

No Need To Be Lonely

(A sermon on John 14:18-21 [RCL Year A, Easter 6] for children and adults delivered at St. Luke Episcopal Church, Cincinnati on May 21, 2000 by the Rev. William G. Gärtig.)

Loneliness is one of the most common and most painful of life's experiences. Our pets feel it when we leave them to go on a vacation. Children feel it when they are sick and have to stay home while their friends are all at school. We all know loneliness when we are new to an area and we haven't made any friends yet. And Jesus' friends, the disciples, felt loneliness when he was arrested by the Roman army and killed. They loved Jesus very much, but now it looked like they would never see him again.

It's natural for us to feel lonely from time to time. This is because we were not made to live by ourselves. God made us to live with other people. None of us would be happy if we were shipwrecked by ourselves on a desert island because there would be no one to talk to and to share our feelings and experiences with. We just weren't made to live by ourselves. That is why some people say that human beings are "social animals."

We need to be in relationships with others, even if those relationships are not all easy and happy. What I mean is that even if we fight with our friends, if they are our friends, we want to stay friends with them. And we may be angry sometimes with our parents or our brothers or sisters, but we wouldn't want them to go away, because we love them.

And sometimes if a child feels neglected by his or her parents, feels that they are not giving the child their attention, he or she may even do

things that he or she knows are wrong, just to get the parents' attention, even if the attention the child will get is a spanking. This shows us how important it is for us to be in relationships with others. We will even do things that other people don't like, just so they will pay attention to us.

But if we would rather have people angry with us than ignore us, if even a relationship which is not entirely happy is better than no relationship at all, how much more important to us is a relationship with someone where we *can* feel comfortable and share life's joys?

God knows our need for others, for friendship and support. God ought to know; God made us this way. So God gives us a family and friends.

But God doesn't just give us other *people* to live around and to go through life with. He offers us *His* friendship, *His* company, *His* support and encouragement. We can know and love God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the good news our Lord is telling us this morning in our Gospel lesson.

Jesus knew what loneliness was. His friends didn't really understand him. They didn't understand a lot of what he told them. And they didn't understand why he did a lot of the things he did. And sometimes when Jesus said things that people thought were crazy, they walked away from him and wouldn't come back to listen to him any more. So Jesus lost

some friends over the things he taught, even though they were true. And then in those days before he was killed on the Cross, when it was dangerous to be seen with Jesus because the police were looking for him, every one of his friends ran away and hid, leaving Jesus alone.

It hurt Jesus to be deserted by his friends. But do you know what he said? He said, “I’m not alone because my Father is with me” [John 16:32]. Even though everybody had run out on him, his Father in heaven had not left him. And it was from Jesus’ relationship with his Father in heaven that he got the courage to face all the terrible things people were going to do to him.

Well, in today’s Gospel reading Jesus promises his disciples (and that can include us) that he won’t leave them lonely, even though he won’t always be with them in person, in the flesh. This is what he says: “If you love me, you will obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever” [John 14: 15-16]. Now “Paraclete” is not the same thing as “parakeet,” the little bird. “Paraclete” is a Greek word that we use for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is translated with the word “Counselor,” and sometimes we just say “Paraclete” without translating the word. What “Paraclete” means is someone who is called to your side to help you. For example, if you were accused of some crime, then someone who came in and spoke on your behalf, saying you were innocent, could be

called a paraclete because he or she came to your aid.

Another meaning the word “paraclete” can have is someone who calls another person to do something, like a duty, and encourages him or her to do it. This part of being a paraclete has to do with begging or urging someone to do something and also consoling and comforting a person. These are all things someone might do and be called a paraclete.

Notice that here Jesus promises his friends that God the Father will send “*another* Paraclete.” This means that the Holy Spirit, who was going to come to the disciples, was not the first Paraclete. No, Jesus was a Paraclete too. He had come to humanity’s aid, and to the aid of particular men and women and children, and had helped them. There were the blind and the crippled and the sick people he healed. And there was also one little girl who had died, but Jesus brought her back to life. Jesus was *always* helping people. In fact, his whole coming down from heaven to live on earth, his *whole life*, was a coming to our side to help us, to make it possible for us to know God and to obey God, and to live with God forever.

Our Lord Jesus was also a Paraclete because he encouraged people to have faith and trust in God and to do what is right. Jesus taught his disciples and all the other people who listened to him about *living*, about how to live the *good, loving* way God wants us all to live. Jesus urged and asked people to love God and to treat each

other kindly, as they would like to be treated. In doing this, too, Jesus was acting as a paraclete.

