

The Absence of God

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“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.”

Today’s Gospel talks about the presence and the absence of God. I suspect that all of us have felt God’s presence at one time or another – those tiny epiphanies at the summit of a mountain or watching a sunset. The smell of spring or a crystalline winter’s day. Answered prayer for healing. The beauty of music or the cadences of the *Book of Common Prayer*. All of these are conduits that help us feel the presence of God. And the feeling is euphoric, for how could it not be? The assurance of God’s presence provides comfort and companionship along the journey of life.

But for those of us who have felt the presence of the Almighty, we have probably felt his absence as well. The loss of a loved one, for instance, or the

desolation of divorce or a failed relationship. Those experiences cut us to the quick, and we begin to wonder, “Where is God?”

Sometimes we become angry; most of the time we feel desolate and alone. Like many of you, I was struck by the revelations about Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who had experienced God vividly in years past, but who spent decades feeling bereft of that assurance of God’s presence. That didn’t deter her from an extraordinary career dedicated to good works, but it makes that life even more remarkable.

During my twenties, thirties, and even into my forties, I felt distant from God. I couldn’t relate to the guy. He seemed aloof and judgmental. He didn’t much like me, I thought, perhaps because I didn’t much like myself.

In talking one day with a friend whose background was very similar to mine, we found that both of us had trouble relating to this distant and judgmental God. Doug suggested that my own conflicted feelings about my father very likely informed my understanding of God the Father. Then, looking me in the eye, for he is a true friend, he suggested that I lay aside my vision of God as Father and consider instead God the Son – Jesus.

Nothing happened for a long while, but then suddenly it worked. Rather than struggling to relate to this distant and disapproving Father, I identified with Jesus, the Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief, the man who, in his desolate moment of abandonment on Calvary, had cried out, “Eloi, eloi, lama sabbathani,” which is to say, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Or, better: “Daddy, Daddy? Where are you, Daddy?”

And it is in that moment of abandonment and self-abnegation that love triumphed and reconciliation was possible so that we, all of humanity, might know the presence of God.

And that brings us to today's Gospel reading. Jesus is talking with his disciples about presence and absence, promising that he will not leave them orphaned. No, he will dispatch the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus refers to as the "Advocate," to comfort and sustain believers in his absence. You will know this "Spirit of truth," Jesus says, "because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

And then Jesus slips in the secret to his presence: "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."

Jesus promises to love and to reveal himself to those who keep his commandments. But here is where we often go astray. For most of us, the word "commandment" conjures, first of all, the Ten Commandments and then, if we think about it any further, some of the Levitical tables with proscriptions about the interbreeding of cattle or uncovering the nakedness of your father's wife or sexual relations with animals or how to bathe after having been attacked by wild animals. Far too often, these are the things we think of when we hear about keeping commandments.

But what does Jesus himself say about keeping commandments? True, when pressed by the Pharisees about his attitudes toward the Law, Jesus affirms the laws of the Hebrew Bible. But then he ups the ante and goes the Pharisees one better. I can summarize all of your precious laws, he says: Love the Lord your God, which is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is similar, he says: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Take that, Pharisees! Jesus summed up their entire legal system in two phrases: Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. And that is what he leaves to us. If we want to know him, the way to know him is to keep his commandments – not the arcane laws of the Pharisees. But the radical ethic of love, which fulfills all of the commandments. And when we have figured out how to love, we shall know God.

I think Mother Teresa understood that. I believe that, even amid her feelings of desolation and distance from God, she knew that the only way to know the presence of the Almighty was through acts of charity and kindness and love.

Love trumps all, Jesus tells us. Love trumps all, and it is the surest way – the *only* way – to know the presence of God.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

April 27, 2008

St. Peter's Episcopal Church

Oxford, Connecticut

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut