

March 18, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Never Ever Lonely

John 14:25-26; John 16:4b-15; Psalm 139

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In our sermons in recent months we've been looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it in the gospel according to St. John. There are four accounts that we have in the pages of scripture of Jesus' life and his ministry and we come today as we've heard in our scripture reading to the 14th, through the 15th and 16th chapters of John's gospel where we find Jesus teaching his disciples in a room, in a house, in the city of Jerusalem on the night when he is going to be betrayed and arrested, within hours of his death upon a cross.

And in this room he is speaking to his disciples, his closest friends, sharing with them his final words, his parting instructions and part of what he says to them is that "it's the end of the road." It's not a message that they want to hear. It's the end of the road of their ministry with him as it has been in the last two or three years. And this is shocking. This is de-stabilizing. This causes a great deal of anxiety – and it's Jesus' fault! Jesus walked into this trouble by himself.

If you go back into the earlier chapters you find the disciples saying to Jesus "you don't want to go to Jerusalem. It's dangerous there." Jesus says, "but I'm going anyway." And they throw their hands up in the air and say "well we'll go with you even if we have to die with you." And they go and they know what's going to happen, and they know that Jesus has walked right into it. And now is the moment where Jesus says "I've done it. Deliberately: this is part of the plan. This is part of the purpose. But I must make it clear that from this moment on I will not be with you as I was in the past. But I also want you to know some other things that will help you in your time of anxiety." As if Jesus, even at this point when he is going to face terrible humiliation and pain and suffering, cares for his disciples to prepare them for his departure.

He knows they're going to be anxious. In a modern setting, for example, their anxiety might be expressed like this... many of you have been to

graduate school. Perhaps you've been to a college or a school where you went there because of a particular professor, and maybe you've been doing some research for two or three years with that professor, with that mentor, with that teacher. And then the professor comes to you and says, "Well I've just received a better job offer. I'm off to another college, another school, another university and I'll be leaving soon." And there you are in the middle of your research, and you say. "Wait a minute! What about me? What about me? How am I going to finish my work? Don't you care about me? Where do I fit into your plans and your purposes?" There's a practical part of this and a very deeply personal part. Practically, the question is "How will I finish my job? You are the person I want to work with." And then, personally, the question becomes, "Why? Why are you doing this *to me*? Why? Don't you know how I feel, abandoned, uncared for, alone, lonely as if I did something wrong? Perhaps I'm to blame?"

What an awful feeling that is when we sense this kind of anxiety, this sense of separation and loneliness. Unfortunately, these are feelings that many people in our society feel at some time or another. I suppose we all do, but some live with this constantly within their lives. Some of those who feel lonely like this, abandoned like this, do actually live alone. But some who feel like this live with others. They have many people around them, family, friends or so it seems; they live in community, but nevertheless beneath the surface there is this awful nagging sense of loneliness.

Just this past week, the lead article in Time Magazine was entitled "Living Alone is the New Norm," and it to the massive growth of single-person households in our nation over the past 60 years. Back in 1950, 9% of households were single person households. By 2011 that percentage had more than tripled to 28%, and even higher than that in cities like ours; 28%, 33 million people living alone.

Now this is significant for all kinds of reasons sociologically, and is significant for our ministry together as a church as we think about who our neighbors are around about us. The article was very careful to point out that living alone and loneliness are not necessarily related to each other. They're not necessarily the same thing. Some people who are alone are lonely. Some people who live with others are lonely. Some people who live alone don't feel lonely at all. They're not necessarily related to each other. But nevertheless that feeling of loneliness, that feeling of 'being alone' is rampant throughout our society.

You can feel lonely by yourself; you can feel lonely in a crowd. You can feel lonely even when you're with others because of some relationship in the past in which you felt abandoned and you cannot get rid of that feeling in your soul – a sense of abandonment and rejection by a parent or by a child or by a friend or by a colleague, by somebody of significance, and it lingers with us no matter where we are or who we are with.

And with his departure our lord Jesus realized that his disciples could well feel this way and it could well be going through their minds that they had been rejected, abandoned; that they were being left as if they were orphans. And so Jesus prepares his disciples for this change within their lives. *He equips them even in their aloneness not to feel lonely nor to feel rejected, but to know that even in this stage of transition he would be with them now almost more closely than he had been before, not only with them, but in them.* So he gives to them a great promise and that promise is the promise of the Holy Spirit who will come to you he says. He will come to you when I have gone.

Let me read to you some of the verses from our scripture reading beginning in Chapter 14 and at verse 18. Jesus speaks through his disciples on this night just before he is going to be betrayed, just before he's going to be arrested, just before he is going to die, and he says

I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you." And at verse 20: "On that day you will know that I am in my father and you in me and I in you" [DR: our lives inextricably bound together], "but the helper, that is, the Holy Spirit whom the father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. (in fact!) It is to your advantage that I go away. [DR: You may not feel it right now, but something better is at hand] for if I do not go away, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will not come to you, but if I go [and this is the promise] I will send him to you." I will! A promise! On this you can depend!

