

Introduction

In John 13–17, during the Last Supper, we see Jesus' last sermon to his disciples and it's a disturbing time for Jesus and his disciples. For the disciples, it was stressful because Jesus is acting and talking strangely.

- Jesus washes the disciples' feet, a new height of humility for Jesus and humiliation for the disciples.
- Jesus predicts that two people in that room will betray him.

These facts are in themselves troubling enough. But Jesus adds to the strain by telling his disciples that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father. There's no wonder that Jesus repeatedly told his disciples not to worry, to not let their hearts be troubled, nor fearful, or sorrowful.¹

Jesus himself was admittedly "troubled in his spirit". He was fully aware of the incredible burden of the coming events, that he'll be praying in the garden to the Father, asking him, "if you are willing, remove this cup from me". Still, in spite of what must have been an excruciating agony of soul and mind, he doesn't waver from his task. He doesn't turn aside from his love for his wayward disciples. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."²

I am again astounded by the degree to which Jesus' love for his disciples and his absolute commitment to their well-being makes him so mindful of their condition, even when they are not mindful of his.

And I'm especially drawn to the phrase in vs. 18: "I will not leave you as orphans".

Loneliness Inherited

"I will not leave you as orphans." Isn't that a strange thing to say? Of all the things about which Jesus spoke, why did he bring this up?

To begin with, we have to understand the place of orphans in the culture of Jesus' day. They, together with widows, were among the most vulnerable and helpless class. They were exposed to poverty, injustice, hunger, sickness, and of course, crushing isolation.

And the Lord cares very much about those who are rejected, isolated, lonely, and vulnerable. In the Bible, one of the commonly repeated examples of genuine obedience to God, is whether one cares for orphans and widows.

What Jesus is saying is that he knows his disciples will be like those orphans, unless they are cared for. Jesus is saying, "I will not let you become among the most isolated

and vulnerable of people”.

Why is this a concern? I first observe that rejection and isolation are inherent in the human condition. Why? It's the result of a very old problem.

Came About ...

Before acting as if they knew better than God, our first parents had perfect relationships, both with God (vertically) and with each other (horizontally).

But their disobedience, isolation and such related themes as despair, alienation, rejection, solitude, abandonment, and loneliness have preoccupied human thinking.

- They lost relationship with God in their disobedience, believing Satan's lie that God did not have their best in mind.
- They lost relationship with each other, especially after Adam threw his wife under the bus by saying, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”³
- They even lost relationship with the world around them, reaping sorrow, unproductivity, and hardship, instead of joy and satisfaction in their work.

Who are my friends? My enemies? Who is for me or against me? She loves me ... she loves me not. In that moment of disobedience, the harmony of relationship was turned into suspicion, fear, and isolation.

Common Theme in Scripture

The results of separation from God are played out over and over in Biblical history.

- The isolation of Ruth from her people and from the people of Israel comes to mind.
- By the time Jesus begins his ministry at the age of 30, his mother Mary is widowed. With Jesus' death, she would have become further isolated from society, were it not for the beloved disciple John taking Mary into his family at Jesus' request.
- The threat that the Lord will no longer accompany Israel through the wilderness is more than Moses can bear.
- Indeed, among Jesus' last words on the cross are ones that display his sense of isolation: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁴

Dominant Theme In Culture

Abandonment and isolation are dominants theme in our culture, aren't they?

- They're certainly part of our music (Cyndi Lauper's *Time after Time*, Smashing

Pumpkins *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, among many others).

- The theme is reflected in poetry (Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*).
- It's reflected in books and movies in all sorts of ways (*The Man Without a Country*, *Oliver Twist*, and *The Christmas Carol*).
- It has even driven our use of computing power with so-called social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and many other such sites?

I once asked a dragster driver: "What are you afraid of?" He told me: "Afraid? You must be kidding! I drive my car at over 200 miles per hour with a 1,000 horsepower engine right next to me. I'm not afraid of anything!" I asked: "What about loneliness?" Without hesitation, he answer answered "Loneliness? I am afraid of that."

Being isolated, even alone with our thoughts, frightens us in western culture. Radios, TVs, computers; these things are all a kind of "noise" that helps drown out the necessity of facing a moment of solitude.

Real relationships are too frightening. The artificial relationships of social networking are safer. I think that one reason why social networking is so popular is because it requires no real risk of becoming isolated. Sure, people can "unfriend" us; but there are still the other 10,000 of our so-called friends on our lists.

Living alone. Dying alone. Suffering rejection. Becoming isolated from others. Feeling cut off from others. All these things preoccupy us.

Loneliness Relieved

I still haven't answered the question, "why does Jesus speak to his disciples about them not being orphans?" Jesus is promising relief for that threatening estate by saying, "I will come to you". But it's not immediately clear what he means by that or how he intends to accomplish it.

Presence

Jesus spends a great deal of time in these chapters on the theme of presence. Of vss. 15–31, every vs. but 15 and 29–31 somehow refer to the themes of presence, isolation, or help being given. That's 12 out of 16 vss in this short section, 75% of the text!⁵

God's remedy for isolation is his own presence, whether in the person of the Son, Father, or Holy Spirit.

What do we do with this fact? That he is present—there is no doubt about that. But whether we are aware of his presence and have learned to depend it, that is the difficult

thing.

