

“*Separation anxiety*”

April 27, 2008

Text: Psalm 63:1-8, John 14:15-21

I.

As many of you know, almost a year ago, Yvette and I became dog owners for the first time in our 37 years of married life. We acquired a two-year old Shitzu-poo named NIKO. To say the least, we’ve come to adore our little NIKO.

So, to get into the message this morning, a question: *Do dogs have separation anxiety?* I know humans do. We see it all the time with parents and infant children. Both parent and child are anxious when they have to be apart ... they’re uneasy; sometimes, not a healthy situation.

We get anxious, too, at times, when our spouses or adult children have to be apart from us for long periods of time. The day before they have to leave or the *day of*, we’re moping about. We’re anxious, dreading the departure. There’s a sadness in our spirit.

But does this happen to dogs, too? Yvette and I could swear that our dog NIKO had separation anxiety about eight days ago, the day our daughter, Natasha, was preparing to go back to England.

Somehow, NIKO could sense (or so it seemed to us) that Natasha was going to be leaving. Natasha and he had gotten real close over the three-week period she was home; and all morning—on the day she had to leave—NIKO was moping around the house ... listless ... melancholic; and it lasted for three days after she left. Is that possible? Or are we just losing it as relatively new dog owners?

II.

Certainly, part of the truth of our lives is that we don’t like being separate from our loved ones. We’d much prefer to have them living comfortably near by ... you may want to define what *comfortably* means in terms of distance, but nonetheless.

In our Psalm for this morning, Psalm 63, the Psalmist yearns for a closeness to God, for a feeling from within that bridges the distance—the separation from God that tugs at our spirit.

In our walk with God—always—there’s some distance, some sense of being apart from or separate from. Part of us rebels against this. We don’t like it. Not being God; not having ultimate power and control over our lives.

At the same time, the magnificence of God's presence, the awesomeness of God's grandeur is overwhelming. All of which only magnifies any possible distance or separation even more.

Check out the Psalmist in our reading for this morning ...

O God, you are my God, I seek you ...

My soul thirsts for you;

My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land ...

Because your steadfast love is better than life itself, my lips praise you ...

III.

Do you recall periods in your life, in your own, personal faith journey, when you've felt separate from God, that God was in some way distant?

Certainly, it's human to experience such feelings ...

- Times when we wonder, where is God? With all that we've been through ... the personal losses, perhaps ... the rejections, the failures ... the long nights of hurtful worry and wonder, about this or this.
- Where's God? And we keep praying and hoping ... and nothing seems to happen.

What to do? What can we do to bridge the distance and to ease the painful separation that has somehow come between us?

Understandably, separation from God makes us anxious. It makes us uneasy with ourselves, with our lives, with the choices we've been making. Moreover, when we're anxious about our faith, often it leaves us insecure, even depressed.

Mother Teresa—although one of the saints of our Christian faith—apparently knew first hand of such low points ... such painful experiences of the *absence* of God.

A deeply reflective person, Mother Teresa at times endured prolonged experiences of what religious people call *the dark night of the soul* ... periods of time when God is somehow painfully absent.

From a book that came out last year entitled, ***Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light***, a book recounting some of her personal correspondence, apparently, Mother Teresa endured intense times of *excruciating darkness ...and dryness ...and loneliness* ...amounting to *spiritual torture*, leaving her deeply anxious about her faith journey.

The point is, it's human to have these anxious moments. I can happen to any of us.

IV.

It's this sort of anxiety that runs through our reading this morning from John's gospel. As we noted last week, John 14 is part of what is known as the *discourse speeches* in the gospel. They're long, convoluted reflections.

The mood in John 14 is melancholic. The talk is about Jesus leaving. But the language is lofty and spiritualized and the disciples must have wondered to themselves, ***What's he talking about? What on earth does he mean?***

CHECK IT OUT! *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 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.*

What possible sense would the disciples be able to make of these words? What's going on with Jesus?

When we get into the *discourse speeches* (which should never be read literally but, rather, as metaphor and symbolic language) we discover that what's happening is that Jesus is trying to work through—both for the disciples and for himself—the harsh reality that he's going to be leaving.

For sure, the disciples are anxious about this prospect. But Jesus, too, is anxious.

- His mood, here, is a mood of trembling loneliness, to the point almost of isolation.
- On the one hand, it's like he's on his own ...
- But at the same time, he's got this *thing* going with God (which nobody fully comprehends), and there's this sense of excruciating loneliness and distance ... not unlike what Mother Teresa must have gone through.

Heavy stuff!

V.

What's going on here, in the big picture, is that the author of John's gospel is trying to tell us what Jesus means. What is the meaning of the Christ?

John's gospel is the most *christological* of all the gospels, by far. Christology has to do with our understanding of Christ. How do we see him? How do we understand him? How do we explain him to others ... i.e., how do we witness about him?

How is Jesus a source of nurture and strength in our faith journey? How does he draw us closer to God and help relieve our anxiety? How does he reassure us about ultimate meanings, fill our emptiness, bridge any distance between God and us?

There are no easy answers to these questions and concerns?

What I find most appealing about John's gospel, in addition to its use, again, of metaphor and symbolic language, is that it draws us in. There's an intimacy to John's gospel that the other gospels, the synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke), don't have.

From John's telling of the gospel—always—there's this closeness to God. CHECK IT OUT!

On that day you will know, says Jesus, that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. That's intimate stuff. We're all a part of one another. Not an easy image to convey.

And, later, we can sense Jesus' frustration in trying to explain it all. It's like he's got all this intimate truth that he wants to pass on to them, but words are just not adequate to the challenge.

I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now, I am going to him who sent me; and because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

Of course, they're sorrowful; he's said he's leaving them ... and they have no clue what it all means. Then he adds,

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. We sense Jesus' frustration ... his regret ... his deep sadness, even.

He wants to somehow tell them that although he's leaving to be reunited with God, the Holy Spirit will come to them and, over time, things will be made clear.

VI.

We can almost feel the separation anxiety running through these discourse speeches.

Later, Jesus says, *A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again, in a little while, and you will see me.*

And then, a bit later ...

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

Friends, that's the GOOD NEWS; and it is always the affirmation of our Christian faith. Clearly, the intent of John is to be warm and intimate ... to be encouraging about God's love and drawing all people into God's spirit.

At last, that's the message for us. That's God's vision, God's overwhelming intent; to draw all people into God ... that we might be one in Christ, one in each other, and one in God.

On the other side of all that might separate us and keep us at a distance. On the other side of all the yearning, the longing, the anxious uncertainty. On the other side of it all, God comes to us in Christ. That's the GOOD NEWS.

VII.

It's the GOOD NEWS that runs through John's gospel.

1. Jesus did not say *I am the certitude that you will never be exhausted, at times, and filled with darkness on your human journey.*
2. He did not say *I am the insurance that you will never be wearied by injustice and unfairness and beaten down by the sin of the world.*
3. He did not say *I am the proof that you will never struggle or suffer or die.*
4. He never said he could save us from being human. What he DID say, though, is **I AM** and he gave us himself.

I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger or thirst.

I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Jesus is all this and more. He is the **good shepherd, the way the truth and the life.** He is the great I AM of God's creation ... love that comes to us with a fierceness ... that knocks us down, gets our attention and invites us in.

So I will bless you as long as I live, said the Psalmist.
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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