

“Unbearable Realities”

*Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15*

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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*Let us pray: God of Delight, your wisdom sings your Word at the
crossroads where humanity and divinity meet. Invite us into your joyful
being where you know and are known,
In each beginning,
In all sustenance,
In every redemption.
That we may manifest your unity in the diverse ministries you entrust to
us, truly reflecting your triune majesty
In the faith that acts,
In the hope that does not disappoint,
And in the love that endures. Amen*

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Jesus speaks to his followers and says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). When I hear Jesus speak about the unbearable things of life, my mind triggers back to experiences I wish I had run from. But I couldn’t then, and can’t now. The unbearable comes and goes as it wills. There’s nowhere to run for escape. As challenging and difficult as it can be to remember and speak

on, I have come to an understanding of what Jesus means when he says, “You cannot bear them now.”

It was a Thursday evening. I was in Philadelphia having just begun my first semester of seminary at Lutheran Philadelphia. We were in choir rehearsal when I got an all-too-usual interrupting phone call from my mom. Most often, she calls when I am busy. Somewhere, mothers can learn this skill. Still, this was one call I must of known something was up. I stepped out of the choir room to answer and my suspicion was confirmed when I heard the voice on the other end, full of distress, say one word, “Anthony.” I didn’t need to hear anything more, not one more word, to know something serious had happened. Thoughts of the unbearable raced through my mind. Those thoughts and fears would later give way to an unbearable reality, a reality my family and I still bear now. Two nights before his 58th birthday, my dad transitioned from this life while in his sleep. Fear of the unbearable streamed down my face as the choir held me upright in their arms.

This story is particular to me, but I imagine, it is not unique to most everyone of us. I’m willing to bet every single one of us has thoughts and fear of the unbearable. Every one of us has lived, or maybe is living now, a reality that is more than we can handle, a reality that leaves us wondering if and how we will persevere. Someway or another, life goes on. Think about all we have already borne we never asked for, never wanted. I

imagine if any of us had been told beforehand what is to come, many of our responses might have been, “I cannot bear that.”

The unbearable is that which we do not wish for ourselves or even our worst enemy. It can come to us in the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, the loss of a job, a diagnosis, or a thousand other ways. Experiences like these are the most painful experiences we can imagine. It is in those moments, all we can do is call God’s name or curse God’s name and, sometimes, both seem appropriate.

What comes to mind when you think of the unbearable? What are your experiences of the unbearable? Most of us, I suspect, recall and/or focus on circumstances that involve pain, loss, or suffering. Circumstances that might break our hearts, shatter our lives, or bring us to tears. That is real! Who wants to bear that baggage? In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus is telling his disciples he is going away, and they become troubled by their coming loss. And this “trouble” the disciples feel doesn’t just mean they’re sad. There is more emotion stirring up inside of them as they begin to think forward and question. Jesus’ going away stirs up distress in his followers as they consider the unbearable - going through life without their shepherd, their teacher, their friend. What will the disciples do on their own. Where will they go? What will they do? How will they make it? Can Jesus’ disciples remember the way? Who will lead them?

The unbearable Jesus' disciples experienced then seems similar to today's experience of the unbearable. What's unbearable for us today can leave us asking the same sort of questions, and it would be absolutely outstanding if for all of us, we could grab hold of what's near and dear to our hearts, bubble wrap, secure in a lock box, and safely place that lock box in our pockets. Unfortunately, life doesn't afford us this privilege. A part of living involves being vulnerable to the unbelievable, the unexpected, and the unbearable.

Still, the suffering, the pain, the distress...they are not the only experience of the unbearable. There is an opposite aspect of the unbearable. Think of a time when love, joy, or beauty was so real, so deep, it became hard to keep control. Those moments brought about emotions and realities that were unbearable. Maybe tears even poured out. Maybe amazement and wonder came to mind and questioned, "who am I...?" Who am I that I might be so fortunate, so blessed, so favored?

I remember just about a year ago, days on end I had sleepless nights. After having found out the life-changing news, I became amazed and wondered restlessly how we might fare going from one little angel to two. I counted it unbearable at times. My heart was already so full having already met this amazing, wonderful little angel. I spent countless hours and days, weeks and months wondering how could I ever extend myself to love and care for another. More sacrifices, greater exhaustion, and more diapers. A new way to grow and know

Love. Having this new life become part of mine would be awesome. At the same time, though, could I handle the way in which this coming new life encounters me, engages me, teaches and guides me?

In my restlessness, I just so happened to speak with a friend, a friend who fathers three beautiful young ladies. He spoke with me and asked how I was holding up. I shared with him only what anyone might expect to hear. I was excited we were expecting and I was looking forward to our new addition. I didn't express to him my other inner thoughts and fears about what else is to come. Maybe he knew there was more going on inside me.