Throughout the New Testament, throughout the New Testament scriptures the various terms "Holy Spirit," "Spirit of God," "Spirit of Christ," "Spirit of Jesus" are intimately related to each other. They are in fact one and the same. They are different ways of describing God's presence with us through the Spirit, bringing Jesus to us when Jesus-in-the-flesh is no longer here . . . God's presence with us by the Holy Spirit bringing Jesus to us while he is no longer here in the flesh. This is his promise: "You may not see me, but I'm here *with* you and *in* you in a way that I have not been in the past.

This promise is an enormous promise. In today's terms I suppose it's almost like a promise that we can have constant Internet Wi-Fi connection or electricity wherever we go! And on such connectivity these days, so much of our society increasingly depends.

One hundred and fifty years ago, if you were to say to people "you know this promise of Jesus' presence is central to our faith. Even though you can't see him he is with you!" – they might respond by saying, "Right! Why do you believe that? If you can't see him it's not real. And beyond that, why would you want that kind of day and night connection to live your lives. Who needs it?"

But things have changed in 150 years. We now, more than then, depend on 'invisible' connections with others as an integral part of our lives. Not only radio, not only television, not only our cell phones, but now more than ever, the Internet with us everywhere. Though we cannot see it, we cannot see the waves that provide it, we all trust in it and depend upon it wherever we go. And when it's not there, we ask, "Do you have it, can I get it, where can I hook up? It is such a part of our lives. And we believe it! We not only depend upon it, but we believe in its existence because of the results that we see, because of the impact on some kind of a screen or some kind of a microphone that we do have in our hand. We don't see it, but we believe it's real because of the results.

When Jesus said to his disciples that he was leaving them visibly, but would still be with them by the Spirit, he was saying pretty much the same thing. Even though we see neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit, nevertheless, there are some guaranteed results of what will happen in our lives when the Spirit comes to stay, not just with us, but make Jesus present with us.

And what are those guaranteed results? Well let me take you to our scripture again.

1. Conviction of Sin. The first one may seem to be a rather strange result and perhaps a downer, but nevertheless it's a vital result. If in fact we are to be effective followers of Jesus, never lonely, serving him faithfully throughout our lives, the first impact of his presence will be what theologians have always called "the conviction of sin." – The conviction of sin; the conviction of our human weakness, our human inadequacy to do what we want to do in the sight of holy God. Let me read you part of Chapter 16 at verse 8 again. Jesus speaks. He says *"When the Holy Spirit comes he will prove the world [you and me!] wrong . . . He will prove us all wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment, about sin because they do not believe in me."* [DR: Even though I am the Son of God! Even good people don't believe in me. That shows how far we are off track with God about righteousness: what is right! " . . . because I am going to the father and you will see me no longer, [DR: even though I'm crucified on a cross God accepts my act as righteous and will receive me into his presence], because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

When the Holy Spirit comes he will prove us all wrong about "sin and righteousness and judgment." The general view of life in our society is that sin is "not that big of a deal." Not a big deal. There may be some for whom it's a big deal, but it's just not that big of a deal for most. Nor is God's righteousness a big deal! Or God's judgment! But when the Holy Spirit comes the first job is to convince us that these things are a big deal. Our sin, God's righteousness, our judgment – these things are of great immense, enormous importance in our lives and *something needs to be done about them* if our lives are to be right with God.

Indeed the Holy Spirit's work in some ways is to turn us all into Episcopalians! . . . who pray in the old Book of Common Prayer: "we have done things we ought not to have done and we have left undone things we ought to have done and there is no health in us."

Who wants to say this about ourselves? "there is no health in us?" I certainly don't like to say this about myself! But the Holy Spirit comes and says this is the truth. This is the truth and it's critical – not to destroy us; not to destroy our self esteem; but so that you and I, like alcoholics, can come to that point where knowing we are helpless ourselves can claim help from another, a power greater than ourselves. It is the essential first step. And this, says Jesus, is the work of the Spirit who will never leave us alone, but who will bring Jesus to us, convict us of our sins so that in the second place we can have just as overwhelming a sense of assurance that we will never ever be abandoned by God ever.

