

“Do not let your hearts be troubled” are the words Jesus says in what’s known as the “farewell discourse” from John’s Gospel, which are a series of conversations He has with the apostles at what was likely the last supper.

This particular passage is among the most common at funerals, as we are told of the peace and serenity that await those who follow Jesus, for there are many dwelling places in God’s Kingdom.

But what I love with this is there’s also a lot for us in the here and now; for those who deal with loss, and for the apostles who know something is about to change but are understandably worried about the future as we hear in the words of Thomas “we do not know where you are going.” But Jesus’ advice to him is to be at peace. Because while He is going away, it does not mean that He is abandoning them. Rather things may change, but He will always be with them, and on their part they just have to trust in the Lord, but also let Him into their hearts to give them guidance and peace.

And as we all deal with the uncertainty and anxiety of what we battle right now as a world, I think this verse might be a great one to keep on our office desk or refrigerator. But how does one make it a way of life?

In early April, Bill Courtney, who owns a sawmill in Memphis, Tennessee, got a very difficult phone call. The call came late on a Monday evening from a fellow member of Bill Courtney’s church. The voice on the other end of the line said: “Bill, I just talked to Kathe. Tim died.”

The man was Tim Russell, an assistant pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, who had been hospitalized with Covid-19. Bill Courtney, a member of Second Presbyterian and a close friend of Russell’s, had been guardedly optimistic his friend would survive. Now Russell was gone and Bill never got to say goodbye to his friend. The hospital allowed no visitors, not even Russell’s wife, Kathe.

“He had to suffer and die alone,” Bill said. “It’s horrific...I am so sad and shaken.”

But Bill was also suffering too.

Bill is the owner of a Memphis lumber mill, and has experienced the full spectrum of the virus’s effects. He has lost two friends to Covid-19 and his mill, which employs 110 people and ships American hardwoods to customers around the world, has struggled to remain in operation.

Bill and his wife, Lisa, live in lockdown with their college-age son and Lisa’s parents, who are in their 70s. He goes to the mill each day but he has sent most of his office workers home. He supervises a skeleton factory crew with the help of his operations manager, Doug Johnson. He remains in touch with his other three adult children but he can’t bring them home.

But through this, he's tried to make sure his heart isn't troubled. As for how he copes with what he described as near-crushing fear and uncertainty, especially when Tim Russell, the person he relied on most to fortify his faith, is gone, in a recent interview he referred to the wisdom his pastor and friend gave him. His teaching continues to guide him. In his words: "Tim said to us, 'No matter what, you must believe in and trust in the divine providence of God..If you will, no matter what comes to you, just trust and have faith in divine providence, you will find a way to sleep at night and wake up the next morning.'"

As for what he meant by Divine Providence, as he put it " This is not chance or bad luck...This is part of something and we may never understand it. I just have to trust there's a plan here and I have to continue to do everything I can to work with what's happening."

He's had to do this before in his life. As an adult, Bill served as a volunteer football coach at an inner-city Memphis high school and this helped him summon the courage to forgive his father, who walked out on Courtney family when Bill was four years old.

More recently, he had to cope with an international trade dispute that nearly wiped out Classic American Hardwoods, Bill's lumber mill. In 2018, China imposed retaliatory tariffs on American agricultural products, instantly lopping off a third of the mill's business. Courtney slashed his own salary, reduced his workforce by 60 employees and scrambled to find new customers.

Then, the Coronavirus hit. Still struggling to regain its financial footing, Classic American Hardwoods now faced plummeting construction demand and paralyzed international supply chains. Then Tim Russell died. Needless to say, there's a lot to be troubled about.

But in these hardships of the past two years, Bill has also gained incredible wisdom, and peace. Bill is a man of deep faith with a gift for expressing himself in plain language. As such, he was profiled recently to give everyday people some advice during this time, which is essentially an expansion of the opening verse of the Gospel

Characteristically, Bill gives most of the credit for his spiritual strength to other people. He said he models his leadership style on Jesus, seeking to serve his employees by empowering them to do good work. In fact in the magazine article in which he was featured, the author noted how he apologized for being late on the phone call, as one of his employees had gotten an upset stomach on the factory floor and Courtney volunteered to clean up the mess. "I smell like I've been in a Clorox plant," he said.

