

Scripture – John 14:23-29 NRSV

14:23 Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. 25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28 You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

Sermon

When I preaching this text before, I've preached on the wonderful, comforting things Jesus says in this passage. Things like "I am going where you cannot go, but peace I leave with you I give to you." I've talked about how its extra special because the word for peace is not the Greek word for peace, it's the Hebrew word, *shalom*, which is much more encompassing than peace. Shalom is a sense of wholeness and completeness and fullness.

I love that about this text, that it's full of tenderness even though it's a little convoluted. It's poetry for all time, even though it was written for a particular [the Johannine] community. I've preached on how we are never alone, how wonderful it is that it's just not in God's nature to be apart from us, because when Jesus leaves, the Spirit comes to be among the people. It tells us that God who loves us would never set up a system without also being part of it. That the nature of God is to be *near*, to be *with*.

I probably would've preached on some iteration of that again, except that time passes and scripture says different things at different times in our lives and with different things going on the world. And, actually, for the first time, I felt a hole, or a gap in the scripture. I felt that something was missing.

You see, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit, or the Advocate, is coming. He tells the disciples—his friends—that this other, different presence of God will remain with them and with all people, even when Jesus dies and goes to be with God. That that Spirit will remain and move and remind and inspire. And that's good news. God's Spirit *is* among us. But that doesn't mean we should gloss over the reality of the loss that is also in the scripture.

Jesus says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything and remind you of what I've said to you. There's a gap—a sentence missing—friends. It's right between "I'm saying this while I'm still with you," and "the advocate will be with you." The sentence that's missing is, "*but I'm not going to be here.*" The way the author of the gospel of John writes it, it's almost just assumed, or implied—or maybe too painful—to say outright. But the disciples get the message all the same. Soon, Jesus is not going to be with them. Those loving things Jesus says about God's Spirit being with them, reminding them, are tender and beautiful. But that loss or longing actually has an important message for us, too.

A podcast I was listening to last week reminded me of how transformative it is to go through—not around, not avoiding, but through the loss or grief or bittersweet. I was catching

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up on Glennon Doyle's podcast called "We Can Do Hard Things" recently. At various meetings, I have learned that many of you listen to this podcast too! In this episode, Glennon was talking to Susan Cain. Susan Cain is the author of the book, *Quiet* on the secret strengths of introverts. And she has a new book out, called *Bittersweet: how sorrow and longing make us whole*, which was just published. Cain talks about how some people feel a sensitivity or melancholy, even in joyful moments.

For example, in their conversation, Glennon talked about how watching her kids play on the beach on a perfect sunny day makes her feel bittersweet, or in her words, "stabs of joy," which is the joy of the moment, combined with the knowledge that that moment is fleeting. That her kids will go off to their own lives, and that's wonderful and it's also bittersweet.

I feel like our scripture today is sort of a stab of joy moment. The joy of the disciples being with Jesus, combined with the awareness that this moment is fleeting, and that Jesus is saying his long goodbyes because will die.

Susan describes the "happiness of melancholy" or "stabs of joy" using a story of a cellist and the power of bittersweetness in this moment in time. 1992 war and siege of Sarajevo bombings all the time. One bombing happened next to the lead cellist of the Sarajevo orchestra. People had to sneak out to get groceries and were being taken out as they were simply outside their homes getting food. Just as it is in Ukraine now, you can imagine how horrible it was. So when the bombing occurred next door, the man went to help his neighbors, to get them out, to get them where they could get medical attention. But then he went back to the bombing site. And in the open, in the middle of the rubble, he sat down to play this haunting, beautiful piece of music. And he plays it out in the open where people weren't. But he goes back for 22 days to play it again and again, once each day. Once for every person killed in the neighboring building in that bombing. People make films and wrote books about it. Later the man says, "you ask me if I'm crazy for sitting outside in an open square playing music in the middle of a war zone and I say to you, they're the crazy ones for bombing Sarajevo." Why is the Albinoni in G minor the thing he chose to play? He plays this stirring, aching music. And the reason is that when we hear that kind of minor key music, sad music, there's something about it that is expressing our longing for the heavens, our recognition that there's a world that we wish we could live in. And we don't live in it right now but we're all deeply united in the fervor of our wish to live in a more perfect and a more beautiful world.¹

As one preacher has said, 'If you can't make it happy, make it beautiful.'²

That's what the cellist did. That's what the Minnesota Orchestra did, just two days after 9/11 when they changed their whole concert program and began with Nimrod by Edward Elgar. That's what the parents in Poland are doing when they leave their strollers for the families at the train station leaving them there for Ukrainian families fleeing the war.