My friend began to share with me his experience of fathering. How before the arrival of his second daughter, he felt he was headed toward an unbearable position. Then he told me what happened when he met his second daughter, when he held this new life in his arms. There was a miracle that happened. His heart grew. What had been one heart, seemed to become two, enough to love and care for another. Enough to bear his new load. When I heard of his experience, from that moment on, I felt free. Weight was lifted from me. When before, I thought I would surely crumble under the weight of the unbelievable, the unexpected, the unbearable, I was reminded by my friend miracles can come to us. I found hope. If my friend's heart can grow from one to two, maybe my heart, our hearts can do the same.

Experiences like these offer us an aspect of the unbearable that can take us beyond our present reality. The unbearable can (be)come, for us, a reality far beyond our wildest dreams and imaginings. The unbearable can leave us in speechless gratitude. It comes to us in the miracle of birth, a life filled with fresh meaning and purpose, a new love that becomes eternal, and in a thousand other ways. The unbearable opens us to receive a life we could never create for or give ourselves. It shatters our fears, breaks through our defenses, and brings us to tears.

This is the unbearable Jesus speaks of. When Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now,” he is speaking to a reality beyond our wildest dreams and imaginings. He even goes as far to say that it is to our advantage that he go. What Jesus wants us to know is bigger than any of our words can explain. We have to experience the unbearable for ourselves. Jesus will go, and promises the coming of the Spirit, and this Spirit may not be all that unfamiliar to Jesus’ disciples.

The Spirit which Jesus promises will be one of the Truth. The Spirit of truth will guide us into all the truth. The original language here can be telling for Jesus’ disciples and for us today. When we hear that the spirit of truth will guide Jesus’ disciples into all the truth, many would understand the Greek to read the spirit of truth “will lead you in *the way* into all *the truth*.” Here’s John’s mention of “the way” and “the truth”

might have certainly caused his disciples to recall Jesus earlier words - words that may be at the heart of John's Gospel, where he says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Jesus begins his farewell to his disciples with this declaration. He confirms to his disciples that, in the coming age when the Advocate comes, love might come in unbelievable, unexpected, unbearable ways, but the Spirit will be reliable. The Spirit will not be an independent witness to the truth, but will speak God's *logos*, God's Word. The Spirit will remind us of the Love of God. Even when the unbearable comes, the Spirit will inspire us to bear witness to the way of justice, this truth of Love. When the unbearable comes to us, we will continue to be called to faithful living, caring for the sick, the poor, the helpless and the oppressed. We will still be called to loving our neighbors as ourselves.

There is more than one aspect to the unbearable. There isn't just one experience of the unbearable. However, when the unexpected, the unbelievable comes our way, miracles can follow. Our hearts can become more opened and expanded. The unbearable can bring us into a new life, new life with unknown vulnerabilities, and a new sense of authenticity, identity. It creates space for and invites a deeper level of intimacy.

There's a sense in which we might need the unbearable. If you're anything like me, we can tend to live unconsciously

sometimes. Our lives can become monotonous as we pass through our days missing life, love, beauty, and each other. What's coming can come to awaken us, offer insights into life's journey, teach us about ourselves, grow us up, and bring us more fully into ourselves. Ultimately, though, the unbearable reveals the presence of God. All of us who live in the dualism of bearing the unbearable can be given ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to love more deeply.

I can't help but wonder, what if our greatest sense of God's presence is in the unbearable? In the death of a loved one and in the birth of new life. The loss of a job and in the opportunity of a lifetime. Daily following Christ and taking up the cost of discipleship. What if these and other moments that ask more of us than we can bear bring to us more than we could ever have dreamed or imagined?

What if we lean into bearing the unbearable? Whatever the feelings, the emotions. Bearing the unbearable places us on the threshold of our lives. It takes us to the limits of who we are and what we have. It's the place where life is too real, too much, too big. It's also the place that calls us to a new sense of presence. We experience God and God's creation in ways unknown. When we bear the unbearable, standing at the edge of life, something amazing and wonderful can happen. When we lean in, we can find ourselves at the opening of the doors that lead all of us "into all the truth." That's a pretty big and bold statement. But that's exactly what Jesus says will happen.

The Spirit of truth will lead us in the way into all the truth. The Spirit will declare, bring, and offer all that Jesus, who is the Love of God abiding with us, has. Nothing is or ever will be withheld. We may not know, understand, or believe it - who does? - Jesus will be there, present, speaking to us.

When we lean in, creation finds communion with the Holy One of Old. I pray when the unbearable comes our way, we lean in and realize God's place in our life. We do not bear the unbearable alone. In Christ, we will never bear the unbearable alone. Amen.

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