

Psalm 150
John 14:1-7, 25-27
Text: John 14:25-26

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 21, 2011

ALONE, AND IN GOOD COMPANY

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you.
But the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name,
will teach you everything, and remind you of everything that I have said to you." *John 14:25-26*

Picture the disciples sitting cross legged on the floor in eastern fashion, some lounging on cushions beside a low table. It is Passover when a mood of celebration should fill the air, but instead it's like a Christmas or Thanksgiving on the eve of sending loved ones off to war. There is a more predominant mood of farewell in the air this night, of separation, with all its attendant sadness.

The disciples, sensing that the security of their world is soon to come crashing in around them, sit like small children watching parents pulling on coats and moving toward the door. And they ask the same three questions that our children ask.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to be with my Father," says Jesus.

"Can we come, too?"

"Not now," says Jesus. "You cannot come right now. But I'm going to prepare a place for you so that you can come later."

"Well, who's going to stay with us while you're gone?" they ask.

"I will send a companion to be with you," says Jesus, "a friend, a comforter for the journey; the Holy Spirit. And He will help you remember all that I have said to you."

Fully five chapters in John's gospel, one fourth of the gospel material, is given over to the theme of separation, of farewell.

Jesus is in the upper room in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark in Jerusalem, on the eve of his crucifixion. Here, John presents Jesus in the last of a series of extended discourses that are designed to prepare the disciples for their soon-to-be-separation from him. Jesus wants to leave his fearful disciples with the assurance that they will never be left alone, in spite of his absence, that another constant companion is on the way to them, one in whom they can rest secure.

When Jesus speaks of an abiding place, a place to live, he uses the word *monai*. It can also mean a place in mid-journey as in a hostel, a place of shelter and rest on along the way. Biblical people understood life to be a journey, a pilgrimage

to a final, secure resting place. The Book of Acts even refers to the earliest Christian community at least six times as “The Way,” conveying the notion of a journey both really and in faith.

In the earliest Latin translation of the Bible, the Catholic Vulgate, the Greek word *monai* is rendered *mansio*, which means a halting place. Unfortunately, William Tyndale whose marvelous translation of the Bible into English was so influential upon the King James version, translated the Latin *mansio* as “mansion.” In his day “mansion” did not have the sense of a palatial dwelling, but that came to be its denotation centuries later, and the sense of *monai* as a resting place on a journey, even at the end of a journey, became lost.

Along the roads of rural India, periodically the traveler will come across a rough shelf built on top of posts by the side of the road. The shelves are approximately shoulder high, and they are called *soma tonga*. People who walk these roads carrying loads on their backs (which is how things are moved in the majority of the world) can stop at a *soma tonga*, place their burden on the shelf for a moment or two, and when rested, resume their journey.

Not surprisingly, Christians in India came to call Christ their “soma tonga,” because Jesus is the one who offers us rest and release along the way. We do not have to bear our daily burdens in isolation and we do not have to bear them forever. We can lay our burdens down for a few moments and know that God will give us rest and grace sufficient for the day.

The point that Jesus is making is not merely that he was leaving to prepare a final place of refuge for us, but more significantly for this life, a series of resting places along the way, for when we need to lay down a burden and draw breath in companionship with God. This so well fits the notion of a comforter and counselor, a steady and constant friend which the Holy Spirit was destined to be. Not merely at the end of this time of separation from Eden but until the end.

Feelings of separation are among the deepest emotions of our time, whether it is the too suddenly barren landscape of Joplin Missouri, or those still homeless from the floods in Minot, ND, or military families watching loved ones go to their third, fourth, even fifth tour in Afghanistan, or streams of East African refugees aching to call anywhere home.

There are also separations of a different kind. The adjustment to a new life after the death of a loved one, a parent, spouse, or child, a separation so little understood by those who have not gone that way. In such a time the dependable companionship of twenty, fifty, sixty years is swept aside in the twinkling of an eye, and the journey must go on without them. There are singles, some of whom choose their singleness freely, while others have it thrust upon them by hard circumstance. Often, these singles feel from the rest of us an imposed stigma upon their aloneness. For we live in a culture still dominated by the shadow of Noah’s

ark where twos are much the rule. There are separations of enormous consequences even within the same household. Lives that have grown vast distances apart while sharing the same roof. The hollow in the mattress at less than an arm's length distance may yet be a prodigal's journey away. There are separations of the spouse who must work far from home; the serviceman and woman in a distant state or country; the prisoner in the cell.

Few, there are, who do not feel the imposition of some exile, some distance from another. Yet even in the midst of these separations there are some gains to be made from this common experience.

Jesus did not say I will be to you as the spouse you have lost, or the land you long for, or the relationship you have been denied. He did not say he would avert the crisis or bridge the distance. These are the painful givens of our existence. What he did say was, "I will not leave you comfortless, friendless, alone." "I sought the Lord and he answered me," said the psalmist, "and delivered me from all my fears." "This poor one cried and the Lord answered." "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

My own experience, and I suspect yours, too, is that this comforter is often borne into my own life through some human agency, no matter how unaware the bearer may be. The Spirit comes, in short, *incarnate*, veiled in the flesh of another, an angel unawares.

This was certainly the experience of the late and beloved American actress, Helen Hayes. Writing in *This I Believe*, she told of losing a daughter to polio and how in her grief she cut herself off from friends and from God. She wrote of how she cut God out of her life and didn't have the nerve to ask him back in. Nevertheless, she went to her church in New York City and prayed there every morning, looking for a restoration of faith and union with God. And then, much later, she discovered that the separation had been overcome, and that it had happened right there in the church. She began to recall, vividly, one by one, the people she had seen there—the solemn laborers with tired looks, the old women with gnarled hands. People whom life had really knocked around. But for a brief moment they had been refreshed by an ennobling experience in their private worship and prayer. It had seemed, as they rose from prayer, that their worn faces had been lighted up and they became the very vessels of God. And suddenly she realized that she was one of them. "I experienced a flood of compassion for people," she wrote, "and have never since felt separated from the love of God."

"Where I am going you cannot yet come, but I will send the comforter, the Holy Spirit to be with you," said Jesus. And the Spirit will be with you at all points along the way to ease the separation and to bring you joy.

Amen.