Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2017

Neal MacPherson

WE ARE NOT ALONE John 14:15–31

 Douglas John Hall, the Canadian theologian and my friend, has said that in the North American/Western context, the overwhelming experience of our time is our “pervasive, fearful, and melancholy sense that *we are alone:* there seems nothing ‘out there’ to correspond to our persistent longing for companionship with the eternal.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As Christians, we might feel that being alone is not our experience. We believe that God is with us in Christ Jesus. Yet, I suspect that many of us gathered here today have felt this sense of being alone; we wonder if God is really with us and for us.

 In our society, people do feel that they are alone. That is why we keep ourselves so busy and occupied. It is all an attempt to escape either our experience of loneliness or our fear of finding ourselves alone and without help. As our prayer of confession for this morning declares, we avoid places of silence and solitude in our lives. We just have to be busy. The minute we find ourselves alone, we reach for our cell phones and begin surfing the Internet looking for something to occupy us, or text our friends. Each text anticipates a reply, and then we reply to the reply. It is amazing to see people walking the streets or eating in restaurants and cafeterias glued to their cell phones, oblivious of their surroundings, completely absorbed in their own little worlds. It seems that we need to be occupied with something, anything, so as to avoid being alone.

 Filling our time with activity or using electronic devices is a way to avoid our fear of being alone. Yet, it does not seem to work. We still have the feeling that *we are alone.* Henri Nouwen, the teacher of the spiritual life, says in his little book *Reaching Out* that the first movement of the spiritual life is the movement from loneliness to solitude. Turning from the busyness of our lives, it is important for us to cultivate within us a silence, a place of solitude, in which we can let go of our fear of being alone, and face the deep seated questions of our lives, so as to create a place within us in which we can then be ready to open ourselves to the Spirit of God, the beauty and wonder of the creation, and the lives of other human beings. Choosing to be alone, choosing solitude, can then enrich our relationship to the creation, to God, and to neighbor. Thomas Merton, in his diary on January 12, 1950 wrote:

 It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness

 with which I can truly love my brothers. The

 more solitary I am, the more affection I have

 for them. It is a pure affection, and filled with

 reverence for the solitude of others.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 Now, it may be helpful to know that the fear of being alone is addressed in the Bible. Our reading for today from the Gospel of John is a case in point. Let us first place the reading in context. Jesus spoke the words we heard in our reading to his disciples just after he washes their feet and gives them a new commandment: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35) He then tells them that he must leave them. It is not all that different from those times when we have to anticipate the death of a loved one. What in the world will we do without him or her? How in the world will we carry on? The impending death of our loved one fills us not only with sorrow, but we also anticipate the emptiness, which we already feel and will feel even more deeply after our loved one is gone.

 Following death, perhaps for a while, perhaps as long as we ourselves live, we will feel the continuing presence of the one we loved. Through the act of remembrance, we may make our loved one a part of our lives all over again. But consider the situation of the community for whom John wrote his Gospel. It was a community that existed at the turn of the 1st century, some sixty to seventy years following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those who had possibly seen or known Jesus had themselves died. This new generation of Jesus’s followers had never seen him or known him. How were they to keep his presence alive in their hearts? And without his supporting presence, how were they to carry on the work he began? How were they to do those greater works than Jesus himself had done?

 They felt alone and perhaps even fearful. What would the future bring? Perhaps for the first generation of followers the shared memory of the physical Jesus could be kept alive. But what about the second and third generations and the countless generations thereafter—how would they carry on?

 It is in this context that Jesus gives them an assurance.

 “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. They

 who have my commandments and keep them are

 those who love me; and those who love me will

 be loved by my Father, and I will love them and

 reveal myself to them.” —John 14:18–21

 Jesus reveals to his disciples that even though he will no longer be with them in a physical sense, he is not going to leave them; he will be alive in the Father and he will continue to abide in all his disciples, forever. They will not be abandoned, orphaned, or be left alone. Moreover, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to them, who will serve as their Advocate as they continue to carry on the truth of his life and work. Says Jesus:

 “I have said these things to you while I am

 still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy

 Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,

 will teach you everything, and remind you of

 all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with

you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to

you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts

be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

 —John 14:25–27

 I did not really know what to say today until I met with the members of our Lectionary Study Group last Wednesday. Together, we discovered a profound truth and meaning in these words of Jesus. His followers would not be left alone, and that includes us. We are not alone.

 The continuing and abiding presence of both God, the Father/Mother, and of Jesus the Son within us is something we need to be assured of in our day when so many of us feel that we are alone. However, going back to the beginning of this sermon, in order to receive this assurance, what we need to do is to set aside the busyness of our lives, and regularly create within us a space, a silence, and a solitude by which we can make room for the abiding presence of God and God’s Son in our lives. Without that presence, we will continue to sense that we are alone. We will continue to be subject to melancholy and fear. And we will not be able to carry on the work of peace and justice, the work of love and mercy begun by Jesus long ago.

In closing, I invite everyone who is able in body and/or spirit to stand and join in A New Creed adopted in 1980 by the United Church of Canada. It is to be found in our New Century Hymnal, Number 887.

 ***We are not alone, we live in God’s world.***

 ***We believe in God:***

 ***who has created and is creating,***

 ***who has come in Jesus,***

 ***the Word made flesh,***

 ***to reconcile and make new,***

 ***who works in us and others by the Sprit.***

 ***We trust in God.***

 ***We are called to be the Church:***

 ***to celebrate God’s presence,***

 ***to love and serve others,***

 ***to seek justice and resist evil,***

 ***to proclaim Jesus,***

 ***crucified and risen,***

 ***our judge and our hope.***

 ***In life, in death, in life beyond death,***

 ***God is with us.***

 ***We are not alone. Thanks be to God.***

1. Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Burns Oates, London, 1953) 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)