Sunday, May 5, 2002
LEFT BEHIND BUT NOT LEFT ALONE
John 14:15-21

One day, each one of you will no longer be here as you are now on this planet Earth. You will die. One day, I will no longer be here as I am now because I will have died. Most people don't talk about this very much unless they are very ill and near death, or very old and therefore know that their life expectancy is not as long as it used to be. If you could be certain your death is near, what advice or counsel would you give to your friends and family?

That's the context, the setting, the background for these words of Jesus to his disciples as he faced his coming death. In the Gospel named John, it's a kind of farewell speech of a leader to his followers who are about to be left behind. It contains promises, expressions of affection, and a glimpse of what life will be like once the leader is gone.

This section of Jesus' final words to his disciples begins with the comforting words you've all heard at funerals and memorial services: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you."

Then Jesus assures his followers that even though they will be left behind for the time being, in the deepest sense, they will not be left behind because they will not be left alone. Listen to his words again: "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."

You will not be left alone because God's Spirit, as revealed in Jesus, is always a part of you. No matter what happens, you cannot get rid of God. As you've heard me say so many times before, you are created in God's image. God is a part of you. Or as Dr. Herbert Benson puts it, "You are wired for God." Even when the Spirit of God seems to be absent, it is present.

The ancient Hebrews knew this long before Jesus lived among us. The Psalmist wrote, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from far away... Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there." (Psalm 139)

Yet the suggestion that God leaves or will leave some people behind is popular again. For some reason, which I do not fully understand, that idea reappears from time to time in the history of religious faith. "Left Behind" is the theme of a best-selling series of books and also a major motion picture. The basic notion is that when Jesus returns (which has now been about to happen for two thousand years), some people will get to go back home with him, and the rest of us poor sinners, who did not have the sense to believe the right things or go to the right church, are going to be left behind and left alone.

I need to tell you that from my perspective, the "Left Behind" series might be exciting reading, but it is profoundly unchristian. It's based on the premise that religious faith is primarily about the salvation of individual souls; that the main purpose of your religious faith is to get you into heaven. If other people do not make it, that's their problem, not yours.

You've no doubt heard that old story about two men who were camping. One morning as they went outside their tent, they saw a huge bear that also saw them and started coming toward them. One of the men quickly began looking for his running shoes so he could put them on. The other man shouted, "Are you crazy? You can't outrun that bear!" "I don't have to," the first man replied. "All I have to do is outrun you." That sort of "I'm saved, and to hell with you unless you become just like me" attitude has rightly given religion a bad name. It inspired the Austin Lounge Lizards to write a song entitled, "Jesus Loves Me, But He Can't Stand You."

However, Jesus taught something else. He said the main purpose of religious faith is not to get you to heaven, but to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. The greatest of the commandments is to "love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself." He said that your capacity to experience the love and presence of God is directly related to your capacity to care for others. Heaven is a byproduct, not the goal.

In his farewell talk to his disciples, he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Divine love not only heals individuals, but it also builds loving communities. This is an especially challenging principle for modern people because we live at the pinnacle of the cult of the individual. To be self-defined, self-sufficient, independent, autonomous, is the goal for many individuals. Get out of my way. Get off my back. Let me do my own thing.

A few weeks ago, there was a fascinating article in The New Yorker magazine about a man named Marshall Goldsmith, who is an executive coach. He trains executives to behave decently in the work environment. How he goes about this is quite a story in itself and may be the subject for another sermon. However, what also intrigued me was his spiritual journey. He tells how he was thrown out of a conservative Christian church when he was 14 because of an attitude problem. Because he was mathematically inclined, he made a list of all the religions in the world and the percentage of the world population for each, and then asked his Sunday School teacher the "left behind" question. "Are Muslims going to heaven or hell?" The answer from the teacher was unambiguous: "Hell." "What about Buddhists and Jews?" "Hell." "Catholics?" "Hell." "How about Baptists — are they all going to heaven?" "No! Even many of them are going to hell."

Mr. Goldsmith said that he gave everybody the benefit of the doubt, and ninety-five percent of the world was going to hell. They didn't just get to die; they got to suffer for eternity. Goldsmith told the teacher, "Your kind of God is worse than Hitler, and he was one of the worst guys in history." So he was thrown out of Sunday School and told not to come back until he changed his attitude. He never did come back.