Is he present in your life right now? Is he present in St. John's life and work, finances, plans, and people? Is he present with respect to 1150 Bristol Rd.? Is he present in my life as I continue to search out answers concerning my cancer? Is he present in your frustrations or fears? Is he present in your marriage, or in your singleness? Is he present in temptation? In victories of spiritual warfare?

Again, I say, there is no doubt of his presence. But are you actively aware of it? Is the presence of God something that can be learned and practiced? It **can** be practiced and learned and by making use of some very old-fashioned ways.

I mean prayer, Bible reading, Lord's day worship, and godly fellowship. These aren't merely things that Christians do because Christians do these things. They are essential disciplines. On an essential level, it doesn't matter so much if you do them well or regularly. It matters most if you do them at all.

Talk to God. Chat with him through the course of the day. Ask him questions. "Lord, what you trying to teach me with this flat tire? How should I respond to that person's insults? Forgive me for my sudden rage behind the wheel this morning and help me to be more patient. Oh yes, Lord, please help me remember to defrost the chicken tonight."

Read the book. If you're not sure where to start, ask me or someone else.

Don't treat Sunday like Saturday #2. Lord's Day rest is still one of the 10 commandments!

God's Loving Care for the Weak

Second, I observe that the vulnerable, the weak, broken, the rejected, the unjustly treated, all these and others are still attractive to the Father. In fact, I could say that God wants us to be weak. Actually, that's not precisely correct. We are weak. God wants us to recognize that weakness, brokenness, and fickleness and lean on him.

We have a Doberman Pinscher—a rather large dog. One of the endearing things that he does is that when I scratch his ears or under his chin, he leans his whole body weight on me. If I were to quickly step back, he would have to adjust his stance or he would fall over. We are told by dog experts that this attribute displays his trust and confidence in us, even his submission to us.

God's power is perfected in our weakness, says Paul. The remedy for isolation is either standing in our own strength or leaning on the everlasting arms.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, Leaning on the everlasting arms; What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Refrain:

Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms; Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear, Leaning on the everlasting arms; I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Refrain

God wants us to lean on him. He has a special heart for every vulnerable human being who turns to him and acknowledges their need for him. Authentic religion, genuine faith is not defined by the strength of our faith. It's defined by the faithfulness of the one on whom we place our faith, even Jesus himself.

This is also a task to which God calls the church. In St. John's, we need to be a safe place for those who lean on Jesus. We need to honor the courage of those who openly confess their weakness, ask for help with their struggles, and look for accountability for their sins. Would that we all had such courage with each other!

Jesus As The Author And Example Of Faith

Finally and most importantly we need to consider Jesus himself. He is the one who must be present for our peace. He is also the perfect exemplar of practicing the presence of the father.

- Wasn't he despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and ... we esteemed him not?⁶
- Wasn't he the rejected stone, which became the chief corner stone of God's household?⁷
- Didn't his own relatives doubt his sanity?⁸
- Didn't his disciples run away in the time of his greatest need for companionship?⁹
- Didn't Peter reject him, with a curse, no less?¹⁰
- And didn't he hang on the cross crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", but the heavens remained silent?¹¹

Why did he voluntarily undergo all these things? He did them for our sakes. He became "orphaned" for the orphans, widows, the sojourner, and every person who is isolated, rejected, outcast, alienated, in despair and lonely. In so doing, He is the one who brings us close to His Father.

- "In Christ Jesus", Paul writes, "you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ".¹²

- And again: “Through Christ we ... have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”.¹³
- And once more: “being justified by his grace we ... become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”.¹⁴

Fellow citizens? Heirs? Orphans have no place in society! Orphans don’t get an inheritance! They’re not part of anyone’s household! They don’t have a mother or a father! They don’t have the comfort and security of family. They don’t have the oversight of age, strength, and wisdom. They have no past and their future is unsure.

But we are **not** orphans. When Jesus said to his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”, He’s referring to all the ways in which He will continually be with them—and with us!

- In his death and resurrection, he’s with us and for us.
- In His sending of the Holy Spirit, one of who’s primary tasks is to point us to Jesus—which is, of course, the primary thrust of this Lord’s Day, Pentecost.
- In his continual intercession for us at the right hand of the Father, he remains by us.
- In his coming again, he will make it clear that he has always been with us.

Lynn and I have a friend, as sister in the Lord, who suffered almost indescribable isolation, rejection, abuse, and abandonment at the hands of her own parents. I’ll never forget how she answered my question about whether God was present in her suffering. “He was always there. I would go through it all again for the sake of knowing Jesus ...”

How can she say that? Because she trusted the one who stayed beside her with the abiding presence he promised to the disciples.

¹ See 13:1, 14:1, 27, 16:6, and 16:19-20,

² See John 13:1, 21 and Luke 22:42.

³ Genesis 3:5.

⁴ Matthew 27:46.

⁵ Of vss. 15-31, every vs. but 15, and 29-31 somehow allude to the theme of presence and help.

⁶ Isaiah 53:3.

⁷ 1 Peter 2:6-7.

⁸ John 7:5.

⁹ For example, Mark 14:51-52.

¹⁰ Matthew 26:74.

¹¹ Matthew 27:45.

¹² Ephesians 2:13-16.

¹³ Ephesians 2:18-19.

¹⁴ Titus 3:5-7.