

For Those Times When You Feel Abandoned

“I will not leave you orphaned.” John 14:18

John 14:15-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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For over a decade I worked in youth ministry – before, during, and after I attended seminary. During that time I learned a lot about teenagers. And even though each generation faces different challenges in our ever-evolving culture, there are still many things that remain the same for all kids going through adolescence. In growing out of childhood and navigating the often-turbulent waters of life toward adulthood, all teenagers face both the joys and fears associated with increased independence.

I know from experience how crucial a good youth group program at church can be in helping teenagers during this time in their lives. Our congregation is very fortunate to have an incredible group of young people, of whom I am only beginning to know personally. Our congregation is also very fortunate to have an incredible group of youth leaders. To you, Jeff Collins, and Elizabeth Buchner, and Bill Nole, and others, I hope you know how appreciated you are, and how important your ministry is to our youth and to this church.

While I have a lot of understanding of what's involved in working with young people, I pretty much don't have a clue when it comes to babies through elementary age children. Therefore, while I understand a lot of the issues that parents of teenagers face, I'm not well versed in the experiences parents of infants, toddlers, and pre-adolescents face. But from what I so know, one of the very real issues that many in this age range go through is **separation anxiety**.

I did a little research on the Internet this week to learn more about this topic. There are, of course, lots of good sources of information to explore. From wikipedia.org I found this simple explanation: “**As babies begin to understand that they can be separated from their primary caregiver, they do not understand that their caregiver will return, nor do they have a concept of time. This, in turn, causes a normal and healthy anxious reaction.**” Many of the websites provide helpful information in trying to lessen the separation anxiety that your child naturally goes through.

Experiencing separation anxiety is not limited to babies, however. Psychologists, in fact, are finding that it's an increasingly serious problem in our society today, and for people of all ages.

There are a lot of factors that contribute to this. With the divorce rate over 50%, adults as well as children experience this particular anxiety. And it's natural to experience this whenever a relationship ends or changes.

Unlike a lot of our grandparents who lived their entire lives in one place, most of us have or will face the anxiety of moving – and not only to another town or to a new place to live, but also anxiety to moving on to something new in your life – like a new job, or college, or a new relationship.

In ministering with folks who have immigrated to this country, I have heard many stories concerning the anxiety of moving to another country, and having to leave one's family, friends and familiar places behind.

There is often an element of separation anxiety, even to the point of feeling abandoned, upon the departure of an "FBP" – that stands for "former beloved pastor." And every one of us experiences this anxiety and fear upon the death, or impending death, of a loved one. I also must be mentioned that there are countless stories by people of faith, perhaps yourself, who go through periods in their lives when they feel as if God has abandoned them.

So I suspect that everyone in this sanctuary today could share a story or two of a time when you felt the anxiety of being separated or even abandoned.

All this is a fairly long introduction to the fact that we aren't alone in feeling these things. For it is certainly a fear expressed by Jesus' disciples after he told them that he would soon be leaving them – in reference to his impending arrest and crucifixion. Even before Jesus was betrayed and taken away the disciples expressed and exhibited symptoms of separation anxiety and a fear of being abandoned by their loving teacher, leader, and friend.

So in response Jesus tells them not to be afraid, for after he is gone God will send another Advocate, which can also be translated from the Greek as Helper, or Comforter. What Jesus is referring to is the Holy Spirit, whom he goes on to call the "Spirit of truth" who will be with them forever. And **Jesus promises that the Spirit will abide with them, and not only with them but also in and among them. That was an amazingly new theological development – the understanding that God actually dwells within us.** Then, in one of the most reassuring passages in the entire Bible, Jesus declares, "**I will not leave you orphaned.**"

Today's biblical text, however, is addressed to more than just those disciples in that upper room on the night of the last supper. The author of the Gospel of John is also addressing an issue that is important to his own community of faith some 60 years or so after the death of Jesus. They would have been wondering: **How is it that the Christian community can experience the very real spiritual presence of Christ without the physical presence of Jesus?**

For this particular generation of Christians, and for every following generation (including ours today), the good news is the promise of the presence of the divine Spirit of God with and within them, and us.

In verses just beyond today's lectionary passage, the author reveals one of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit. Starting in verse 25 of Chapter 14: "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

What Jesus had just told them prior to this is that as his disciples, they should love one another. So **the tell tale sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is our capacity and ability to love.**

The author of the Gospel of John reveals that when we, as disciples, live in love (thereby keeping Jesus' commandment) we experience the indwelling presence of God and Christ. The lesson for the early church was that relationship with Jesus does not depend on his physical presence, but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community.

This emphasis on being a loving community directs us to ask of ourselves: **How well are we, as a congregation, taking on and living out this commandment to love?** How is love present in our worship, in our study, in our fellowship, in our stewardship, in our evangelism, in our welcome and hospitality extended toward visitors, in our ministry and service to others?

When we truly love one another, we reveal the Spirit of truth that dwells within and among this community of faith – and we truly experience the reality that we are not abandoned.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said. Recall these words anytime you feel separation anxiety or the fear of being abandoned. **Perhaps this very day you are feeling the need for greater connection. Perhaps someone else in this congregation is experiencing this. You can count on it.**

What can you and I do to help? **Perhaps each one of us can be more intentional in reaching out to another.** Not necessarily everyone, because it just too overwhelming a task. But perhaps to just a person or two that you sense God is calling you to reach out toward.

Perhaps each one of us can be more intentional in allowing others to reach out us.

A loving community is there for one another when help is needed. This is one of the vows we take, for instance, when someone is baptized, or becomes a member of this family of faith.

Let's reach out to each another in love so that no one experiences the anxiety of being separated or abandoned or left all alone. And let us always remember Jesus' promise, "I will not leave you orphaned."

Amen.