

I Am Still With You

John 14:23-29

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When I was about eight or nine years old, I developed a fear of the dark, along with a very active imagination. Needless to say, I had a hard time going to sleep at night. I would imagine all kinds of scary things that might happen after dark, and the only way I knew how to guard against them was to sit up all night and keep a lookout. Eventually, my mother would come sit with me until I could fall asleep. And over time, I became less afraid of going to sleep at night, but only if my mom was in the room with me. Occasionally, as I began to drift off, I would worry that she would think I was asleep and leave me. If I weren't quite ready for her to go, I would call out and ask, "Are you there?" A voice from the end of my bed would respond, "Yes, I'm still here. Now go to sleep."

Years later, after I had graduated from high school and was struggling through my first year of college, I would often call my dad just to hear his voice. He has a "radio quality" voice. Just the sound of it was enough to calm my hysterics over the prospect of failing second level biology. (I did fail it, by the way.) He helped me cope when no one else could. He would listen for a while and then say, "It's going to be all right. Don't worry now."

Ten years after I graduated from college, I told my grandmother goodbye for the last time. I had been staying with her during the last stage of her fight with cancer. After my week of caring for her, my mother arrived to take my place, and I went back to Atlanta where my obligations were piling up. It was hard saying goodbye because I knew in my heart that it would be our last, and I wasn't ready. I was just beginning to learn the source of her strength and trust and mind. I was just beginning to learn who God was calling me to be, and I needed her to help me make some important decisions. I wasn't sure how I was going to do this without her in my life. I wasn't ready for her to die, and nothing she could say would really prepare me for the loss.

Letting go is hard. And during this time of year, our congregation faces goodbyes at every turn. Those among us who are graduating from high school and preparing to enter college this fall face the inevitable separation from friends, teachers, mentors, and families. Some parents are saying goodbye to their eldest child. Others are watching the last one leave the nest. And we have said goodbye to many others from whom we have been separated by death this year.

And so it goes; it seems that we are forever saying goodbye—goodbye to childhood, goodbye to high school, goodbye to friends, goodbye to jobs, goodbye to relationships—goodbye, goodbye, and goodbye. One would think that saying goodbye would get easier over time because we seem to do it so often. But it doesn't. Each separation is a loss that we mourn, whether it is temporary or permanent. Having to say goodbye reminds us just how fragile life can be. At times such as these, we might wonder whether anything will remain the same, whether there is anyone to whom we can hold on and never let go.

Today's passage from John's gospel speaks to such a time in the life of the

disciples. It is part of a long series of farewell conversations that Jesus has with them in anticipation of his departure. He begins the conversation with a comforting word, one with which many of us are familiar: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14: 1, 3).

Jesus is going ahead of the disciples, but he promises that he will not leave them. “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (John 14: 20). And from today’s passage, “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 all that I have said to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14: 25-26, 27a).

Jesus is going away, and he knows his leaving will be hard for the disciples. That’s why he tells them about it beforehand. Jesus will no longer be among the disciples in the way they’ve come to know him during his life, but after his death, he will come to dwell within them through the presence of the Holy Spirit. He tells them: “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” (John 14:23).

We Presbyterians are sometimes accused of not recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. While it’s true that we aren’t known especially well for our spontaneity during worship, we know that the power of the Holy Spirit works even through gatherings that are decent and in order. Sometimes we sense the presence of God’s Spirit working in and among us only when we sit very still and listen very quietly.

During session meetings, our prospective members always remind us of the work of the Spirit in their lives. People are often moved to tears by the testimonies of these prospective members as they tell about how they came to our church or why they want to join our particular faith community. It isn’t always something we can describe with words, this presence of God. Sometimes, we don’t even know it until we look back at a difficult time and realize that we could not have survived it alone, without God’s help. Sometimes, we plow ahead for years at a time, thinking we know exactly where we’re going and exactly what we’re doing. And then, unexpectedly, God takes us off our path and shows us another way. Encounters with the Holy often start with just a feeling or an impulse that we learn to trust over time. Sensing God’s presence and learning to trust in that presence is the work of Holy Spirit. That’s what Jesus promised the disciples, and that’s what he promises also to us.

About a year after my grandmother’s death, I began to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life. I began to discern that God was calling me in a different direction. But decision-making was always hard for me, and facing this particular decision was extremely difficult. I could think of lots of good reasons to keep me from going to seminary, but ultimately, it was my own fear that really held me back.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, however, I managed to put aside all the good reasons not to go to seminary. I quit my job; I called my parents; I applied to Columbia (in that order). And suddenly my life began to change, not just vocationally, but spiritually. I drew on strength I didn’t know I had before, and I began to learn what it was to really trust.

Like the voice of a mother answering her child when she calls, “Are you there?” Jesus responds, “Yes, I’m still with you. Now go to sleep.” Like a father at the other end of the telephone line when his daughter calls to hear his calming voice, Jesus is there, always willing to listen. Like the presence of a grandmother in the memories of her voice, in the music of her favorite hymns, in the punch lines of her favorite jokes, Jesus is always with us through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, supporting us, loving us, and teaching us to trust.

In the midst of all our goodbyes this season, when life seems fragile and transitory, when everything around us seems to be changing, remember God’s promise to dwell in us and be with us forever. We don’t even have to reach for God because God has already claimed us. God is holding us, even now, and God will never let us go.