted spiritually!" They imagine their trees as green soldiers, guarding their beautiful village.

[IMAGE – carrying his friend]

They really are a pitiful couple, one lost his eyesight 18 years ago. The other has lived all his life with no arms. Yet they say of each other, "When we're working together, we don't feel disabled at all...we're a team."

[IMAGE – peace I leave you]

God smiles at such friendship. These two have let go of separation and they are holding on to relationship. When we can do that it's good for our hearts and we learn the peace of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.