And now Jesus says that although he will be going away to return to his Father in heaven, God the Father will send another Paraclete to be with his disciples forever. That Paraclete will do the same kind of things Jesus did. He will come to our aid and help us with our problems and give us strength and courage and also show us the way God wants us to live.

Maybe you’ve had an experience like this before. You were in a situation where somebody ignored you or did something to you that you didn’t like, and your first thought was to get back at them or to stomp away and never talk to them again. But then you got this idea that what you really ought to do was not to go off mad or to hate them but to try to understand them and give them another chance—to try to be kind to them, even if they hadn’t been kind to you. If you’ve ever had that experience, that probably was the Holy Spirit talking to you, giving you the idea to be kind and forgiving. So you see, it doesn’t have to be by anything weird and amazing that God the Holy Spirit speaks to us. It can just be a thought that we get that tells us what would be the good thing to do in a certain situation. Also, when we might tend to be afraid of something, and we pray to God and then feel a peace and calmness inside, that can be the Holy Spirit strengthening and encouraging us. That’s why the Holy Spirit is called the

Paraclete, because He does things that a paraclete does: He comes to our aid, strengthening, encouraging, and guiding us.

And here is something really special: after Jesus talks about another Paraclete coming (the Holy Spirit), he says this: “I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you” [John 14:18]. The Greek word translated here as “desolate” really means “orphaned.” So Jesus here promises his disciples that he will not leave them alone in the world like a child whose parents have died. No, he will come back to them so they won’t be alone. And how will he come back? I think Jesus means that he will come back to be with them (and us) forever in the Holy Spirit. So the second Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) is not really separate from the first one, Jesus Christ.

Because the Holy Spirit and Jesus and the Father are one, when one is with you, the others are too. (After all, they are all God, the one God.) So when the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, is with and in Jesus’ followers (like all us Christians), so is Jesus. So Jesus is not separated from his disciples, even though he died and went to be with the Father in heaven. Jesus is going to be with his disciples (and that can be us) forever.

So we don’t have to be lonely. Oh, sure, if we are sick in bed for several days and no one can come and see us, we are going to miss them. But even then we won’t be alone, because God can be with us.

There *is* a cure for spiritual loneliness. If we ask Jesus to be with us and ask the Holy Spirit to come to our aid, then that’s the way it is. (Jesus is *actually* with us always, we just have to reach out for him and call on him to know that he is.)

Now, other people won’t see Jesus there with you, but he’ll be there anyway. Jesus said, “in just a little while the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me; because I have life, you also will have life. On that day you will recognize that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I in you” [John 14:20].

There need be no more spiritual loneliness. If Jesus is in us and we are in him and he is in the father, then we are not alone. We are in a relationship — a very close relationship — with God. In fact, what Jesus has just said means that we are in as close a relationship with him as he is in with the Father. And there can be no closer relationship since in another place Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.”

This may seem hard to believe since many of us don’t feel all that close to God most of the time, but the relationship is there all the same. Maybe an analogy will help. When a man and a woman marry each other, we say that they become one. But it usually takes time for them to actually learn to become very close in their relationship so that they *really* become one. They have *the chance* to become one. No one can *stop* them from becoming one, and they have the *perfect right* to become one (and in some ways they *are* one, whether they know

it or not). But it is possible for them to live together in the same house and to sleep in the same bed for years, but, maybe because of a lack of trust, never to really communicate with each other and to know and love each other. Now, the relationship of oneness is there, at least potentially. It is a legal and a theological fact that they are one. But they have to grow into that oneness, into experiencing their oneness.

We could think of God as a loving husband who finds his wife keeping away from him and not trying to really relate to him. Maybe it’s because of fear, fear that he wouldn’t really love her, that she doesn’t open up to him and let him console and encourage her and love her. So it is that we have Jesus present with us in the Holy Spirit, but we don’t usually open ourselves to that loving husband who is just waiting to help us and comfort and encourage us. So we are spiritually lonely. But it is stupid to be that way. It’s really not necessary. Our husband, Jesus, is right by our side, or in us, and wants to be a Paraclete to us, if only we would call upon him and let him.

Let us pray. Gracious heavenly Father, Blessed Holy Spirit, One God, we don’t want to go through life without knowing the God who made us and loves us, and who we need to rely on. We ask You to make Yourself real to us and let us know Your presence and love and Your will for us. You have made us to live in relationship with You. May we not keep away from You for fear or for any other reason at all. *AMEN.*