

While I'm Away

John 14:23-29

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It's one of those things that anyone who has dealt with small children has witnessed. Parents experience it, as well. I'm talking about separation anxiety. Here at the church, it happens at that moment when parents are carrying their toddlers and they are approaching the nursery. The child suddenly starts to grip her parents tighter and tighter, and the smile disappears from her face. Then both parents go into the nursery, so that one of them can pry the toddler's fingers off the other, and transfer the child into the loving and gentle arms of one of our nursery staff. By this time the toddler is screaming desperately, eyes popping out and face alternating between red and purple.

Let me assure you that the child isn't crying because the nursery is a bad place, because in fact we have wonderful staff and volunteers caring for the children. But the child is crying because there comes a time, especially between 8-14 months of age, when children become frightened when they meet new people or visit new places. Their parents are familiar and safe, and when they are separated from their parents, they feel threatened and unsafe.

Separation anxiety is something I suspect the disciples were feeling when Jesus told them he would be leaving them. The disciples are with Jesus in the upper room, the night before Jesus would be crucified. He has told them that he is going away, and where he is going they cannot come with him. Jesus senses their anxiety, and so he tries to encourage them: Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.¹

Jesus informs his disciples that he must go away. It is a divine necessity he cannot avoid. In fact, the reason he has to go away should be a cause for joy for the disciples, because Jesus' departure will be an act of redemption. But that doesn't do much to allay the fears of the disciples. What will they do without the one who has been their teacher and friend for all these years?

And so Jesus seeks to assure his disciples. He assures them that while he's going away, nevertheless he will never leave them nor forsake them. In essence, Jesus says to his disciples: I'm going away, but while I'm away, you won't be left alone, for I will still be with you. You see, we have this need to know that we're not alone. Even more, we have this need to know that the one who has promised to protect us and preserve our lives has not left our side.

This coming weekend hundreds of people will gather at the high school football stadium for the Relay for Life event. We should take special pride in this year's event, as our very own Cheryl Gause is the chair for the relay here in Georgetown. Of course, the primary goal of the event is to raise money for the fight against cancer. But aside from the money that is being raised, there is something else that takes place through the night as people walk the track. Cancer survivors can see that they're not in this fight by

¹ John 14:27b

themselves. They are not alone. They are surrounded by scores of others who are fighting the same fight. They are surrounded by hundreds who by their presence tell them they care.

People need to know they will not be left alone.

Jesus promises us, “While I’m away, still I won’t leave you alone. I will be with you.” It is one of the ironies of our faith that in Jesus’ absence, he gives us the gift of his presence. And in this morning’s text he offers us three words of encouragement to remind us that while he’s away, still will he be with us.

First, he promises us that he and his Father will come and make their home in our hearts. Jesus tells us, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them...”² Jesus is not saying that God’s love for us is contingent upon whether or not we obey Jesus; rather, Jesus is telling us that it is when we love the one who has first loved us—and we love him through obedience—then we will experience the indwelling love of the Father. It is when we love God through obedience that we will experience the immediate and permanent presence of God in our lives. Loving God turns our hearts toward God and makes us aware of God’s presence. It is when we turn our hearts toward God that we see that God has already made his home with us. Much later John will write in his first epistle, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”³

Jesus says, “While I’m away, still will I be with you. Trust and love and obey, and you will know that my Father and I abide with you.”

The second way Jesus promises his presence is by sending us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The word that John uses for the Advocate is “Paraclete,” literally one who is called alongside to help. That is the role of the Holy Spirit—to come alongside us as our help. “A paraclete is the one who comes to your defense, your rescue, your comfort, and Jesus has done that for his disciples.”⁴ Throughout this farewell discourse found in these later chapters of John, Jesus helps us understand the work of the Holy Spirit—to be continually with us and in us, to be our teacher and to remind us what Jesus has said, to bear witness to Christ, and for the unbelievers to convict them of their sin. And Jesus also tells us that he must go away before the Spirit can come.

It is worth noting that every task assigned to the Holy Spirit is also assigned to Jesus. That is because Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one and the same, just as Jesus and the Father are one and the same. This is a very Trinitarian passage. Therefore when the Holy Spirit comes alongside us, it is Christ himself who is alongside us. And as we will be reminded in two weeks on Pentecost Sunday, it is through the advent of the Holy Spirit that the presence of Christ is manifest in more than one place at a time. Previously, the presence of Jesus was limited to his twelve disciples. But through the Holy Spirit the presence of Jesus becomes a worldwide presence. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus is able to be every bit as present for us as he is at this very same moment for other believers around the world.

Jesus says, “While I’m away, still will I be with you, for the Holy Spirit, the Advocate and the Helper, will come alongside you and will lead you in all truth.”

Finally, Jesus gives us the gift of his peace. “Peace I give to you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” It is a peace that is unique to Christ, unlike any other peace that one can experience apart from Jesus. Later on Paul will

² John 14:23

³ 1 John 4:16

⁴ James G. Somerville, “Who Will Take Care of Us?” *The Christian Century*, May 6, 1988, p. 471.

refer to Christ's peace as the peace that transcends all understanding.⁵ The kind of peace that Jesus gives is far greater than a lack of hostilities or a cease-fire. The kind of peace that Jesus gives is shalom, that sense of wholeness and well-being that comes with a right relationship with God. It is a peace that gives both comfort and courage in the midst of the trouble and the sea of anxiety that buffets our world.

There was a cartoon in which a man was lying on the couch of a psychologist. When the psychologist asked the client what his problem was, the man confided that he had all kinds of fears. "Doctor," he said, "I'm worried about the price of gas, the economy, the situation in the Middle East, political and social upheaval around the world, the threat of terrorism..." and the list continued. In the final frame of the comic the psychologist responded to the man laying on the couch, "Shut up and move over."

Our is indeed a troubled and anxious world. In such a world as we live today, Jesus promises his peace. His peace can be ours because he is with us. And in his presence we need not fear nor be troubled, for it is in his presence that we find tranquility and calm for our anxious soul, courage and comfort in the midst of trouble.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus was with his disciples on a boat. Jesus was sleeping, and a storm arose and threatened to destroy the boat. The disciples were terrified, and they awoke Jesus. Jesus stood up and turned toward the raging water, and he said, "Peace! Be still!" And the Scripture says the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.⁶

That story becomes a metaphor for us, to remind us of the One who has power over the storms of our lives. Whether it is the economy, or the fear of terrorism, or racial unrest, or fear of the wrath of nature—to whatever it is that threatens our lives, Jesus says "Peace! Be still!" The peace that Christ gives to us can be ours because though he has gone, still he is with us.

While I'm away, says Jesus, still will I be with you. And though it was on the night before his crucifixion that Jesus told his disciples this, nevertheless the same promise applies for us today. For this Thursday the Christian Church will mark the Ascension of Christ into heaven, that time when the resurrected Jesus left us until he comes again in glory. And so his promise remains valid for us today: While I'm away, still I will be with you. He will be with us, dwelling in our hearts through our abiding in his love; He will be with us through the power of the Holy Spirit that comes alongside us and guides us and helps us; and in his presence he will give us peace, his peace.

Therefore, let not our hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. Amen.

⁵ Philippians 4:7

⁶ Mark 4:35-39