

“Peace | leave with you; my peace | give to you.”

John 14:1-3, 15-19, 25-29
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Have you ever had an experience known as **separation anxiety**? Since it's a normal part of the developmental process in growing up, all of us have felt this at least once or twice, like when we turned around in a crowded place and a parent just wasn't there. That's when we probably became overwhelmed with a sense of being lost and left all alone. Separation anxiety can be triggered in older youth and adults by any number of things. It can be experienced in the loss of a loved one, something many in our community of faith are facing at this very moment, the death of a beloved pet, the ending of a relationship or friendship, leaving or losing a job, going away to college or watching a son or daughter move away from home for the first time, or having to move from a place that is familiar and comfortable.

I bring up the issue of separation anxiety because this is the backdrop, the context, of today's Gospel reading from John 14. The author of this gospel shares a story that deals directly with a specific and very real fear. It's perhaps even worse than separation anxiety. It's the **fear of being abandoned**. Many struggle today with abandonment issues.

Jesus acknowledges this fear in his disciples after he told them (during what we call the Last Supper) that he would soon be leaving them, referring to his impending arrest and crucifixion. 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 faced a question that just wouldn't go away, and it still hasn't.

- How is it that the Christian community can experience the *spiritual* presence of Christ without the *physical* presence of Jesus?

The answer found in this gospel is Jesus' promise that after his departure God will give them an Advocate, to be with them – and us – forever. That promise: the same divine Spirit of God that was in Jesus of Nazareth will be sent to dwell within us. That's what we will be celebrating next week on Pentecost Sunday.

Different English versions of the Bible translate the Greek word *parakletos* (from which we get Paraclete) as “Advocate” (NRSV) or “Comforter” (KJV) or “Counselor” (NIV). We are told that this divine spirit is the Spirit of truth. We are also told that **one of the purposes of this Spirit of truth is to “remind” believers of what Jesus taught, and to empower them to fulfill his commandments – specifically the command to love one another. In this way they will know that Christ dwells not only with God but also dwells with them.**

The author of John goes on to reveal that love, which is so central to his understanding of Jesus' mission, is defined not in terms of emotional feelings, but as "accepting" and "obeying" Jesus' instructions. Biblical commentator Nancy Ramsay writes:

Love is seen in Jesus' life as service and compassion. It is also seen in his fierce protests against those who abuse this vision of the value of each person and the importance of an ethic of mutual regard and care. The love that Jesus commands has as its goal the well-being of all persons regardless of social status or any other distinction...

Then comes the remarkable assurance that the love Jesus offers is in fact God's love... The love to which God calls us does not intend hierarchy. The reality that love creates discloses to us the truth that **God calls us to be neighbors – to recognize in the 'other' one who God also loves and calls us to love.**

Admittedly, the gospel writer has indeed set up a kind of distinction of who is a true follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus. This distinction, however, unlike modern times, is *not* about what a person believes. Rather, it is between those who love God, their neighbors, themselves, even their enemies, and those who do not love. **Those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus are defined (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. "And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

When we live in love, thereby keeping Jesus' commandment, this is when we experience the indwelling Presence of God and Christ. That, in turn, is an effective way to define the role of the Holy Spirit. **The Holy Spirit is that which reminds us and empowers us to love others – not only as individuals, but especially as a community of faith.** Or to put it another way, **the telltale sign of the Presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is our capacity to embody, to incarnate, love.** So, we must ask the following questions of ourselves as this community of faith.

- How well are we embodying and living out this commandment to love?
- How is love present in every aspect of what we do every time we gather together in community?

The promise of God's Sacred Presence, the continuing spiritual Presence of Christ among us, and the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit, reiterate one of the primary promises of God found in the Bible: John 14:18, **"I will not leave you orphaned."** Recall these words anytime you feel separation anxiety, or the fear of abandonment, or of being left all alone.

All of this leads to another one of the greatest promises in scripture. John 14:27 states, "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." Chances are these words are familiar to you. That's because this passage, along with Psalm 23, is one of the most common readings in the context of a memorial service – words we've had to hear too often lately. **It is in and through the understanding that we will never be abandoned by God that brings meaning to Jesus' words, "Peace I leave**

with you; my peace I give to you.” These are some of the most pastoral words found anywhere in scripture.

We are also meant to take notice that there is indeed something different in the internal peace that Jesus gives and the peace that the world gives. Reflecting on this passage from John 14, biblical commentator William Barclay wrote over 60 years ago:

The peace that the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble, the peace which comes from refusing to face things...

The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace which no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can make less. It is the peace which is independent of outward circumstances.

The peace that Jesus promises results from the Presence of the Holy Spirit teaching us and assuring us that the Sacred Presence of God is among us and dwells within us. This is what we enact and remind ourselves of each Sunday during the Passing of the Peace, when we share with one another the words, “The peace of Christ be with you,” and respond with, “And also with you.” “The peace [that Jesus gives],” writes another biblical commentator, “is the confidence that God is God, that God loves the world, that God is for us, and that God makes that love real in acts of self-giving. Therefore, neither our pains nor our pleasures, neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate; they do not create nor do they annul the peace of God.”

As you depart from this sanctuary today, and throughout this coming week and hopefully always, cling tightly to this promise from Jesus:

I will not leave you orphaned... The Advocate, the Comforter, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all 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.

Amen.

Resources:
Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, *Feasting on the Word*
William Barclay, *John*