

## **“I Will Not Leave You as Orphans”**

***April 27, 2008 | Sixth Sunday of Easter | Year A***

### **Lectionary citations:**

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

John 14:15-18 "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

This week I was in McDonald's, as a single person I go there perhaps more often than I should, but anyway, ahead of me in line was a grandmother and a little girl. The little girl could walk and talk, so I suppose she was around 3 years old. This little girl was in a very happy mood. She would look at her grandmother, then look at the fountain—the Cape McDonald's has an unusual fountain where water streams down a large pane of glass—she would laugh, run over to the fountain, stick her hand in the water, look at her grandmother, laugh, and then run back to her grandmother and put her wet hand on her grandmother's wrist. This was obviously a great deal of fun, because she kept doing it over and over again, and she seemed completely happy and unafraid.

In counseling jargon, she had a “secure attachment” to her caregiver. Secure attachment\* has four characteristics in children:

1. Children who are securely attached do not experience significant distress when separated from caregivers.

2. When frightened, these children will seek comfort from the parent or caregiver.
3. Contact initiated by a parent is readily accepted by securely attached children and they greet the return of a parent with positive behavior.
4. While these children do not become exceptionally distressed by a parent's absence, they clearly prefer parents to strangers.

For these children, the caregiver acts as a secure base from which the child can explore the surrounding environment. Secure attachment is not always achieved. Instead, the child may cling excessively to the caregiver, may appear indifferent to the caregiver, or may seem confused about how to respond to separation. Lack of secure attachment can cause challenges later in life in maintaining long-term relationships.

The reasons why secure attachment is or is not achieved are unique to each child and are somewhat mysterious. One way to look at it is whether a child can turn a caregiver into what is called an “internal object.” Put simply, can the child bring the caregiver to life in their mind and heart, so that the caregiver is present to the child even when he or she is physically absent? Is a child’s emotional life ruled by “out of sight, out of mind,” or by “absence makes the heart grow fonder?” I have known children, and adults, who are simply unable to feel someone’s love unless that person is physically present and interacting with them. This inability to bring those who love you to life in your heart makes it very difficult to be alone.

Jesus clearly intended for his disciples to have a secure attachment to him. As Jesus said in John 10, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” Jesus knew that his disciples would need that secure attachment to have the strength to go out into the world and spread the Good

News. In today's Gospel, Jesus is concerned that the bond between him and the disciples will survive his death, resurrection, and ascension. I believe that he is looking ahead beyond the disciples who knew him in the incarnation to the future Church. How can we, who never met Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh, have a secure attachment to him?

Some of us have been blessed with the gift to keep those we love alive in our hearts, long after they have been separated from us, even by death. If Jesus had just been an extraordinary and holy human teacher, his disciples might have been able to keep him alive in this way, even passing down stories and traditions to following generations. In this way, the wisdom of teachers such as Confucius, Gautama Buddha, and Mohammed have been passed along. However, in today's Gospel, Jesus was promising something entirely different: "Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. Anyone who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

Jesus explains the coming events to the disciples. He will be going somewhere they cannot yet follow, to the cross. He will die and be raised up to life. He will show himself in his resurrected body to the disciples and then ascend to the Father, to prepare a place for them. He will return at a future time to take them to that place. Jesus has not abandoned his disciples. Yet there must be a time in which he is no longer present with them in the same way he has been, as the bodily presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

In today's Gospel and other portions of his so-called "farewell address" Jesus begins to explain the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to the disciples. However, in making this explanation, it is quite evident that Jesus is totally uninterested

in providing a formal theology or doctrine of the Trinity. His concern is solely on maintaining the loving relationship that he has established with his disciples. Although some may disagree, I believe there are only slight hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament. Jesus is bringing something new into the relationship between God and human beings. It is not that God has changed his nature. Nevertheless, God has chosen to relate to us in a new way, in a way that uses the Triune nature of God to move that relationship to a new level of love and closeness.

Jesus offers a new and wonderful way to experience God, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is an advocate, a comforter, a teacher, and a protector. However, he is not a temporary replacement for the Father and the Son. He is not a legal guardian who stands in the place (*in loco parentis*) of our real parent. Instead, the Holy Spirit has the power to transform our relationship with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit can do something that we human beings cannot do for ourselves, no matter how wise and righteous we are. The Holy Spirit can transform our hearts so that we can truly love Jesus and keep his commandments. The Holy Spirit will teach you how to love and be with the Son and the Father even though they will not be physically present with you in the bodily form of Jesus of Nazareth. As Jesus said, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

In John 20, the resurrected Christ comes to the locked room and breathes the Holy Spirit into the gathered disciples. "Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." From that day forward, the church calls upon the Holy

Spirit in Baptism. As Peter says in Acts 2, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We receive this baptism today when we join the Body of Christ.

Returning to the little girl in McDonald's, each of us can ask ourselves, “Do I have a secure attachment to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit? Have I opened my heart to the Holy Spirit so that the Son and Father can come and abide with me? Do I have the secure base in God that allows me to grow, explore, and take risks? Do I have the confidence that even when I cannot feel God with me, he is right there beside me, waiting for me to turn my heart towards him? Do I want to be an orphan or a beloved adopted child of God?”

I believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit that we received at Baptism is working constantly to transform our hearts, so that we may be truly “born of the Spirit.” However, it is our choice whether our reason and our will conform to the Spirit’s power or fight it every step of the way. Jesus has given us everything we need to live in joy with the Son and the Father. All we need to do is believe. To believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even though they have never been seen or known by the World seems like an impossible challenge. That is why God has given us an advocate, a comforter, an advisor, the Spirit of truth to be with us forever. As Jesus said to Thomas, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” With God’s help, I know we can do it. Amen.

\*Source: “Attachment Styles” by Kendra Van Wagner, About.com found at <http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/ss/attachmentstyle.htm>

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