

“Separation Anxiety”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 30, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: John 18:12-27
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 22:22, 25-31**

How well do we know each other? Not just y'all and me as your pastor, but all of us. How well do we know each other? Some of us we know better than others – maybe if you've been on the same church Caravans or other fellowship outing, attend the same Sunday school class, or work on a committee, service project or mission team together. These are all ways we get to know each other better.

But one of the best ways we can really know each other is by knowing Christ. And I mean really knowing Christ, and getting to know Jesus Christ better and better each day. We do that in two ways. We get to know Christ as we interact with one another in the name of Christ – in the Spirit of Jesus – and we get to know Christ when we're on our own and in need of Christ's presence and direction in our lives.

To hear it described in the Gospel, the disciple Peter got to know Christ so well, mostly by journeying along side Jesus the Christ during his earthly ministry. But in today's New Testament lesson, Peter gets to know Christ in a different way. He gets to know Christ through his separation from Jesus – his separation anxiety.

To give you a sense of what Peter experienced, what he did, I've recruited a few of our church members this morning to help me. OK, so I'm Peter (I wish, maybe ... maybe not). And this is the gate they took Jesus through. It's guarded by (Dana), who's playing the woman from our NT lesson this morning.

Dana: Hey Peter, one of Jesus' disciples told me to come and let you in. The high priest knows him, so I guess it's OK; you can come in. But hey, you are not also one of Jesus' disciples, are you? You wouldn't dare to claim to know him – or even worse – to be known by him, would you?

Dave (Peter): I am not; I would not; I do not know him. In fact, I'm just going to hang out here in the courtyard with the servants and the police. They've got this nice charcoal fire going where I can keep warm. (Peter moves to Brendan and Cameron)

Brendan (police): Hold up there, fella. You are not also one of his disciples, are you?

Dave (Peter): I am not.

Cameron (servant): Well I happen to have been there when Jesus was arrested. Did I not see you in the garden with him?

Dave (Peter): No. (shaking his head). (Rooster crows and everyone backs away from Peter) When I was with Jesus, I knew who I was and what we were up to. But now that Jesus has been arrested, I'm lost.

It seems like the world is all about who you know. My buddy got me through the gate because he knew the high priest. That woman and the policeman accused me of knowing Jesus, which would have gotten me arrested too.

And then the servant – he actually saw me with Jesus, and still I denied it. Even though I do know Jesus – and I love him – I guess I just don't know myself very well.

Knowing Jesus and knowing ourselves, and developing that relationship and how that relationship with Jesus affects all our other relationships, that's what we're talking about here. We think we know who we are, what we're capable of. We think we know the people in our lives – our bosses, classmates, coworkers, friends and family members.

But really, we can only know them so much, and we can't even be sure what we are capable of under the pressure this world throws at us. We think we know how we will respond, but if we're not careful, we might be surprised to find that we respond very badly given enough pressure, particularly if we are left out in the cold all alone, like Peter was.

But thank God, we are never really alone. While Jesus walked the earth, he came and went in many ways just like anyone else. Sometimes he was there; sometimes he wasn't. But now that Christ is risen and Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit, he is always with us.

Our only job is to accept him, to claim him as our own – as our Lord and Savior – and then to cling to him at all times, and especially at those times when the pressures mount, when the going gets tough, and when we feel all alone in the world.

Since we're talking about who we know and how well we know them, let's focus this morning on our closest relationships. Does anybody here experience some pressure or rough spots in their closest relationships? I didn't think so; it's just me, then. That's OK. Learn from my experiences; it's nicer for you that way.

I grew up with two older brothers. As the youngest, I was the least athletic and most socially awkward of the three. So I found myself very frustrated most of the time. Now it took a lot of years and the grace of God for me to grow beyond this – to become someone who dearly loves and values my brothers, and all my family, even as they love and value me. And this was not something we achieved by ourselves.

I don't have time this morning to tell you all the ways that God led us and supported us and changed us over the years to be the loving family that we are today. But I can tell you that without God, it would not have happened. Just by being open to God and then clinging to Jesus throughout life; that's what opened the way for all of the good things that my brothers and my parents and I enjoy as a family today. It's what holds us together, even across the miles.

And in fact, because we do live so far apart – one brother in Cleveland, another in New Jersey, and our parents in the Carolinas – because of the distance between us, in some ways, we actually have it much easier getting along as a family than most.

People whose family members are in close quarters with them have to work twice as hard to develop and maintain solid, loving, Christian relationships. And since many of you are in that kind of a family situation, let me give you a list of Do's and Don'ts when it comes to living together as God intended.

It's called the Ten Commandments of Christian relationships:
(Now, don't start filling in the blanks in your sermon worksheet quite yet; I'll tell you when to do it.)

No. 1 in our Top Ten – I am thy Main Squeeze; thou shalt squeeze no others before me.

No. 2 – Thou shalt not take the name of thy Squeeze in vain, or badmouth me behind my back. (Obviously, we're talking about a significant other, here – a spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend – but these ideas can be used in any relationship that's important to you.)

