

Sitting with uncertainty (John 16:12-15)

We are often told that “negative” emotions are to be ejected, tossed aside, and forgotten as quickly as possible.

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It does not feel good when someone important to you says they have something to tell you but asks you to wait until later for the conversation. How many anxious spirals have started with the message, “Can we talk later?”

Our anxious minds attempt to prepare us for the very worst: What could they possibly have to tell us? They’re angry with us? They’re firing us? They’re leaving us? They’re sick? They’re dying? Often, we expend more time and energy playing the worst-case-scenario game than we do actually participating in the conversation.

I imagine this is how it must have felt for the disciples when Jesus said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” I have a difficult time hearing such a statement and not feeling insulted on behalf of the disciples, given that Jesus spent much of his ministry preparing them for his death. What could he possibly have left to say to them that would be heavier to bear than that?

Perhaps it is not the disciples’ capacity to handle troubling information that Jesus is concerned about. Rather, Jesus knows there is so much more to living his way—embodying God’s love on Earth—than the disciples can make sense of in their particular time and context.

That does not, however, soften the blow of anxiety and anticipatory grief felt when a beloved teacher shares with you he will soon be gone, and that there's more to learn that will all make sense later. It is human nature to fear the unknown and to stew over an uncertain future, especially when the one you've leaned on for reassurance in all that uncertainty will no longer be physically present. We want to know the answers now. We do not want to wait.

Many of us are not adept at sitting with uncertainty—and the uncomfortable feelings associated with it—for too long. Perhaps this is because we are so often told that “negative” emotions—like fear, anger, worry, sadness—are to be ejected, tossed aside, and forgotten as quickly as possible. However, psychologists remind us that the only way to get past emotions is to feel them, as if we are practicing the Marie Kondo method of tidying up—holding our feeling in front of us, naming it, thanking it for what it taught us, and letting it pass.

The Holy Spirit Jesus speaks of offers the reassurance we need as we face the struggles of our time. As a community of faith, we have much to feel uncertain about—in terms of not only the state of our church but also the future of our world. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' continued presence with us, meeting us in our time as we grapple with our particular struggles. Though the Holy Spirit will not cure the uncomfortable feelings associated with uncertainty, she will provide the loving presence made known to us in the person of Jesus as we sit with those feelings.

As followers of Jesus, we are asked to sit in the unwanted feelings for just a moment longer—and to be reassured that through the Holy Spirit, we already have what we need, even when it doesn't feel that way.