

Dealing with the Separation Anxiety

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

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

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Think back, if you would, to when you were a child. Or think about your own children when they were young. What would you say are some of the greatest fears that children have? Well, for most young kids there's the usual ones like fear of the dark, and sometimes fear of monsters under the bed or in the back of the closet, or in the basement or attic.

Later on, especially as teenagers, many experience a fear of fitting in and belonging. More and more young people today, unfortunately, even fear for their personal safety at school, including the current rise in bullying. All teenagers also face both the joys and fears associated with increased independence as they get older (as do their parents).

Perhaps the greatest fear of them all (and thank goodness not all children experience this) is the fear of abandonment – of being left alone.

When you were a young child, did you ever get lost or separated from your parents or family while at a grocery store, or the mall, or in some other large crowd of people – like the State Fair? **Many of us can probably remember a time when we were young, and lost, and got that horrible panicked sense that we wouldn't be found.** It is indeed one of the worst of all feelings.

Though none of us can actually remember when we were babies, this feeling goes all the way back to when we were under one year old. One expert on this phenomenon writes, “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.”

Separation anxiety is an ever-serious problem in our society today. There are a lot of factors that contribute to this. For instance, with the divorce rate over 50%, adults as well as children experience this particular anxiety. In our very mobile society, there's also the separation anxiety that comes with moving to a new town or even a new neighborhood. It can also be experienced when moving on to something new in your life, like a new school, or a new job, or even moving to a new church. 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 surroundings behind. There is also often an element of a sense of abandonment after the death, or impending death, of a loved one. And it 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.**

I suspect, therefore, that everyone in this sanctuary this morning could share a story of a time when you felt separation anxiety or even the anxiety associated with

being abandoned. Yet with the passing of time, circumstances usually change, and we most often learn to adjust and cope. We discover that our parents could indeed find us again; after a divorce, children most often maintain a loving relationship with both parents; when we find ourselves in a new place we can make new friends; we learn to live again, even if perhaps a little less fully after the loss of a loved one; and hopefully we learn that God never abandons us, under any circumstance.

The fear of abandonment has always been a universal and timeless reality, including for those who we read about in the Bible. It was certainly a fear expressed by Jesus' disciples after he told them during what we call the Last Supper that he would soon be leaving them – in reference to his arrest and crucifixion.

Today's biblical text from the Gospel of John, however, is addressed to more than just those disciples in that upper room on the last night of Jesus' life. 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 spiritual presence of Christ without the physical presence of Jesus.** For this new generation of Christians, and for every following generation – including ours today – the scriptures promise the presence of the divine Spirit of God.

Different English translations translate the Greek word *parakletos* (from which we get Paraclete) as “Advocate” (NRSV) or “Comforter” (KJV) or “Counselor” (NIV). We are also told that this divine spirit is the Spirit of Truth. **One of the purposes of this Spirit of Truth is to “remind” believers of what Jesus has said and to empower them to fulfill his commandments.** In this way they will know that Christ dwells not only with God but also dwells within them.

The author of John goes on to reveal that love, which is so central to his understanding of Jesus' mission, is defined in terms not of emotional feelings, but of “accepting” and “obeying” Jesus' instructions.

The author has indeed set up a kind of distinction (which I know we try to avoid) between who is inside the community of faith, and who is outside. This distinction, however, unlike modern times, is **not about what a person believes, but is between those who love, and those who do not love.** Those who call themselves followers of Jesus are defined then, according to John, **as those who obey Jesus' command to love.** Perhaps you've never thought of this as a way to define what it means to be a Christian. **When we, as disciples, live in love (thereby keeping Jesus' commandment) we experience the indwelling presence of God and Christ. That is a primary way to define the role of the Holy Spirit.**

There was a wonderful and wise older gentleman in his mid-80s who was a member in the congregation I used to serve in Dallas. For some particular reason, this life-long Presbyterian came up to me after worship one Sunday and said, “I pretty much understand the part of God being the Creator, and Jesus being the model of how we should live our lives, but I still don't get the Holy Spirit.” He's not alone, for I've heard similar comments here.

I referred him (as I do you now) to this biblical passage, with its particular understanding of **the Holy Spirit as that which reminds us and empowers us to love others.** Or to put it another way, **the telltale sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is our capacity and ability to love**

When we refer back to the original Greek language we notice that all the personal pronouns “you” in these verses are plural, not singular. **The promise of the**

divine presence, therefore, is a promise made to the community, not merely to the individual.

That bear repeating, in this particular passage Jesus does not promise the Spirit to individuals, per se, but to the community that lives in love. That has a lot to say as to the role of the Christian church today.

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**. One biblical commentator writes, "The insistence of these verses on love as the sign of fidelity to Jesus and the way to communion with God suggests that the believing community in any generation will enter into relationship with Jesus only when it takes on and lives out the love that Jesus revealed."

This emphasis on community, rather than on the individual, 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 outreach and social action?

Love should always be our primary motivation for ministry. For when we love one another, that is when we experience the presence of Christ within and among us. When we love one another, we reveal the divine Spirit that dwells within and among this community of faith.

These three promises: God's presence; the continuing spiritual presence of Christ among us; and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, reiterate one of the greatest promises of God in the Bible: "I will not leave you orphaned."

Recall these words anytime you feel separation anxiety, or the anxiety of abandonment, or of being left alone. 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 to everyone, because that's 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 more importantly, 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. So reach out to each another in love. Remember Jesus' promise, "I will not leave you orphaned." An know that there is no place that you can go where God is not also present with you.

Amen.