He claims that now he is a kind of Buddhist and that his basic approach to life can be summed up in three short three-word statements: "Life is good. Be happy now. Let it go." His criticism of some forms of the Christian faith is that "guilt is glorified." He does not say that people do not do bad things and make horrible mistakes, but he asks, "What's the value added for me to feel miserable?" The important thing is to change one's behavior. Is it helpful to look back on life and say, "I wish I'd been more guilty?" When Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," he was talking about everyday behavior. He was not talking about feeling guilty.

Then Jesus made a further promise to his followers, and that includes you and me. He said, "Even though I will be gone from you in the physical way you have known me, God's Spirit, which is also my Spirit, will continue to be in you and with you, and you will know and

experience the power of that Spirit, especially when you are practicing the love of God and neighbor."

Jesus knew, as you and I know, that there are times when the Spirit of God seems very close and at other times that Spirit seems to be very absent. If your experience is in any way similar to mine, then you have known God's presence and absence. But consider what "absence" means. I want you to listen now very carefully to what I am about to say. You cannot know absence without also having first known presence. In the same way, you cannot truly understand darkness unless you have also experienced light. When someone important to you is absent from you, then you know more than ever what that person means to you.

Details that got lost in your togetherness are now recalled in your separateness, and their sudden clarity has the power to enable you to see virtues you have overlooked and opportunities you have missed. Some of the little crazy quirks that seemed to drive you crazy at close range become endearing at a distance.

One thing is certain: there is no sense of absence where there has been no sense of presence. Absence is the arm flung across the bed in the middle of the night, the empty space where a beloved sleeper once lay. Absence is the child's room now empty and hung with silence and dust. Absence is the overgrown lot where the old house once stood, the house in which people laughed and thought their happiness would last forever.

Left behind, but not left alone. There's a larger principle at work here, and it's still true today. In someone's absence, you can begin to see and understand that person in a way that was not possible before. It often takes distance in time as well as in space to give you perspective. When you are too close to an event or person, you cannot see that person or event in the same way you can from a distance.

When Lincoln's Gettysburg address was first spoken, it was characterized in some United States newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldiers' graves, but distance has now helped us to see and understand it more clearly.

When Harry Truman was president and for the ten or more years following his term in office, he was not thought of very highly. Now, the further distance we have, the more we are realizing his stature.

Jesus said more than one time to his disciples, "What I am doing now you do not understand, but afterward you will understand." How true that is of much of life. There are so many things you cannot truly understand when you are in the midst of them or when you are too close to them. It's something like looking at a very tiny part of a large map that is folded so that you cannot see all of it. It doesn't make much sense until you unfold it completely and back away and then see the small part in its relationship to all of the rest of the map around it.

Jesus had been with his closest followers for several years in a very intimate relationship. He had tried to show and tell them in many different ways that he and God were intimately related and that God's Spirit was also in them. The disciples were so close to him that they oftentimes missed the larger picture. At the Last Supper, Philip, in frustration, is reported to have said to Jesus, "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Jesus answered, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?" Being present with each other, no matter how intimate the relationship, does not always reveal to us

all there is to know about each other. Sometimes children understand their parents better after the children are grown up and gone from home, and parents understand their children better in the same way.

The more experience you have in living, the more you come to know that closeness and understanding grow in the continuous interplay between presence and absence, between intimacy and distance.

That's why Jesus said to his disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away." He went on to say that once he was gone, they would remember his teachings with a new understanding.

There's one more point to be made. It wasn't until Jesus was physically gone from them after the resurrection that his followers began to work on their own. Had he remained with them as a physical, visible presence, it might never have occurred to them that they were now Christ's hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth. They were to be the body of Christ. The disciples became apostles. The listeners became preachers. The converts became missionaries. The healed became healers. It's not the way they planned it, of course. If they could have had their way, they would have tied Jesus up so that nobody could take him away from them. But once he was gone, they stopped looking toward heaven and started looking at each other. And everywhere they looked, they saw Jesus. They were left behind, but not left alone. Amen.