

Mike Bennett  
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 13, 2007

Revelation 21.1-10, 22-22.5  
**John 14.23-29**

### **A Bittersweet Gift**

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”—John 14.27

Saying good-bye is hard. Moments of farewell are fraught with emotional risk. Think about time you’ve spent with dear friends or with family far away. When it comes time to leave, things often get uncomfortable or awkward. Sometimes, rather than admit our true emotions, we find ways to mask them. I had a family member who would always pick a fight on the last day of every visit. This used to puzzle me, until I realized that it was this person’s way of making the pain of separation easier to bear.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” These are poignant words from Jesus to his disciples. This section of the Gospel of John is full of promise and hope. But it is also full of fear and hurt. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He knows that his end is near, so he is getting them ready for a new phase of their life. He offers them a wonderful gift, but it is a bittersweet gift—for in order to receive it, Jesus himself must leave them. Three entire chapters of John’s gospel are taken up with this “farewell discourse.”<sup>1</sup>

By his very words of reassurance, Jesus demonstrates that he understands the vulnerability of his followers. He senses their fear of abandonment and their lack of understanding about the nature of his death. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he says earlier in this lengthy dialogue. (John 14.18)

I’m a big fan of bluegrass music. A few years ago a wonderful, authoritative biography of Bill Monroe appeared.<sup>2</sup> Bill Monroe, for the “unwashed,” is the Father of Bluegrass music. He was also, according to Richard Smith’s biography, “an uncle to country music, a first cousin to the folk revival, and a grandfather to rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>3</sup> Being a bit of a fanatic, I’ve read quite a bit about Monroe before. (I’ve got books. I’ve got videos. I’ve even got his autograph.) But

this book was the first thing that really helped me to understand the complexity of the famous musician's personality. From his very early years, Bill Monroe had a problem with his vision. Though he wanted to spend time with his older brothers, they would often leave him behind—in order to avoid embarrassment. In his early teenage years, his brothers moved north from Kentucky and Bill was orphaned when his parents died. He went to live with his Uncle Pen, a fiddle player.

A few years later he joined his brothers in Indiana, but the feeling and fear of abandonment never left him. Our childhood experiences are powerfully formative of our adult personalities. The fear of the “little cross-eyed boy” inspired a lot of Bill Monroe's best music. [Play songs.<sup>4</sup>] But that fear also shaped his marriages and relationships with women, as well as his interaction with members of his band. Probably no singer ever harmonized more sweetly with Bill Monroe than Lester Flatt. The mid 1940's with Lester Flatt playing guitar and singing and with Earl Scruggs playing banjo—that was the true heyday of Bill Monroe's band, the Blue Grass Boys. But when Flatt and Scruggs followed their natural ambition and left the Blue Grass Boys to strike out on their own, Monroe felt abandoned. This feeling resulted in a famous feud of silence that lasted for twenty years! The same pattern was repeated over and over in Bill Monroe's life—with women, with his family, with his favorite fiddler. For all of his fame and musical greatness, much of Bill Monroe's life was lived out of the emotional perspective of that fearful little boy with the bad eyes, frightened that he would once again be left behind. “He was every inch a man. And yet, in both his hurts and his enthusiasms, he had never ceased being a little boy.”<sup>5</sup>

“Peace I leave with you;” Jesus said to his disciples, “my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14.27) In his fresh paraphrase of the New Testament, Eugene Peterson renders this passage very creatively:

I'm leaving you well and whole. That's my parting gift to you.  
Peace. I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling  
abandoned, bereft. So don't be upset. Don't be distraught.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus doesn't abandon us. He doesn't leave us orphaned. The disciples didn't want him to go, of course, but he gave them a farewell gift. In his time of leaving, Jesus promises the presence of the Holy Spirit—or as he calls it in this passage, the Advocate: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14.26) The word translated here as “Advocate” has a broad and full meaning in the original Greek. The *parakletos* is a counselor, comforter, and helper.

The Holy Spirit is to the church today what Jesus himself was to the disciples. Through the Holy Spirit we have access to God's abiding presence. But even today our awareness of God's presence is caught up in our anxiety about abandonment. At some dark times in our life, God seems absent. We pray, but we feel no response. We listen, but we hear nothing. We get anxious that God has left us alone.

And yet, when God really is present, we are also afraid. Virtually every divine appearance in the Bible is first met with the reaction of fear. Think of Moses. Or of Mary. Or of those shepherds who were “sore afraid.” Think of the Apostle Paul being blinded by the light of the risen Christ. As human beings, we fear God's absence, but—paradoxically—we seldom welcome God's presence. When we have a difficult problem, we might pray for help. But what if we actually get an answer!/? What if God's solution is not the one we would choose? At times like that, we'd prefer to be left alone...thank you very much!

For human beings, the whole question of God's presence is problematic. In a lot of ways, we are like adolescent children. We want the safety and comfort that comes from knowing our Parent is close by. But at the same time we are embarrassed by God's presence, we are afraid of being “seen” showing too much devotion. The kind of tensions that were so powerfully present in Bill Monroe exist in all of us. As Jean Vanier says, “Belonging is a beautiful but terrible reality.” It is in the “to-and-fro of love” that we learn what I means to be human.<sup>7</sup>

And it is precisely at this point of discomfort that faith enters in. We want God in our lives, but we are afraid and tentative. The process of faith is the process of learning to let go of our anxiety about God's presence. As we mature in faith, we begin to accept that God won't always feel near—and also that God won't overwhelm us. In faith, we gain a certain comfort—a sense of *peace*—about the presence of God.

God meets us where our fear is strongest. Our anxiety can be debilitating, but fear can also be a doorway to spiritual growth. Bill Monroe's fear of abandonment was at the root to his many personal problems. But at the same time it was the source of the incredible soulfulness of his music. It was his spiritual cutting edge.

Understanding and feeling the presence of God is always going to be a tricky business. Just look at what Jesus said to his disciples as he was saying goodbye: "I am going away, and I am coming to you." (John 14.28) That's a pretty confusing message! Jesus knew it would take his disciples time and patience to understand.

It will take us time, too.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>1</sup> John 14.1-17.26

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Smith, *Can't You Hear Me Callin': The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *Can't You Hear Me Callin'*, page 286.

<sup>4</sup> A brief selection of clips from Bill Monroe songs dealing with the theme of abandonment: *Blue Moon of Kentucky*, *Sitting Alone In The Moonlight*, *I'm On My Way Back To The Old Home*, *Sweetheart You Done Me Wrong*, *Uncle Pen*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), page 221.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pages 42-43.