

Finding Comfort from Separation Anxiety

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

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
June 1, 2014

I'm going to start this sermon with potentially problematic question. **What are your greatest fears?**

Psychologists tell us, in part, that it somewhat depends on our life circumstances, even our age. Evolutionary biologists tell us that some of our fears are hard-wired due to the process of evolutionary development itself.

You are probably somewhat familiar with the poll taken of **adults** in this country. **The list of greatest fears include:** Public speaking, death, spiders and/or snakes, darkness, heights, social situations and other people, flying, confined spaces, open spaces, thunder and lightning. Other commonly listed fears include: loneliness, sickness and pain, and financial problems. While most people have a fear of change and the loss of the familiar, these are especially strong in fundamentalist personalities. Many politicians, business executives, and some religious leaders fear the loss of power and authority.

Going back in age, **teenagers**, for the most part, have some of these fears in addition to others that are especially prevalent in their age bracket. Many of these fears are carried into adulthood. **These include the fear of:** fitting in, belonging, and whether their lives will make a difference. Many fear for their personal safety at school, including bullying. All teenagers also face both the joys and fears associated with increased independence as they grow out of childhood (this is a fearful time for most parents as well).

Going back even further, young children, especially toddlers, deal with yet a relatively different set of fears. Most have to do with their safety. **Common fears in toddlers include:** the dark, monsters, weather, bad dreams, strangers, masks and costumes, the bathroom, doctors and dentists. But perhaps one of the greatest fears that very young children have is the **fear of separation and being left alone.**

Toddlers process the leaving of their primary care giver as, “Why are you leaving me? What if you never come back? I feel safe when you are with me and afraid when you go out of my sight.”

Interestingly, adults can also experience that fear of separation and being left alone. I would suspect that each one of us could tell stories about times when we had to deal with separation anxiety, whether it be triggered by having to move, or the loss of a loved one, or the ending of a relationship, or leaving a job. **With all of these listed fears and more, learning how to deal with them and cope with life, primarily by putting them into perspective, is crucial to our well-being.**

Some of our fears are necessarily based in reality. **Other fears, however, often have less of a basis in reality, but are rather a product of an over-active imagination that tends to obsess over the 'worst that can happen.'** But, of course, it rarely does.

You may be wondering what any of this has to do with today's Gospel Reading from John 14. Actually, a lot. The author of the Gospel of John shares a story that deals directly with a specific and very real fear, the fear of being abandoned. Within the context of what is known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus acknowledges this fear that is being experienced by his 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, 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 continued presence of the same divine Spirit of God that was in Jesus of Nazareth.**

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 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 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 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...

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 (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. Rather, it is between those who 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 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 of Jesus, live in love (thereby keeping his commandment) we experience the indwelling presence of God and Christ. That, in turn, is **an effective way to define the 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, 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.

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 congregation, embodying and living out this commandment to love? How is love present in every aspect as we gather together in community?**

Love for others and for one another must always be the primary motivation for our ministry efforts. For when we love one another, that is when we experience the presence of Christ, the Divine Spirit of God's Presence, within *and* among us. These ongoing 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 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 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, 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 – that we are ALL responsible for caring for one another. 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, each one of us can **be more intentional in allowing others to reach out us.** And yes, I know how hard that can be for some of us introverts and isolationists who are much more comfortable keeping our 'force fields' up.

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

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. And add to that the promise from John 14, that God is also always *within* you, and *among* us.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word