Sunday April 6, 2003

MY SOUL IS TROUBLED

John 12:20-33

Most, if not all of you hearing or reading this sermon can identify with the words of Jesus in today's scripture reading when he said, "Now my soul is troubled," and with his second statement, "Father, save me from this hour." When your soul is troubled, it's natural for you to want to avoid the anguish. Your prayer, like that of Jesus, might be, "God, save me from this troubling situation. Help me avoid it. Relieve my worries. Take away the problem."

If you're like me, when your soul is troubled, you feel off center, out of focus, off balance, not in harmony. You wonder if you are on the right track. Have you made the correct decision? And now that our country is at war, you wonder if our nation is on the right track. Have our leaders made the right decision? You wake up in the middle of the night, or before it's time to get up and your mind races and worries.

A troubled soul can have physical symptoms such as a knot or emptiness in the pit of your stomach, a lump in your throat, an aching heart, a sense of dread or sadness, or even a pain the back.

The causes of a troubled soul are varied. I have already mentioned that in a time of war, many souls are troubled. St. Augustine, probably more than any other Christian thinker, is credited for developing the Christian concept of a "just war." At the same time, he believed war is essentially an occasion for remorse, for having a troubled soul. He wrote, "The wise person will wage just wars, but even the possibility of war should cause humans sorrow because humans are responsible for it." Augustine's sober attitude is a profound contrast to the barely suppressed excitement of many broadcast journalists covering the war with Iraq. You, the viewer are invited to be caught up in the excitement, not the sorrow of war.

Your soul might be troubled because of having conflicting emotions or desires within yourself. Your soul could also be troubled because of a broken relationship, a pending divorce, the loss of a job, a misunderstanding with a person where you work, the death of a family member or friend, a child gone wrong, a family argument, a health problem such as cancer, heart disease, a stroke or an injury from an accident.

The important issue is: as a Christian, how do you deal with a troubled soul and the pain, physical and emotional that is associated with it? The initial temptation is to want to escape as much pain and suffering as possible. You can attempt to do this in several ways. You can

try to hide the fact that your soul is troubled and keep telling yourself that everything is okay. The difficulty with this strategy is that sooner or later your troubled soul will cause problems in some other way. And because it has been covered up or hidden for a time, it will be worse in the long run than if you had dealt with it earlier.

Another way of attempting to deal with your troubled soul is to do your best to blame it on someone else or on the situation in which you find yourself. You can say to yourself, "the fact that I am troubled and am feeling bad has nothing to do with me. It's someone else's fault." Of course, it could be true that someone else is involved. Or as

I mentioned earlier, in a time of war, that could be the cause. The point is, it's important to figure out as honestly and openly as you can what the cause could be and then deal with it. If another person is involved, that person may not even be aware of it. At the same time, you also need to ask, "What is my contribution to my troubled soul?" A wise person once said, "Remember no one can make you feel troubled without your permission."

Perhaps the strongest temptation of all in dealing with a troubled soul is to try to stop the pain as quickly as possible without ever dealing with the underlying causes. In today's world with so many pain-killing drugs that's a powerful temptation. But remember as someone said, "Spray paint won't fix

rust. A band-aid won't remove a tumor. Wax on the hood won't cure the cough of an engine. If the problem is inside, you have to go inside."

Before going any further, let's clear up one misconception. There's a misguided notion that we human beings are supposed to be happy all the time and never have troubled souls. What we learn from the life of Jesus is that no one is immune to the ups and downs of life. No matter how spiritually mature you might be, your soul will be troubled from time to time. Not only that, if you are spiritually sensitive, your soul should be troubled at times.

When you are treated unjustly or when you see

someone else being abused or used, your soul should be troubled. When we human beings have to resort to violent action in an attempt to solve disputes, your soul should be troubled. If your soul is troubled as mine is because of the war in Iraq, that does not mean you are unpatriotic.

The best generals and other military leaders even when they believe their cause is just, have troubled souls when they send young men and women into battle because they know some of them will be killed. Their souls are also troubled because they wish there had been another way to settle the conflict.

When someone you have dearly loved dies, your

soul should be troubled. When you are facing a difficult decision and you know the only way out is to go through, your soul will be troubled. That's the context in which Jesus said in today's scripture reading, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father , save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour." Although he was speaking to his disciples, he was carrying on a conversation with himself as he worked through his decision and tried to deal with his troubled soul. Opposition to his ministry had been increasing and he was certain that the end of his life on earth was near, so his soul was troubled, but he would not let the fact that his soul was troubled deter him from accomplishing what God wanted him to do.

