

“Deeper the Bond”

John 14: 1-14

Makemie Presbyterian Church

March 21, 2009 Fifth Sunday of Lent

(Jesus is speaking to the disciples)

14“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

<sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

<sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

<sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the

Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father & the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father & the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

<sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

This ends the reading.

In this scripture passage lies what is in my judgment the most extraordinary story there is; the teller of the story is the person we call John, and the story simply is this:

Once upon a time, not in a fairy tale sense, but once upon God's time, there was a man in the little country of Israel from the town of Nazareth named Jesus. Early in his adult life, those who knew him, or at least many of those who knew him, began to see he was more than the son of Mary, more than the son of Joseph, more than a mere carpenter. There was something about him that made them think "God." His character, his words, his work, what he did, what he said, the way he behaved, made them believe that when they were in his presence they were in the presence of God.

That doesn't mean in some obvious way he was different. He didn't shine in the night, he didn't dress in unusual clothes, he didn't have a strange look on his face, he didn't go around saying a lot of religious things all the time. It is just that who he was and what he did and the way he related to people caused them to say, "He is a revelation of God and in him we have seen God's glory."

I am sure all of you have known a person like this, a person who, when you're in his or her presence, makes you think better

thoughts live a better life, reflect of God, become more devotional, more spiritual. Multiply that a thousand times and you have Jesus of Nazareth. I do not want to imply that a part from him people had no experiences of God. They did, and they do. For some, dreams conveyed that special meaning of God; for others, it came through visions; some spoke of voices in the night. Many people saw in nature the hand of the Creator. No area of the earth is so desolate and barren that one cannot see, if one is sensitive to it, the artist's name down in the right hand corner: G-O-D. How can anybody spend five minutes outside and not think "God."

Some had the experience of God implanted in their hearts. Have you ever gotten up in the morning before the rest of the family, gone out on the back steps with a cup of coffee, and cupped your hands around it against the morning chill? Or, late in the evening, have you ever walked down the back roads & along the rivers of your memory? What do you think about? As an African saying puts it, "We know somebody walks in the trees at night." People have had many experiences, but we don't often talk about them.

Of course, only a minority of humanity experienced God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth & some of those who followed him quit.

When the price got a little high, they turned away, and this prompted Jesus to say to his immediate friends, "Are you going to leave too?" They said, "Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life." And so it was. No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten son from the heart of God has made God known. This is the reason he came into the world: To reveal God.

The painful side of it, however, is that, just as Jesus came into the world, he had to go from the world and return to God. During his life, his brief life here on earth, he bonded with a lot of people. He had family. The other Gospel writers tell us about his brothers and his sisters. He had a mother. He had friends. Toward the close of this life, he said to his disciples, "I don't call you `servants' anymore I call you `friends.'" John says that he loved Martha & Mary & Lazarus, their brother. He had bonded with a lot of people. But then he had to go.

The deeper the bond, the more painful the absence.

That's just a plain fact, we know that. Even on occasions that seem not to have heaviness about them, it is there.

All the years that I was a Christian Educator & would go to the student's commencements I was torn, I really didn't like to do it, because on the one hand saying, "Isn't it wonderful to be out of this

place!” But then I would see the mix of emotions; the tossing the square lid in the air with the tears in the eyes. It bothered me.

Now, I don't mean that commencement is hypocritical in the negative sense. It is just one of those days when you have to put on like you are 100 percent totally glad this day has come, when the fact of the matter is your classmates, your friends, well one is going to New York, another is going to Kansas, and another is going to South Georgia, and the deeper the bond, the more painful the absence. This is true even in high school. “Man!” we say. “Isn't it great to be out of here!”

Yet one is going to University of Florida & one to New York, and one is going to Georgia Tech & one is going to the University of Tennessee & one is going to Maryland and one is going to stay home and work a year. But we'll text...won't we? And we'll talk to each other on the phone...won't we?

The deeper the bond, the deeper the pain.

Two little girls have been friends, next-door neighbors, since they were three. They have played together, slept in each other's bed, ate at each other's table. Now they are nine & they are still tight. Then the father of one of the girls is transferred to Baltimore.

Suddenly there is the ugliest thing in the world, a big old van our front hauling them away. The deeper the bond, the more painful the absence. It's a terrible, terrible thing.

I want to tell you something unusual, something peculiar. We've been together for almost 10 years now & I can talk peculiar if I want? One of the dicculites I had when I was new to ministry was that I had this notion – it seems quaint to me now & you can laugh you would like, I had this notion that people in a congregation had such a deep bond that they missed each other when they were absent. In fact, I thought that the congregational bond was so deep that people would not be absent from church unless it was just necessary, unless they were sick or something. On almost every Saturday night I would picture the congregation in my mind & visualize where everybody sat. Then on Sunday morning when I'd get up to preach & there would be this one absent or hat one absent, you know what I assumed? I assumed they must be sick. So that afternoon I would call to see how they were feeling. It never occurred to me after years of ministry that they might have been fishing or picnicking or sleeping or boating on the river. I had the feeling that Christian people have a bond so deep that if one person is absent, a lot of people hurt. I had the notion that

if I missed a Sunday, everybody would miss me & if you missed a Sunday, we would miss you. It's not a matter of saying, "are we going to church or not?" because we have this bond. That's the way I thought.