¹ Glennon Doyle and Susan Cain on "We Can Do Hard Things" podcast, April 6, 2022, accessed May 12, 2022
{HYPERLINK "<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/susan-cain-says-sadness-is-a-superpower/id1564530722?i=1000556487145>"}

² Rev. Sam Wells

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If it can't be happy, make it beautiful. When things are the most painful that is our invitation for humanity to show up. It cracks your heart open and takes your breath. It's a depth of beauty we don't get when everything feels okay.

It's pulling back the curtain, from the business of our daily lives. As one person said on the podcast, its realizing about humanity: "we are this horrible; we are this good. We are this greedy; we are this generous. We are this tenuous; we are this brave."³

I feel like our scripture today is sort of a stab of joy moment. You see, because there is this tenderness and love in this text from Jesus to his followers. And it's worth holding up. But the tenderness and love are so special because they are paired with an impending sense of sadness, absence and loss. This is after all, part of Jesus' farewell discourse, which is to say, the long goodbye in the gospel of John before Jesus dies and is raised. He says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of what I've said to you. There's a sentence missing between "I'm saying this while I'm still with you, and the advocate will be with you." The sentence missing that is simply implied is, "I'm not going to be here." The way the author of the gospel of John writes it, it's almost just assumed, or maybe too painful to say outright. But the disciples get the message: soon, Jesus is not going to be with them.

The joy of the disciples being with Jesus combined with the awareness that this moment is fleeting and that Jesus is saying his long goodbyes because will die. I think it's important to not look over that line and just get to the good part. That loss or longing actually has an important message for us.

That loss or longing 1., connects us as humans in the same experience, and 2., can be transformative. Glennon said in the podcast that that longing, that bittersweetness, is the closest she comes to understanding faith. "Faith isn't a list of rules that keeps some in and others out," she said, "it's this hunch that it was all supposed to be more beautiful and perfect than this. And then faith in action," she continues "is not just having the hunch but stretching for it."⁴

Its's in that bittersweetness, in that stab of joy or that happiness in melancholy that we find one another and God again. Could it be that even in the doldrums, through the horrors of the world, through the hunch or faith that things should be more beautiful and more perfect that we find one another, that we come together, that our busyness and our masks are pulled away for just long enough to have that faith in action, to stretch into that longing. So for those of you who appreciate sitting with things, just hold this idea for a moment. That it is our hunch or longing for a more beautiful world is what leads us back to humanity and to God. And for

³ Amanda, sister to Glennon Doyle, with Glennon Doyle and Susan Cain on "We Can Do Hard Things" podcast, April 6, 2022, accessed May 12, 2022 {HYPERLINK "<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/susan-cain-says-sadness-is-a-superpower/id1564530722?i=1000556487145>"}

⁴ Glennon on Glennon Doyle and Susan Cain on "We Can Do Hard Things" podcast, April 6, 2022, accessed May 12, 2022 {HYPERLINK "<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/susan-cain-says-sadness-is-a-superpower/id1564530722?i=1000556487145>"}

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those of you who are doers, consider how our hunch and longing for a more beautiful world can propel us into acting on that we act on that hunch? Whether it's sitting in rubble playing a cello, or planting a tree or a pollinator garden? Or giving time or money or both to places that are hurting. It's here in the hunch, in the longing, where we feel a sense of uplift and connection, through the bittersweetness.

Back to the scripture again. Jesus says, "do not let your hearts be troubled, do not be afraid," (which is the most commonly repeated phrase in all of the Bible, by the way). He's living into the bittersweetness, even if he doesn't say it. He's saying goodbye, and there is certainly loss and grief and love in that. He's living into the bittersweet—but he's also saying, don't let your fear and grief overcome you—don't look away. Because something important is happening here, even in the melancholy. And its deep and its important. It's something close to faith, and it will change you.

I'm going away, he says, yes, but the Spirit of God isn't going anywhere. It's coming to you all the more powerfully, so live into and through the melancholy, but don't despair, or you'll miss the beautiful goodness, the joy, the connection that is possible. Live into the gap. The bittersweet, the hunch that things can be better. It will lead you through and the Spirit is going to help you live into that. And those things are going to bring you through and bring you together. So pay attention because the world needs this. We each need this, we all need it. May it be so.