2. Assurance of Relationship. That's the second work of the Spirit is deep assurance of our relationship with God: that Jesus has come to us as 'Savior'; that he has borne the judgment we deserve, that the righteousness judgment of God has been satisfied in his death. And that we are now right with God – now and always. Listen to these words once again: "*When the Holy Spirit comes he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment*" — He will work within our hearts to make us know that these things are of critical importance, but that God has come to our rescue through Christ. And back to Chapter 14 and at verse 20,

"on that day you will know [DR: you will have an assurance by the power of God's Spirit] *you will know* [DR: as we cannot know by ourselves] *that I am in the Father* [DR: that Jesus' relationship with God the Father is a deep foundational and eternal relationship within and beyond the universe; the eternal relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son that is the Trinity] . . . *On that day you will know that I am in the father and you in me and I in you.* [DR: that we have a relationship that nothing on heaven and earth can undo. That in Jesus Christ we have been blessed and bonded to God forever.] *I will not leave you orphaned.* [DR: You do not disappoint me. I love you and want to travel with you through all eternity. All of the sin and evil that can separate you from me, I have taken care of it. I have thrown it into the depth of the sea. Now hold my hand and come with me forever].

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. This conviction of sin, this assurance of our salvation, of a relationship with God that is eternal. And then in third place the work of the Holy Spirit is to come and say to us that just as God gave life to Jesus so God gives life to you and me too – power to follow in his path, to remember his teaching from this moment on.

3. Remembrance of Jesus' Teaching. Jesus says to his friends, "*I will not leave you orphaned.*

I am coming to you. Because I live you also will live. On that day you will know -- know that I am in my father and you in me and I in you. I have said these things to you while I am still with you, but the help with the Holy Spirit whom the father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."

This is the third work of the Spirit: to teach us about Christ; to draw us back to his original teaching, passed down to us from that first generation of followers. In this third work, the Holy Spirit first draws the lives of those first followers back to the two to three years they'd been with him so that they remember and understand what they have been taught – recollecting much that may have passed straight through their minds, in one ear out the other! And then the Spirit continues to work in that generation, enabling them to tell and re-tell the story and then write it down for future generations in what would become the Scripture. And then in the days that followed up to the present, the work of the same Spirit provides the impulse or nudge for people like you and me to pick up "The Book," read it and seek understanding.

So simple, so down to earth, so mundane, so ordinary, and yet so powerful and transformational – to pick up the book and read it as if the Jesus who lived here in the flesh wanted to speak through these pages to you and me: through the Bible to you and me.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. This past Thursday, I met briefly with our third graders (who are receiving their Bibles today) and told them something about the importance of the Bible in my life. I mentioned to them that I did not learn what was in the Bible by going to seminary or by going to college. Rather, I learned what was in the Bible because from the time I was 13 I went to a Christian summer camp, and became part of a group at camp that encouraged me to read a short passage from the Bible every day of my life (well, I'm not sure I did it every day! There were days I missed like everybody else . . . but most days, from age 13, a small passage, meeting with Jesus Christ every day). And I believe he met with me! He came by the Spirit and (1) brought me to Jesus, empowering a relationship that was based (2) on a conviction of sin and (3) on an assurance that Jesus was a savior who would never fail me nor forsake me and that he would teach me all my life long that nothing – that nothing – could take away.

And reflecting on this relationship and work of the Spirit, I think that it's true, surprisingly true, that in all those years, although I've never lived close to home (indeed, most of my life has been very far from both my home and family and my wife's), and although, in moving from church to church I've had to make and then break relationships and friendships with many people, YET, I think it's fair to say that there have been very few times when I have felt lonely or that God was far away. Of course there are times when I cry out like others: "Where are

you, Lord? Where are you? “ But the assurance of the Spirit has been constant: that despite my sin Christ is there, my teacher and my friend, and will be forever.

And this is what Jesus promised his disciples at that very moment when they wanted to scream at him, “What about us? Why are you doing this . . . to us?” At that moment he says, “Wait a minute, I’m actually going away for you ,I’m not doing anything to you or against you! Listen, if I do not go, the Spirit will not come, but if the Spirit comes the Spirit will convict you of your need for help in a way that perhaps I cannot. He will convict you of the fact that I have provided that help not only in my life, but in my impending death and my resurrection. He will lead you back to me, so that my presence and my teaching can be placed deep within your lives and souls forever.

Notice this: Jesus does not say that when the spirit comes you will begin to speak in tongues!

He does not say that when the spirit comes he will make you stand up and dance and do things which are very un-Presbyterian!

Rather, he says the Spirit will convict you of your sin, give you assurance of your relationship with God and his closeness to you, and will teach you what Christ has said, so that we can be his faithful followers all our lives long . . . never alone, never lonely, but walking this life with the Savior who will never fail us or forsake us.

My friends this is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God.

Let us bow before god and pray.

Holy God help us to bow before you in awe and wonder. How amazing that this message of Good News was given to followers who both failed you and forsook you, Lord Jesus, so long ago at the cross. And yet you trusted them with the message. And as they experienced your Holy Spirit they preserved it and shared it so that through their fallible and ordinary lives we this day can follow in their footsteps, and in yours. So come to us, too, by your Spirit with conviction and assurance, enabling us always to listen for your word. Be our teacher for this life and for all eternity, amen.

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