Now that I have gotten older & wiser, I've finally learned that church is something many people just fit in here & there among the other things in their lives. Even so, back when I started, on Saturday nights I would picture all of you sitting in the congregation. But then on Sunday morning I would look out & if such & such a person wasn't there, that old feeling came back. It's like being a child, because the deeper the bond the greater the pain.

This pain, this pain of absence, is intensified if the occasion for absence is death, as it was in the case of Jesus. Death makes absence so complete & final.

I think of Jesus, snatched away from his friends & family. Absence is even more painful sometimes when we consider the way somebody dies. I can't even begin to speak of that day in Littleton, Colorado or Blacksburg VA. Those boys, with assault rifles, classmates of those they killed – senseless, senseless, senseless. And I think of Jesus.

Does that make sense, up there on the cross? Do you know what they did? They stripped him naked. They put him up there in front of everybody. Vulgar foul-mouthed soldiers did. Unbelievers walking by, saying, "If you're the Son of God, God will get you down." Somebody else yells, "Why don't you jump, Jesus?"

They had a big time & he died. People laughed. Jesus hung there naked in public. Make sense of that. Think of the girl in Littleton. "Do you believe in God?" they asked her & she said, "yes." Make sense of that.

The pain of absence is even more intense when you think about the character of the one who goes away. She was a straight –A student. HE was in the athletic club; she sang in the school choir. HE was editor of our school yearbook; here they went, here they went, here they went. It just seems by the nature of their character that the pain is intensified -- & I think of Jesus. I have never in my life heard anybody say that there was ever an occasion when Jesus turned his back on human need, said a cruel word to anybody, hurt anyone, rejected anyone, excluded anyone. It's his character that makes his absence so much more keenly felt.

Jesus knew this. He knew the depth of pain created by absence, so in John chapters 13 through 21 he became a counselor to his friends & he is still talking to them. He's trying to soften the blow, trying to get them ready. He says, "I know I'm leaving, now listen to me. You trust in God, trust in me. I am going its true, but I am going to prepare a place for you, so that when I come again, we will all be together forever. I will send another counselor while I am gone & he will guide you into truth & be with you & help you & never leave you. The Holy Spirit will be with you."

Jesus is trying to get them ready for his absence. Does he succeed? I don't think so. They are still confused, still asking questions. "We don't know where you are going or how you're going to get there? We don't understand anything you're saying. Just show us God, & we will be satisfied. We don't know what you're talking about. We don't like all this.

It didn't work. It never works at the time. Jesus tried to get them ready, but you can talk & talk & talk & there is still the pain. Jesus left his disciples & they felt his absence keenly & painfully. It just doesn't seem to work until later.

Do you believe that God is ever absent from you? Do you believe that God ever withdraws from you, that God is not close to you? I'm not setting you up for anything. I do know that a lot of people say they experience the absence of God, but that's not to say God is really absent.

We remember the prayers & the psalms, all those prayers, "Lord please don't turn your back on us. Don't hide your face from us. Don't go away from us. Please God, don't leave us alone."

The people in the Bible must have felt it too. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I don't know if the distance between us & God increases sometimes. I can imagine there are times when God might just get tired of us & say, "Try it by yourself."

It might be that God needs to let us do it on our own to develop some strength.

This summer when I went for training at Lake Tahoe, I became acquainted with a minister who has no arms from the elbow down. He was telling me one day of the experience he had of learning to put on his own clothes. He said his mother always dressed him. She fed

him, she dressed him, she fed him, she dressed him. One day, she put his clothes in the middle of the floor & said, "Dress yourself."

He said, "I can't dress myself."

She said, "You'll have to dress yourself."

HE told me, I kicked, I screamed, I kicked, I screamed, I yelled at my mother, "You don't love me anymore."

Finally he realized that if he was going to get any clothes-on, he would have to put them on himself. After hours of struggle he got the clothes on. He said that it was not until later that he learned that his mother was in the next room crying.

I don't know if God grows distant from us. I do know that sometimes we feel some distance. How do we manage that? How do we live with the experience of distance from God? I think it's mainly a matter of memory. Remember the good times. Remember the close occasions. Remember the profound worship. Remember the Lord's Table. Remember your baptism. Remember the bread & the cup. Remember your Christian friends. Remember the old songs, & you will get through. It just hurts me to think of the young people who do not know a hymn, who do not know a single scripture verse & who

have never sat next to the strong shoulder of a believing man or woman. How will they ever make it?

You see, what we do here on Sunday, in case you're wondering, is that we are making memories. What happens today will be the only food you will have one of these days.

But it will be enough.

It will be enough.