He adopted a similar attitude toward his high school football players, mentoring them on and off the field and giving them credit for the team's victories and their own triumphs at home.

Bill said he has no particular talent for faith. He fuels himself spiritually with prayer, Scripture study and by emulating his pastor's practice of seeking God's presence in everyday life.

"One thing Tim said a lot when he taught Sunday school class, when someone said something about how God impacted their life, Tim would say in his booming James Earl Jones voice, 'That's the Jesus I know,'" Bill said. "I have a daily walk with Christ. I study Scripture...I make sure I'm right with the Lord every morning and every night. And I have 100 percent steadfast, unadulterated faith in the divine providence of God."

Bill said he does not believe God causes or inflicts suffering. Rather, he said he tries to remember that his own perspective is limited and so he does not always see the larger divine pattern or intention in particular moments of time.

In his words: "I ask every night for God to continue to grant me two things: his presence, so I know I'm not alone in this. And his strength...Success has a very odd way of inflating your belief in your own abilities and control. Anyone can be a champ when you're on top of the world. Character is revealed by how you handle suffering and tough times...When you lie in bed staring at the ceiling at 3:00 a.m. wondering what you're going to do, you realize you've never been in control. God is, so you might as well give it to him."

Bill said he will continue working to stay in business and retain his employees, even if it means paying them to stay home. The mill has been deemed an essential business by the government and the skeleton crew works in full protective gear and sanitizes the factory at the end of each day.

Bill wasn't able to attend Tim Russell's funeral because Memphis 'stay-at-home order bans large gatherings. He grieved alone with God and with his family. But through the grief, he also has hope. As he put it:

"Two years of tariffs. This virus. Economic problems. Everything we've done to stay in business and my head is pounding...But at the end of the day, I will submit to the divine providence of God...Do the best you can, and when you release that control, the fear and anger dissipates and you wake up with a smile on your face and you know God has got you."

It's great advice, because we must remember that while God is with us, it does not mean it is smooth sailing from here to heaven. Jesus dies after this meal with His friends; and in time, all of them will die too, most by martyrdom. But this anxiety that they feel at this moment will be ultimately dispelled by fortitude and hope. It's what enables Bill to get up each day with that mentality. So, how can we do it?

As a starting point, I'd invite you to think about that word "heart." In our lives, we can be very guarded with our hearts. It can be hard to open up. But in the Bible, the heart is seen as the innermost core of our being and where we are most ourselves. For instance

Samual says "Man looks on appearances, but the Lord looks to the heart." So this means, we should be willing to come close to God. This means letting God into your heart. Talk to God about your anxieties. Listen to God in silent meditation. Maybe like Job, you are angry or frustrated - it's OK to talk to God about these emotions too, because God knows how you are feeling. Maybe you feel shame and haven't addressed things that you've done, but just kind of ignored them or tried to cover them up. Let God's mercy come to you. Remember Jesus died for you and me, and loves us so much. Christ takes us by the hand and guides us, and he is the "way, the truth and the life." But for us to find peace, it means doing what Bill did, and truly coming to know Jesus by listening to him, and surrendering. To quote Proverbs 4:30, "my son, give me your heart and let your eyes delight in my ways." Scott, our youth director, had a great meditation on this at our staff meeting this week when during the prayer time that he led, he invited us to close our eyes, and think about Christ leading us down a path that was windy and rocky and doubled back, and that we could not see the end of but that Jesus was smiling, because He could see the end of it. All we had to do was trust. That can be so hard, but Jesus will ultimately see us through. There's a saying that "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." Prayer is indeed the key to overcoming or coping with anxiety, for it reassures us of God's presence and reminds us of our need to rely on His strength, not on our own. As St. John Vianney said, "God commands you to pray, but He forbids you to worry."

