In Times of Separation Anxiety

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

*John 14:15-21 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

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Living through a pandemic hasn’t been easy! And, of course, not everybody has. We’ve addressed this here in past weeks, but since things are still difficult and disoriented for most of us, our continued reflection is warranted. Let’s acknowledge, therefore, that **even as we are all trying our best to simply cope, there’s still a lot to cope with**. And now that places are starting to reopen, that now includes turning the wearing of facemasks in public into a politicized issue. And often, the guiltiest are men who have been convinced that it’s a sign of weakness and an affront to their rights – public safety be damned. Oh, vanities of vanities.

Remember, this is something none of us have ever experienced before. Though it differs from person to person, one of the many issues most of us are struggling with, whether we recognize it or not, is **separation anxiety**. There are a lot of factors that contribute to this, including a difference in specific causes, often related to age, and different ways the anxiety is experienced. **Separation anxiety is a strong experience of distress or worry when separated from that to which we have become attached**. That attachment can be to a particular person, whether a family member or a friend, to a loved one who has passed away, to something we cherish, to organizations such as work, school, or church, and even an attachment to simply following a regular routine.

Separation anxiety, however, is as old as time itself. In today’s Gospel Reading from John 14, Jesus continues his long conversation with his disciples, known as his farewell discourse, during what we know as the last supper. The disciples are experiencing separation anxiety in the form of the fear of abandonment after Jesus told them of his impending departure. We know this because the gospel writer states that Jesus says, “’I will not leave you orphaned…In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me” (vs 18). Orphans, of course, were among the most vulnerable persons in that, and any society.

This biblical text, 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. The text states, “I will ask [God], and [God] will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (vs. 16

The Greek word *parakletos* (from which we get Paraclete) is translated differently in various English versions of the Bible. They include: “Advocate” (NRSV) or “Comforter” (KJV) or “Counselor” (NIV). We are also told that this divine spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Later in this same chapter, it is revealed 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, especially the one he had just given them, that they love one another as he has loved them. In this way they will know that Jesus dwells not only with God but that Christ also dwells within them.

The author of the Gospel 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. 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.

This is the love that calls us to love others – every, single, other! (to quote my friend and colleague, the Rev. Chris Moore).

Admittedly, the gospel writer has indeed set up a kind of **distinction** (which I know we try to avoid) between who is considered inside the community of faith, and who is outside. This distinction, however, **unlike modern times, is not about what a person believes. Rather, it is simply between those who love – love God, themselves, their neighbors, even their enemies – and those who do not love.** Those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus are defined then, according to John, as those who obey, thus embody 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 followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, live in love (thereby keeping Jesus’ commandment) we experience the indwelling Presence of God and Christ. That, in turn, is an effective way to define a primary role 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 to embody love**.

In this particular passage of scripture, it is important to note, Jesus does not promise the indwelling 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 church today and to our own mission and ministry. The lesson for the early church was that relationship with Christ does not depend on Jesus’ physical presence, but on the Presence of the love of God in the life of the community. This emphasis on community, rather than on the individual, directs us to ask of ourselves: **How well are we, as a community of faith, embodying and living out this commandment to love?** How is love present in every aspect of our ministry: in our worship, in our study, in our fellowship (which has not stopped just because we are currently apart), in our stewardship, in our evangelism, in our outreach and social action**? Love for others and for one another must always be a primary motivation for our ministry efforts.**

These three ongoing promises: God’s Presence; the continuing spiritual Presence of Christ among us; and the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit, again reiterate one of the greatest promises of God found in the Bible: “**I will not leave you orphaned**” (vs. 18). **Recall these words anytime you feel separation anxiety, or the fear of abandonment, or of being left alone. And yes, these words are taking on an even deeper meaning and relevance during this time of physical separation from one another.**

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**, and not just to those in obvious need. I recognize that it isn’t very realistic to reach out to everyone at this level. That’s just too overwhelming a task for any individual.

But we are a community. That’s the approach being taken by our Congregational Care ministry team – **we are ALL responsible for caring for one anothe**r. So perhaps, reach out in love to just one or two persons that you sense God may be calling you to reach out toward. As importantly, some of us might need to be more intentional in allowing others to reach out to us. **A loving community is there for one another, even if we cannot currently do so in person.** Remember Jesus’ promise, “I will not leave you orphaned.”

As the ancient psalmist so poetically wrote, know that there is no place that you can go where God is not also present ***with*** you. Then add to that the promises from John 14, that God is also always ***within*** you, and ***among*** ***us***. It is my hope and prayer that this will help us all during this time of separation anxiety.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word