Sunday, June 19, 1977
PRESENCE AND ABSENCE
John 14:8-11,18-20

One of the great mysteries of life is that absence from one another and the memory that comes from being absent can often bring us closer to each other than can physical presence. Being with someone not only invites but also blocks deep communication. Our bodies and minds hide as much as they reveal. Indeed, is it not true that many of our disappointments and frustrations in life are related to the fact that seeing and touching each other does not always create the closeness we seek?

Jesus had been with his disciples for several years. He had tried to tell and show them in many ways that he and God were intimately related. He tried to show them that if they knew him, they would know God also, but they did not understand. At the last supper, Philip said to Jesus, “Lord show us the Father and then we will be satisfied.”

Jesus answered, “Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip?” In other words, being present with each other does not tell us all there is to know about each other. Tn fact, the more experience in living we have, •• the more we come to know and sense that closeness grows in continuous interplay between presence and absence.

In absence, in distance, in memory, we can come to see each other in a new way. We are less distracted by each other’s idiosyncrasies and are better able to see and understand each other’s inner core. In memory we are able to be in touch with each other’s spirit, with that reality in each other which enables an always deepening communication.

Jesus knew this and said to his disciples, “It is to your advantage that I go away,” and he went on to explain that once he was gone, they would come to experience him and know him in a new way.

We all know of course that memory can distort, falsify, and cause selective perception. But memory also clarifies, purifies, brings into focus. Distance and absence give us perspective. When a mother and father think of their children who have left home; when a child remembers his or her parents, when a husband and wife call each other to mind during periods of absence, when friends recall their friends: it is often the very best that is called forth and the real beauty of other that breaks through into consciousness. When we remember each other with love, we evoke each other’s spirit and so enter into a new intimacy, a spiritual union with each other.

This sustaining power of memory becomes most visible in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. It is in memory that we enter into a nurturing and sustaining relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is what happened to the disciples after the resurrection. They had been with Jesus. They had listened to his words. They heard him speak about his death and resurrection, but they did not really understand. Only later when he was gone did all these things begin to come clear to them. Then in his absence they experienced his presence in a new way. Instead of not seeing him anywhere, they began to experience him everywhere. In his absence they began to experience his tota1 presence. He lived within them. His presence no longer depended on his physical presence.

In our day-to-day human relationships with those whom we love, this matter of presence and absence also suggests that we need to be absent from those we love as well as present. If a parent is always present, hovering around the child which he or she loves, the child will be suffoc-ated and never really be himself or do very much on his own. In our human relationships there can be too much availability.

In our absence from those we love, in our withdrawal at the appropriate times, we come to experience each other more deeply. Lovers who are always with each other will soon find their relationship coming apart. In marriage and in all ether intimate human relationships, we need both presence and absence.

It's a great mystery, this matter of presence and absence. The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming but also by his leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ's absence that our intimacy with him is so profound that we can say he dwells in us, call him our food and drink and experience him as the center of our being.

In the celebration of Holy Communion, we see this interplay between presence and absence. We eat bread but not enough to take away our hunger; we drink wine but not enough to take away our thirst. But in so doing we remember Jesus Christ. And we are also saying to each other--eat and drink, the one we are waiting for is our food and drink and is more present to us than we can be to ourselves. He sustains us. Like food, he gives us energy and power and life. And so, in his absence, we discover and celebrate his presence in our midst. Amen.