He knew that many times, a troubled soul can be a messenger trying to tell you something you need to hear but do not necessarily want to hear. In those cases, a troubled soul is not an enemy, it is rather a signal to us that some action needs to be taken.

There's another side to this matter of having a troubled soul. You can also pay too much attention to it so that it keeps you from doing something that needs to be done. The same is true of physical pain. Very few if any individuals feel like getting out of bed and walking a few steps following surgery. Those steps can be very painful. But if you want to regain your strength you need some exercise even when it first hurts to do it. If you pay attention to the pain, it can keep you from

over doing it, but it is also necessary to endure some pain in order to get well more quickly.

The same is true of the pain and the troubled soul of grief. When a loved one dies, you can use your troubled soul as an excuse for not doing anything for too long a time. It can keep you from being with people and facing life again. By paying too much attention to your troubled soul and giving it too much power, you never go through it and beyond it.

During my 46 years in ministry I have conducted hundreds of funerals and have been with an equal number of families and individuals as they have dealt with their troubled souls because of the death

of a loved one.

I remember one funeral where a young man, age 40, died suddenly of a heart attack. He and his wife had been married for 15 years and had three children. After the funeral and a reception in their home, I was alone with his wife and her soul was very troubled. She asked over and over again, "Why did this happen?" I had no adequate answer. Finally after a long silence, I was able to say, "Sarah, I don't know how your husband's death fits into the ultimate will of God. I do know that the main reason your suffering is so intense is because the two of you loved each other so much and because you had so many good times together. I also know that God still has a will and

purpose for your life now that this has happened."

A little over a year later, I received a letter from Sarah. She remembered little of what I had said at the funeral service, but she did recall our conversation after the funeral. She said in her letter, "I still remember what you said that day as we talked in my home after the funeral. You reminded me that God has a will and a purpose for my life in spite of the sudden death of my husband and you helped me understand why my pain was so deep and my soul so troubled so that I could face it, learn from it and go through it. That gave me a place to begin and I am now on my way."

She also said that even though there was still a

void in her life, she would not have traded her fifteen years of the loving relationship with her husband in order to avoid the pain.

What else can you learn from the way Jesus handled his troubled soul which will help you in dealing with your troubled souls?

Listen to his words again—"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Once he admitted that his soul was troubled, it was then he received God's affirmation. He heard God saying, "You are doing what I sent you to do. Keep doing it. Hold on to your faith. I am always with

you." In this conversation with those around him and with himself, he knew that the only way to deal with his troubled soul was to do what he was now certain God wanted him to do.

There's one more theme in this story. When the soul of Jesus was troubled, he went back to the basics. He relied on his abiding convictions about God. That's also a good thing for you and me to do especially in this time of war. Here are three of these abiding convictions which have been helpful for me to remember in dealing with my troubled soul. I hope these abiding convictions will bring some comfort to your troubled souls.

First, always remember, the earth is the Lord's. All

of creation belongs to God. It is the testimony of the great stories in the Bible and in the life and teachings of Jesus, that God in the long run always brings forth good and abiding things. In times of chaos, God's purposes are not always visible, but God is always making things new. Tomorrow can be better than today. Therefore you can trust that God is at work in the world and that good will come from the chaos of the moment.

The second abiding conviction taught and lived by Jesus is that your overall purpose on earth is to be of service to others. Jesus said that he came not to be served but to serve. He went on to say, "Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there will my servant be also. Whoever serves

me, the Father will honor." Serving other human beings has no season, or qualities of time. Service brings tremendous relief to troubled souls.

The third abiding conviction to remember is about our country, the United States. Our nation is far from perfect, but it still represents great potential for the whole human community. We have the capacity and hopefully the will to work together with other nations and individuals to bring freedom and hope where there has been little freedom and not much hope. The people of our nation have been the leaders in scientific, technological and humanitarian breakthroughs. I am confident that we will continue to use these advances for the good of all people.

Sometimes we believe we can fix things quickly, but we need to remember there are no short term easy solutions to long term problems.

So when your soul is troubled, it will help you to remember you are in good company because the soul of Jesus was also troubled. Hopefully, as was the case with Jesus, your troubled soul will motivate you to serve God by serving others. Amen.