

Homily – I Will Be With You Forever

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This coming Thursday is Ascension Day. Ascension Day is our annual commemoration of the time two thousand years ago, when Jesus left his disciples for a second time. The first time was his death on the cross, but after his resurrection and return to his disciples, Jesus leaves for good.

In the Book of Acts, it is written, *“As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”*

Pictures of the ascension of Jesus often show legs and feet going up into the bottom of a cloud. Another famous painting shows Jesus as he is being transformed into another state of being. In that picture we can see the outline of a dove that represents the Holy Spirit, and to me this picture looks a bit like the transporter on the Starship Enterprise. There is an interplay of light as Jesus is transported elsewhere.

No matter the method of transportation or the way we depict it, we are left with the final departure of Jesus, at least his departure in body. And, before his departure, Jesus prepares his followers to be without him.

In today's Gospel reading we heard some of those preparations for departure. Jesus says, *“he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever....”*

I find these words to be comforting.

Be with you forever...

I like the thought that God is always with us. I am comforted by the eternal presence of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

Usually we only hear these types of words in a wedding ceremony or the blessing of a union. Two people commit their lives to one other and there is much joy.

Be with you forever...

But, my first marriage did not last. Sometimes these vows that two people commit to one another don't hold. Sometimes our best intentions don't endure.

Be with you forever...

Whether intentional or unintentional, sometimes our very human relationships aren't forever. And, that is the risk we take every time we open our hearts in love.

Til death do us part...

Sometimes we are separated from loves ones by the death of our mortal, human bodies. Or sometimes, the mind goes before the body.

Be with you forever...

Now, sometimes the presence of a loved one in our lives can help banish loneliness. It might be a spouse or partner or a close friend. It might be children or grandchildren. But, these relationships are as temporary as everything else in this world. Even the earthly presence of Jesus with his disciples was temporary.

Be with you forever...

I have to admit that in my own life I have experienced the temporariness of important relationships, which has led to my own fears of loneliness. I have used work, activities and busyness to help keep loneliness at bay. When someone asks me how I am doing, I usually respond by saying "busy." I bury myself in my work and many other things. When I stay busy, I keep the demons away. In the evening when the work has stopped I still stay busy reading or streaming something from Netflix. I fear loneliness and use busyness to keep it away.

Be with you forever...

Now, here is something a wise person knows. A wise person knows that gathering together in community is a better antidote to loneliness than busyness. It might be friends or even a faith community like the one we have here at St. Barnabas. At our best we walk with one another on the crooked path of life. At our best we are with each other in the highs and the lows. We are a community that allows a person to be known and to know others. We all have a very innate desire to know and be known and this is one of the blessings of being in a community of God.

God created the universe and created us to be connected to one another such that none of us ever stands alone. As an illustration, here is a poem by the poet Dedan Gills called "I Am".

I am old and wise as the night. I am as beautiful as a bird in flight.

I am the moon and the sea. I am the robin and the bee. I am the soil and I am the tree.

I'm the lion and the gazelle. I am heaven and I am hell. I am the ring and I am the bell.

I am the joy and I am the tear. I am the brave and I am the fear.

I am the blistering desert. I'm the freezing snow.

I'm the cringing coward and the gentle hero.

I'm the aged and I am the young. I am the weak and I am the strong.

I am the smile and I am the frown. I am the pauper and I am the crown.

I am the wrong and I am the right. I am the day and I am the night.

I am now and I am never. I am yesterday and I am forever.

I am the bitter and I am the sweet. I live on the hill and I live on the street.

I am the top and I am the bottom. I am Martin, Hitler, Gandhi, and Saddam.

I am red, black, yellow, brown, and white. I love, hate, laugh, cry, and fight.

All the universe is reflected in me. I am all that ever was and ever will be.

When I lose, it's the lesson that I win. Judging others is my sin.

This poem, "I Am," is a good reminder that we never stand alone. We are connect to all through Christ this is in all and around all.

As another illustration, here is a story about community told to me by a friend. My friend lives in San Francisco and was having surgery down at Stanford. Another friend was playing chauffeur from San Francisco to Stanford, and when they arrived at the hospital this second friend suggested they stop in the hospital chapel before checking into admissions. As the two entered the hospital chapel other friends who had driven in from around the Bay Area joined them. Several other men had gotten up early in the morning, given up a chunk of their day, and joined together in the chapel to pray before the surgery.

This makes my heart smile to imagine the efforts of these men for their friend. Hospitals and impending surgery can make a person feel very lonely, but these men reminded my friend that he was not alone for they were with him, and God was with him.

Be with you forever...

This group of friends is not from St. Barnabas, but we have some of these same stories here. In our community, we have Stephen Ministers and others who provide pastoral care. And, some of you give rides to others who cannot drive. Some visit those who are in the hospital or a care center. And, we have various groups that walk with one another through life. We have our weekly Bible study

and our Spirituality for Seniors group is meeting again this Tuesday afternoon. And, there are the participants in our prayer chain, who lift up the needs of those in our community. And, let's not forget our Centering Prayer Group which meets every Friday afternoon. And then there is the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. You can't volunteer weekly in our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop and not be part of a tight, loving community.

We are not alone here at St. Barnabas. It takes a village to care for one another in the normal parts of life that we have here on the California Central Coast. But even our village is not forever. Our village and human relationships may not be forever, but our God is forever.

Be with you forever...

In this life and in the next, God is always present with us. There is nothing we can do to make God leave us or abandon us. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more or love us less. God is always embracing us in arms of love.

Even when we root for the Dodgers, God's love is undiminished.

My prayer is that you join together in community with one another. My prayer is that you call your mother on Mother's Day, or if you can't do that then say a prayer to God for your mother and all of the mother-like people who have been part of your life.

And, join us in community next Sunday as we come together again to worship and adore our living and eternal God.