No. 3 – Remember our Anniversary (or my birthday or other special day), and keep it holy. Or else.

No. 4 – Honor MY mother and father. (Those with in-laws get that one.)

No. 5 – Thou shalt not kill my love by behaving tackily and making me embarrassed to be seen with thee. (Definitely a husband/wife thing.)

No. 6 - Thou shalt not commit adultery, nor shalt thou even THINK of it if thou knowest what's good for thee.

No. 7 – Thou shalt not steal from my purse, not use my credit cards, nor make long-distance calls on my telephone. (kids, you hear that one?)

No. 8 – Thou shalt not talk about our personal problems to our friends. (Good advise for anyone.)

No. 9 – Thou shalt not covet the higher market price of thy neighbor's house.

And No. 10 – Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's Main Squeeze, nor stereo, nor BMW or Prius.

To sum up our 10 Commandments here, -and you can use the notes sheet in your bulletin to jot them down- they basically say be loyal in both word and deed, be thoughtful, respect each other and respect yourself, don't fool around when it comes to love or anything else really important, don't mess with it if it's not yours

to mess with, don't throw each other under the bus, and don't go around wishing you had someone else's life; be thankful for what you have.

Those are pretty good rules to live by. And if you think about it, most if not all of the trouble we have with relationships has something to do with breaking one or more of those rules. Such is our lot in life as human beings.

Even the disciples had trouble playing by these rules. Peter breaks the first rule by betraying his loyalty to Jesus – I don't know the guy. Judas displays more a love of money than his love of Jesus. And Thomas; Thomas doesn't even know or trust Jesus when he sees him in the flesh – albeit the risen Christ, in the flesh, which would be hard for any of us to believe at first.

We all have trouble believing in Jesus – really turning to, counting on and trusting in Jesus. And especially when things get rough, we tend to have trouble clinging to Jesus. Sometimes the world just shakes us loose and we feel like we're drifting out into nothingness, or falling into some big pit of despair. What do we do then? Nothing. There's nothing for us to do when the world really shakes loose our hold on Jesus. When that happens, that's when Jesus steps in and takes hold of us, as long as we don't forget or abandon our faith and hope in Christ.

That was Judas's problem, after all – he failed to turn to Jesus when evil and sin took hold of him. Peter, on the other hand, Peter's denial of Jesus is even more haunting. While what Judas did shows the power of evil to take hold of us, what Peter did shows the power of that gray area, which we all stumble into from time to time. Peter's downfall was caused not by outright betrayal, but by compromise, by giving in to personal expediency, self-protection, and fear. Which one us here has not done that – some maybe yet this morning!

But the good news for us – the good news for Peter and even for Judas – is that our core problem is not with who we are as human beings, but rather who we forget that we are as children of God. Judas forgot who he was as a child of God, and that made all the difference in the world for him, the difference between life and death.

As a child of God, we are not asked to depend on, cling to, or rely on our own capabilities, but rather we rely on God's grace and mercy.

For some reason, Judas forgot about this – or maybe he outright refused it – this gift of God's grace. Let us not make the same mistake!

Because while life may not be easy, God's grace and mercy is. Let's not forget that, and let's not forget the Core Principles of the 10 Commandments of Christ-based Relationships – loyalty, thoughtfulness, self respect, honesty, and being thankful for what you have – the Core Principles of Christ-like living.

And – since we are only human – when you do forget the one don't forget to turn to the other. When you forget or betray these Core Principles with someone you care about, remember that God's grace and mercy are available to you. You can go to that person, in the love and grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, and clean it up, make right what ever has gone wrong. At least we can do that on our part, and then leave the rest to God.

As long as you – as long as I – remember to stay right with God, we can always find a way to make things right with others, at least in our hearts and more importantly, in God's eyes. That, my friends, is God's gift to us all. We just need to have the courage and the faith to accept it.

I encourage you to do that right now. Think of someone you need to make things right with, and pray for the courage to act on it – using the Core Principles as a guide, and trusting in God's gift of grace and mercy to see you through.

Let's do that now. Let's pray silently for a few moments, about who that might be in our lives – in your life – and how God might be calling you – calling me – to make things right. Amen.

Pastoral prayer

Gracious God, we acknowledge that temptation is ever present, always knocking at the door and nipping at our heels.

It comes cleverly disguised and enticingly packaged, sometimes as decadent enticements, but at other times, as innocent amusements.

We are foolishly overconfident in our ability to recognize and resist the grip culture has on us when it pulls us away from faith in Christ and the teachings of Jesus.

Thank you for this special season of Lent, which reminds us to look to you for strength and guidance.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that our identity is in belonging to you, not in keeping up with the ever-changing whims of the world and the overwhelming choices we feel pressured to make.

Without your living Word to guide us and the Spirit to strengthen and support us, we would not make it another day.

So we take this time, this day, to pray together using the Words that you gave to us, the words of the Lord's Prayer, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.**

**And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**