

A Homily for Ascension (Easter 7), Year B

Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

May 13, 2018

One of my very close friends is fond of saying that everything that she has ever managed to 'let go' of has claw marks on it. For most of us, if we're being honest, it's far easier to sink our claws in and cling on tight than it is to lovingly let go. This is true of precious things in our lives: treasured objects, favorite momentos, cherished traditions and perhaps most of all, beloved people. When letting-go moments arrive, whether in the best or worst of circumstances, we find ourselves confronting the anxious and vulnerable nature of our humanity.

Endings and transitions have been constant companions in my own life these past few weeks. I have found myself circling back to today's Gospel, deeply listening and taking in the words of Jesus praying for his friends and followers. In the lesson we heard, this farewell discourse comes at the end of Jesus' earthly life, just before Jesus separates himself from his disciples to go and pray in the garden at Gethsemane. We know how that story was about to unfold and, with certainty, so did Jesus. Knowing that time was of the essence, Jesus could have focused on any number of lessons or points he wanted to make. But standing there on the precipice of great uncertainty and risk, Jesus chose to pray. He invited his friends into deep connection with God. And, as followers of Christ, this prayer is for us, too. It is a prayer that has echoed through my life this week in powerful and beautiful ways.

On Friday, I was sitting on stage at our commencement exercises at VCU watching my students walk across the stage with confidence, their families cheering and crying. There is so much hope and possibility that hangs in the air at commencement. Yet, as a faculty mentor, I know their struggles to get to that point and I hold their uncertainties, too. I felt a renewed awareness that their circling through my life is a sort of lived-out prayer of faithfulness for what has yet to emerge...that's why we call it commencement, the edge of new beginnings. Less than twenty-four hours later, I was with many of the same people at another gathering entirely, remembering and paying tribute to the spouse of my doctoral student who has had to commence an entirely new chapter of her life after walking side by side with him through a brief but fierce battle with cancer. While there was great sorrow at his absence on this earth, the community gathered also experienced a re-awakening of the inspiration they had gained from their friend and brother. I witnessed their active commitments to embody the values they had learned from their relationship with him. In holding space for their grief and their tributes to be shared, I felt like I was living into this scripture, this prayer that Jesus prays: leaving and joining, departing and returning, building up confidence in the sure presence of God as seen in community.

If I have ever had a doubt as to whether I could be both professor and priest, this week has convinced me that the answer is already yes. So, bear with me. I'm going to blend the professorial and the pastoral for a few more minutes with you all today as well.

The way that social workers understand human behavior is through the importance of relationship. As I'm socializing my students into the social work profession, I teach them about mid 20th-century attachment theorists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby was trained as an old-school psychologist but became frustrated by the dominant psychoanalytic theory of his day which blamed the problems of our adult lives on deeply rooted internal pathologies of the mind. Instead, Bowlby believed that the way that we experience caring, loving relationships early on in life has a direct bearing on how

we live out our potential in this world as adults. Bowlby was an intellectual and a theorist; he wrote three really fascinating (or at least, fascinating to me) books, describing how Attachment, Separation, and Loss are dependent upon each other through the duration of our lives. An example appropriate for Mother's Day: John Bowlby coined the term "separation anxiety" emphasizing that in spite of the tears of toddlers, these separations are developmentally essential because they make us aware of loving attachments and anticipate joyful reunions. Without the anxiety of separation, we don't experience the joy of reunion; without knowing the joy of reunion, we become overwhelmed by loss.

Bowlby's protégé, Mary Ainsworth, was more of an experiential learner. She made it her mission to put science and practice around these theories. First, she traveled to Uganda to study mothers and infants in their natural environment, pushing herself outside her own cultural expectations to observe human truths about the way attachments are formed early in life. Later, she tested out her observations by setting up an experiment called the "strange situation" where she observed 12-18 month old infants during a series of events involving separations and reunifications with the parent along with the addition of a "stranger" into the mix who would sometimes align with the parent and sometimes be present on their own. Her contribution was to observe and document how we human beings respond to transitions, changes and separations and explore how these attachments impact our identities and behaviors.

If you crave more social science details, I can walk you through each stage of the experiment sometime! But, what I want to convey is the heart of what we can learn from Bowlby and Ainsworth's studies of attachment: we are able to be our best selves in this world...exploring, playing, responding to love and affection...when we know where and to whom we belong. The power of attachment can only be fully realized through separation; we are comforted when we know and recognize what Ainsworth called a *secure base*. Love is like a homing beacon that reminds us who we are.

OK, so perhaps it took a couple thousand years for social science to put words around what Jesus already knew but I think there is an important lesson where today's scripture and our theories of attachment come together. Jesus knows that we are one body, one community; those who are his disciples on earth are those who will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to become the Church, the Body of Christ, even as Jesus returns to wholeness in God. In Jesus' prayer for his disciples, our hearts also begin to hear clearly what our logical minds can't quite grasp: leave-taking may be humanly difficult but it is never the end of the story. In God, we belong to each other and live out the divine relationship in our love and care for each other in this world. Jesus doesn't prepare his disciples to let go and move on as he ascends heavenward; Jesus reminds the disciples of belonging already right there with them, alive and in their midst. Jesus prays to remind them of their secure base in God and in each other.

Christ's ascension is our reminder of that lasting divine connection, a parting gift of divine relationship: "...and now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." The Church...the Body of Christ...becomes the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of divine relationship. We...the Church...we are each other's secure base because God is in our midst.

There's a lesson for all of us in another letting go moment we're standing in today, too. After serving as your seminarian for a very enjoyable two years, it could be tempting to cling onto things exactly as they are right now. But the risen Christ doesn't call us to cling to the way things have been; the risen Christ reminds us to trust in His presence in our midst and to move as the Holy Spirit leads us into the world.

No claw marks are necessary for this transition: our identity is with each other in Christ no matter where we go and wherever we move about in this world.

Some might say I've spent two years getting to know all of you, but really, what we have done together is invest two years learning how to see and know God in each other. Our understanding of God...the ultimate secure base...has expanded because of our relationship. I'm not the same person I was when I first began my time here, because God has been made known to me in each one of you. We pray together, we worship and we give thanks for our common relationship as the Body of Christ. In the sacrament of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, God's presence is continually made known to us in each other.

Thank you...every one of you...for helping me see and know God more fully. And please know that Grace and Holy Trinity will always be a "secure base" for me, a place that I will know and cherish as my community. Together, we have seen and known God in our midst.

