

## “Troubled souls”

March 29, 2009

Text: *Psalm 51:1-12, John 12:20-33*

### I.

Some years back, a new field of study emerged in seminaries across America called *Congregational Studies*. What’s perhaps most curious about this development is that it didn’t happen sooner. *Congregational Studies* would certainly seem to be a logical area of emphasis for the training of future pastors of our congregations.

Musing through a journal on congregations, there was an article where the author was talking about the gap that exists between our *dying churches* and the *hunger for Jesus* breaking through in the spirit of the **Generation X** and **Millennial** generations. The author pointed out two qualities that seem to be central to this hunger:

1. a deep desire for authenticity ...
2. and a discernable yearning for passion ...

Now, I have to admit that I had to *google* Generation X and Millennial Generation to get more up to speed on them. The *Generation Xers* were born between 1965 and 1980, while the Millennials birth period was 1978 and 1998.

The *Xers* grew up on TV, personal computers and video games. Growing up mostly in the *me* generation of the 80’s, they tend to reject status and money. They also tend to be cynical, unmotivated and, apparently, many still live at home because they can’t get jobs.

The *Millennials* grew up on technology, do everything in groups (you’ve heard how youth culture these days *hang out*). They apparently like structure, multi-task well, respond well to mentoring, but find institutions irrelevant.

### II.

From this brief glimpse of these generations—along with their hunger for *authenticity* and a yearning for passion—the gospel of John would seem to be THE gospel for them.

More than anything, John wants people to believe that Jesus is the one. He IS God’s Christ, the *light of the world*, the *good shepherd* ... the one in whom and through whom God revealed God’s light to the world.

What this is about is that John is himself a passionate believer; and this impulse of passion resonates throughout the gospel.

John’s gospel is the fruit of one who passionately believes, who sees the truth with clarity

and conviction. John sees the end game, the light at the end of the tunnel, and wants desperately for others to see it as well. And, of course, Jesus *is* the light.

There's scarcely any wiggle room in John's gospel. You're either in or you're out. He wants us to be in; but he wants us to make a decision—today.

For the careful reader of the gospel, there's a heaviness and a tension, that runs throughout.

The heaviness is related to the repeated theme that Jesus is about to leave ... that he's going to die. In John, life and death themes are everywhere, which prompt a sense of urgency.

1. *I am the bread of life*, says Jesus. And to eat of this bread (of course) is to eat at the table of eternal life.
2. *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* Again, the tension between light and darkness, and between life and death.

Jesus talks—straight away—about his death: *I am going away ...and where I am going, you cannot come.* Then, expanding on this: *You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.*

We want to say, *what are you talking about?*

3. Still later, Jesus says, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.*

And then the famous words surrounding the death of Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, who dies but who Jesus, later, brings back to life.

4. *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die, and those who live and believe in me will never die.*

### III.

These words from John are not to be taken literally; which, of course, doesn't mean they are not true. They are; but they are symbolic. The symbolism gives them greater power to grab us.

But no matter how we hear them, there's a sense of urgency to them. There's the sense that we need to sort ourselves out, figure out who we are, make a choice and get on with our lives.

In our reading from John 12, in verse 27, Jesus says, *My soul is troubled*; and he talks about his death. The thing about death talk with Jesus in the gospels is that it always leads to life.

And that's the source of *authenticity* in John. That's the springboard for passion. It's *authentic* because it talks about what's real. Issues of life and death are real.

When Jesus reflects that his *soul is troubled*, we can relate. We, too, at times, live with *troubled souls*.

1. We're anxious over many things: certainly, the economy ... our health care situation ... key family relationships ... even frustration with ourselves.
2. There are things about us we wish were different—things about us we wish we could change. Biases we grew up with, perhaps; old habits and attitudes—ways of thinking that we know we need to rise above.

For a time, an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trader named John Newton thought he was on top of the world, profiting as he did from the slave trade. But then, one day, he ran head on into John 8:32—*and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*.

In those words, his heart was converted. And John Newton spent the rest of his life crusading against the very slave trade that had made him rich. And he also wrote a number of hymns ...

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I'm found, Was blind but now I see.*

These words have greater meaning when we know the history ...

#### IV.

The gospel of John invites us to tell the truth about ourselves. It invites our confession. There's *trouble in our soul* whenever there's a gap between our daily experience and our very real sense of God's purposes.

Jesus' *troubled soul* relates to his leaving, to the death that awaited him. Again, we shouldn't read John literally, but as symbolic language that draws us in; that touches our heart and soul and helps us get ourselves right with God.

And it all points to love. But we can't get to the love when our soul is too troubled. We have to get ourselves right with God First. Jesus' *troubled soul* talk in John leads us, naturally, in this sense, to the powerful confession and healing thrust of Psalm 51.

The thing I love about this Psalm is its truth-telling and—therein—its healing. The Psalm invites us to bring our confession—whatever it is—before God.

A personal immersion in Psalm 51 is what the author of John’s gospel would want each of us to go through on our way to the altar of belief. We don’t just come to belief in a vacuum of meaning.

We come to belief in a very real human context of personal confession and sorting out, of coming to terms with whatever darkness or imperfections are doing battle in our spirit.

*Troubled souls* is not where God leaves us—ever. It’s the truth-telling we do—the confession about ourselves—the unpacking, the unloading, the unburdening we do to be restored to greater wholeness with God.

When we confess our *troubled souls*, healing comes. And in the process, we’re more fully alive and more authentic—not just as children of God, but also as husbands and wives and as parents and grandparents.

## V.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

And then, (check this out): *For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me.*

The confessional tone of these words is important. In order to be whole and healthy as individuals or even as a nation, we have to tell the truth about ourselves. We know when we mess up;

- when we want more than we need (which is much of the time),
- when we resist sorting out our priorities in life because it’s the easy way out—with our spouses, our children, our parents ... whoever it is.

With regard to all kinds of stuff, from time to time, don’t we all need a new beginning? In the way we think about our lives, our bodies and our spirit.

Listen to the Psalmist further on this! Talking (praying) directly to God:

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

This is gripping stuff. *Truth in the inward being* is what we all need; and certainly, what we all desire; to move us out of anxiety, out of confusion, out of ambivalence.

*Teach me wisdom in my secret heart*—the heart that pulses at the center of our being; the heart that integrates all that we are as human beings—what we feel, what we know, what we long for.

There's a confidence, here—both in John and in this vibrant Psalm—that we *can* be the person God wants us to be. We can be reborn, renewed and, therefore, redirected—every day, every moment of our lives.

And thus does the psalmist say, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

For John, what this truth and wisdom lead to is belief in Jesus. And on the other side of belief, to love one another. Love is always where the Word of God is headed. It's the key to everything.

## VI.

This is the path Lent takes us down, prompting us to deal with whatever is troubling our souls—talking about it, confessing it. Because when we do, we're reborn—free again to be the person God created us to be; and to be the nation God calls us to become.

Free to love others as God has loved us in Christ; and free, therefore, to know the joy of salvation. That joy, friends, is oneness with God and with one another, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlchurch.com](http://www.mlchurch.com)