Second, realize that both what we are going through now in the world, but also in our lives, is a marathon. But the more we think and ruminate, the worse things can be in our heads. St. Augustine of Canterbury was the abbot of a monastery in Rome. In the year 596, he was chosen by Pope St. Gregory the Great to lead a group of forty monks on a missionary journey to England. (There were some scattered Christian communities there, but the island as a whole was pagan and uncivilized.) Augustine and his companions set out, but on reaching France, they were frightened by stories of the dangerous waters of the English Channel and the fierce temperament of the Anglo-Saxon tribes. Leaving his companions there, Augustine hurried back to confer with the Pope. Gregory encouraged the worried missionary and sent him back on his way, after telling him, "He who would climb a lofty height must go by steps, not by leaps." Augustine returned to the other missionaries; they crossed over into England and there experienced great success in spreading the Gospel. But of course all this takes time. So I think it helps to look for the blessings and joys that come in the midst of the storm too. When I ruminate for instance on the future or the unknown, I try to think about the good here and now. Of being with my golden retriever. Of talking to my mom and dad on the phone. Of seeing the hard work of the staff who keeps the parish going, or the volunteers who make this Mass possible. At times it can be easy to ruminate, or to think about all that we don't have, or to go from website to website or news channel to news channel and our minds can get out of control. Maybe check the news once a day realizing it might not end with corona virus cured, but also check over the day and realize there is a lot of good in each day too.

Third, we have to remember too we have one another. On this mother's day, I think of how like so many of our moms, my mom has always been there for me to give me

guidance, love and support. But from an early age, I knew I could open my heart to her. She was there to help me learn how to tie my shoes, to read, but also to comfort me when I had a bad day at school or needed some advice. I'd never have to pretend with her things were always OK, because sometimes they weren't OK. And she was okay with that to listen, to help and to give advice and help shepherd me through the storms. What I need to remind myself is that it is OK to ask for help and to open my heart to others. When I was 6 I remember being upset about getting a time out in kindergarten for talking when we were supposed to be quiet. I didn't want to talk about it but being a bit emotional when asked how my day went, I remember being upset but mom not being upset at all but assuring me it was OK. And when saying Mass two days after Kirby, my beloved golden pyrnees died here at Saint Joes with the school kids, I talked about him in my homily as all the kids gave me cards of support and I got emotional too. I'm a reserved and quiet person, who hates showing emotion in front of others other than laughter, but as the amazing movie "Inside Out" reminded us, we aren't meant to have one emotion, but many, and it's important we share them with others especially when our hearts are troubled.

And lastly, like Bill, and like the apostles, we go forth and do our job. Jesus says "where I am going, you know the way," meaning the way He has shown them of love and faith; faith in God, but love by serving one another. It's why Bill was late to the interview to help an employee and why he's doing so much for his workers. St. Thomas More, from his prison cell wrote to his daughter, "I will not mistrust Him, Meg, although I shall feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear. I shall remember how St. Peter at a blast of wind began to sink because of his lack of faith, and I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to Him for help. And then I trust He shall place His holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning." Sir More was afraid, but he didn't back down in his faith in speaking up for what was true and right, and it got him killed. When fear takes over, it can be paralyzing. We can avoid doing what we know to be right; or we can also miss out on life or greater things. Ultimately in life we must make decisions, but too much brooding can be a big problem. It does not mean being rash and reckless, but it does mean that if we forever ruminate and think "what if the job isn't what I want it to be; what if the virus or something else kills me, what if they don't like what I have to say; what if I am rejected, etc." the "what ifs" will succeed in increasing our stress, but we won't find true peace. In life, some bad things will happen and not work out. But we also have a mission and a vocation; the apostles will suffer and often fail in trying to convert people, but they'll lay the seeds of the Church which the Holy Spirit continues to grow. So hopefully we go forth too and don't get caught up in thinking "what if this fails," but rather have the trust that no matter what life deals us, God will help us to see our mission through to completion.

In order to learn the way of the Lord Jesus we have to let the turbulent waters of our own anxieties and concerns subside. One of the Desert Fathers was teaching one of the apprentice monks about prayer and the surrender of the heart. He took a bowl of water in which sand had settled. When he shook the bowl the sand was agitated, and the water became cloudy. When he set it down and the water was still the sand sank to the bottom. It did not disappear but was submerged in the calm. Not letting our hearts

be troubled does not mean that our cares and anxieties disappear but that they are covered by the waters of calm confidence in Jesus our good shepherd. So let go and let God. We can't yet see the end of Corona Virus, and we can't see where our lives will end - but we do know what when we trust in God and take His hand, and help others to do the same, ultimately we will be led to what eye has not seen and ear has not heard, the Father's house which has a dwelling for you and for me. Let our hearts not be troubled because we can't see where we are going yet, but may they rest in God who will ultimately lead us home.