

Sixth Sunday of Easter

READINGS: Acts 15: 1 – 2, 22 – 29; Revelation 21: 10 – 14, 22 – 23; John 14: 23 – 29.

THEME: God Sometimes Withdraws from Us So That We May Draw Closer to Him

Four-year-old Alice shouted and jumped for joy each noon when her mother came home from work on her lunch break. Her mother would pick her up at the neighbor's. They would hurry home, eat lunch, and play together. But Alice would become hyper when her mother left again after lunch for work. One day her mother stopped coming home for lunch. Alice was saddened. She wondered why her mother stopped coming. She wondered why her mother stopped eating and playing with her. She wondered if her mother still loved her as much as she once did. Years later Alice learned that her mother still came home each noon. She sat at the kitchen window, eating her lunch and watching Alice play in the neighbor's yard. All the while she longed to be with Alice. She longed to hold her close, especially when she cried. But it was for Alice's good that she did not. Eventually Alice adjusted to her mother's absence and grew up in a healthy way. Looking back on it now, Alice sees why her mother stopped coming. It was for her own good, for her own growth and development.

The story has something in common with today's gospel. For in today's gospel, Jesus says in effect to his disciples, "You are sad that I tell you I must leave you. You are distressed and fearful. But I tell you, it is better for you if I go. For then my Father will send the Holy Spirit to help you grow and develop in a new way." In other words, Jesus is saying to his disciples that it is time for him to leave them for a while. It is time for them to begin a new phase in their spiritual growth. It is time for them to grow and develop in a new way.

What is true of four-year-old Alice and what is true of the disciples of Jesus is also true of us. There come times in our lives when God seems to abandon us. There come times in our lives when God seems to leave us for a while.

Take **our prayer**, for example. Perhaps there was a time when we experienced deep peace from prayer. But now we seem to draw little from it. Or take **our faith**. Perhaps there was a time when our faith was strong enough to move mountains; but now it can hardly move a molehill. Or take **our religious commitment**. Perhaps we once derived great satisfaction from working in **Marriage Encounter, in RCIA, or as a Eucharistic minister**. Now we derive very little joy from it. It is as though God has abandoned us. We begin to wonder if God still loves us as much as he once did, just as little Alice began to wonder about her mother's love.

The truth is that God loves us very much. He loves us as much as he always did. He still longs to hold us close. But God knows that it is for our own good that He does not. God knows it is time for us to begin in a new phase in our spiritual growth, just as little Alice did and just as the disciples of Jesus did.

For example, it is time for us to realize that prayer can take place without feeling on our part. In fact, the best prayer often takes place when our heart seems to turn to stone and we have no feeling at all. For it is then that we truly pray with faith.

It is time for us to realize that faith is not a feeling. It is a commitment. It is a surrender of ourselves to God. It is a saying yes to God, even though we do not sense or feel his presence, just as little Alice did not sense or feel her mother's presence.

Finally, it is time for us to realize that the motive for our religious involvement does not come, primarily, from the satisfaction we get from it. We get involved because Jesus asked us to. We get involved because Jesus taught us to. Get involved because Jesus himself did.

Once a little boy was playing outdoors and found a fascinating caterpillar. He carefully picked it up and took it home to show his mother. He asked his mother if he could keep it, and she said he could if he would take good care of it. The little boy got a large jar from his mother and put plants to eat, and a stick to climb on, in the jar.

Every day he watched the caterpillar and brought it new plants to eat. One day the caterpillar climbed up the stick and started acting strangely. The boy worriedly called his mother who came and understood that the caterpillar was creating a cocoon. The mother explained to the boy how the caterpillar was going to go through a metamorphosis and become a butterfly.

The little boy was thrilled to hear about the changes his caterpillar would go through. He watched every day, waiting for the butterfly to emerge. One day it happened, a small hole appeared in the cocoon and the butterfly started to struggle to come out. At first the boy was excited, but soon he became concerned. The butterfly was struggling so hard to get out! It looked like it couldn't break free! It looked desperate! It looked like it was making no progress!

The boy was so concerned he decided to help. He ran to get scissors, and then walked back (because he had learned not to run with scissors...). He snipped the cocoon to make the hole bigger and the butterfly quickly emerged!

As the butterfly came out the boy was surprised. It had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. He continued to watch the butterfly expecting that, at any moment, the wings would dry out, enlarge and expand to support the swollen body. He knew that in time the body would shrink and the butterfly's wings would expand. But neither happened!

The butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly...

As the boy tried to figure out what had gone wrong his mother took him to talk to a scientist from a local college. He learned that the butterfly was SUPPOSED to struggle. In fact, the butterfly's struggle to push its way through the tiny opening of the cocoon pushes the fluid out of its body and into its wings. Without the struggle, the butterfly would never, ever fly. The boy's good intentions hurt the butterfly.

Something like that happens with us. God programs struggle into our lives. It is His way of helping us grow spiritually. God arranged things so that at certain points in our prayer-life we must struggle.. He arranged things so that at certain points in our spiritual life we must struggle. And all the while we are struggling, God is close at hand, just as Alice's mother was close at hand when little Alice was struggling. God knows that it is for our own good that we struggle for a while. For it is through this kind of struggle that we grow and develop spiritually into mature Christians.

Let's close with a poem by an unknown author that sums up what we have been trying to say.

“For every pain we must bear,
For every burden, every care,
There's a reason.

For every grief that bows the head,
For every teardrop that is shed,
There's a reason.

For every hurt, for every plight,
For every lonely, pain-racked night,
There's a reason.

But if we trust God, as we should,
It will turn out for our good.
He knows the reason.”