

“THE FIVE PROMISES OF CHRIST,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 6, 2022

Today is Totenfest or Memorial Sunday—a day of remembrance for us as a gathered congregation. It’s a time to remember those dear to us who have died over the past year, as well as those who may have passed on to God long before yet remain forever close to our hearts. But it is a time of remembrance in quite another sense too. On this day we remember all the promises that Jesus made to those who live and die in faith, trusting in him. Nowhere are those promises more clear and beautifully shared than in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to John.

Let me briefly set the scene for you as John’s gospel reports it. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem in the final days of his ministry. He has healed many people along the way. He has his own fateful encounter with the leadership of Jerusalem’s Great Temple where he has overturned the table of moneylenders and pigeon-sellers, determined to purify God’s house of spiritual defilement. (*Matthew 21:12-13*) As only he can do, Jesus has also raised from death Lazarus, the brother of his friends Mary and Martha. (*John 11:1-44*) Now he gathers with his apostles in an upper room for a meal which he already suspects will be his very last.

However heavy his own heart must be, Jesus’ concern continues to be for his well-intentioned, but still very confused, apostles. Hoping to equip them for all which lies ahead for them as he prepares to face Calvary’s cross, Jesus not only washes their feet as an example of humility and then initiates the custom of the sacramental meal that we will share this very morning for spiritual nurturance. He also speaks right from his heart to them, offering forewarning as to what they can expect in the dramatic hours to come.

On the one hand, Jesus announces his own impending betrayal and death. On the other hand, he reassures his apostles that his death is not something that they should dread as if it is the end of their end of their story together. Instead, as Jesus in all his gentleness makes clear, it is to be a new beginning, a new dawn, and a fresh chapter for heaven and earth beyond anything they might be able to imagine. Jesus then proceeds to explain all this to his apostles in terms of five inter-related promises. Each promise spoken by Christ is powerful in its own right.

The first promise is that there is a place in heaven for any and all of us if we only believe and keep faith with his commandment to love God and to love one another. Jesus doesn’t go into a lot of detail about heaven. Nevertheless, using a metaphor of a big house or mansion, perhaps akin to an ancient Roman apartment building of Jesus’ day that seemed to accommodate an endless number of families, he gives us to understand

that haven is a very commodious and hospitable place with plenty of for everyone ready to be welcomed by God. (*John 14:2*)

In what amounts to a second promise, Jesus also vows that even though he may leave us at the foot of his cross, he will eventually return to personally lead us to our new home with God. (*John 14:18*)

Next, offering what constitutes a third promise, Jesus reassures us that, just as he will eternally abide in heaven as God's own son, the faithful are destined to enjoy without time limits the company of the divine Father and Son when we are finally called to relinquish mortal life. As Jesus so very explicitly says: "Because I live, you will live also." (*John 14:19*). Yes, that means forever.

However, not stopping with these magnificent and exalted promises about the hereafter for us, Jesus also remains attentive to his followers' more mundane and worldly needs here and now. Indeed, as yet a further and fourth promise he offers all of his apostles and disciples some very immediate and heartening reassurance for our continuing, daily struggles on earth. Jesus tells us, for instance, that after his own heavenly ascent, he will ask God the Father to send us a helper—namely, the Holy Spirit. (*John 14:16*). According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit will both instruct and guide us in everything we need to know.

In what constitutes a fifth and final promise, Jesus assures us that very same Holy Spirit will also help us recollect everything which Jesus has taught us through the word and deed of his ministry so that we will continue to feel close to him as our savior, bridging any sense of distance between us on earth and him at God's right hand in heaven. (*John 14:25-26*)

In the midst of all five promises made, Jesus encourages us not only to see aside any anxieties about being abandoned but also whatever fears we may have about what is to come. "I will not leave you desolate," he reminds us. (*John 14:18*) He further adds: "Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid." (*John 14:27*)

As I read it, the deeper message of all of Jesus' final words to his apostles, shared with us, is that if we place our trust in him and embrace the truth of each extended promise, we stand to gain a lasting inner peace and tranquility which the world cannot rile or disturb. Not can even the prospect of our own mortal death will diminish, let alone defeat, such peace that Jesus imparts.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the ultimate power of Jesus' teachings on this score is the extent they did sustain his own beloved apostles after he went to the cross. After Jesus' apostles got over the initial shock of his crucifixion at Calvary and began to take to heart the good news of Christ's resurrection that so soon followed, they faced down

every conceivable challenge with a resilient courage and a resolute hope that amazed all bystanders and onlookers. Many witnesses to this transformation in Jesus' apostles and disciples were similarly inspired to trust and embrace the promises of Jesus as well. Consequently, the Christian community not only survived but thrived against all worldly odds.

Today, being a follower and believer in Jesus Christ doesn't remove all pain, sorrow, or tragedy from our lives. Indeed, Christians like us inevitably face all the struggles that go with mortal life—just as everyone else on the planet does. Yet because of everything that Jesus assures us in those final hours before he walked to the cross, the edge is taken off our anguish. As the Apostle Paul remarks, even death loses its terrible “sting.” (*1 Corinthians 15:55*)

As Christians we can confront this day squarely and tonight go to bed confidently knowing that with the help of both Jesus and the Holy spirit, God is always in our midst seeking to heal, redeem, and bless. Whatever trauma and tragedy overtakes us, God wants us to be whole people again and will not rest until this becomes true. As we remember loved ones lost over this year and more and all that we have gone through since, let us also remember that in Jesus Christ we have a more a loving God who does not forsake us or leave us desolate. May we each find strength in the promises of Jesus. Abiding in these promises and walking together in the grace of Jesus Christ may we be a people of invincible hope. **Amen.**