

LEFT ALONE UNALONE

John 15:26 – 16:15

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When learning to fly, an instructor, of course, flies with you. The student pilot sits in the left seat in front of the gauges. The instructor sits in the right seat with access to a dual yoke, rudder pedals, and brakes. The instructor guides the student through maneuvers, reminding the student of protocols, making sure the plane remains in control. Should the plane get out of control, the instructor is able to take over and return the plane to a safe configuration.

Then one day, usually at an unannounced time, the instructor will direct the student to land. With that he or she will get out of the plane and tell the student to do three takeoffs and landings – alone. It is time to solo. It is the time for which every student pilot waits, and yet there is a fear factor. For the first time the student will be executing the two most difficult and dangerous stages of flight, the takeoff and landing, without anyone else in the plane to give instruction or to grab the controls if something goes wrong.

It is the same feeling student drivers may have when they pull away from the curb for the first time without an instructor or parent sitting next to them. It is the same feeling children may have the first time they jump into a pool without mom or dad to catch them, or freshmen might have when mom and dad drop them at the dorm and then leave, or skiers might have the first time they leave the instructor and bunny slope for the top of the mountain, or those promoted may have when suddenly they are boss and the buck stops with them. When it is time to solo, when the safety net is removed, one can feel very alone.

I wonder if this is how the disciples felt the night Jesus told them he was leaving. Just as the student pilot knows that one day the instructor will step out of the plane and say you are on your own, the disciples had to suspect that Jesus would not always be with them. He had earlier sent them out on missions in pairs, which was clearly training for future missions. They had come to Jerusalem and the tension was high and the future tenuous. The authorities were out to get Jesus and the possibility was real that it could happen any day. They had to suspect Jesus would not always be with them.

Suspect or not, at the Last Supper Jesus made it clear. He was leaving. The disciples would be on their own. The gospel of John, unlike the other gospels, provides a long discourse by Christ at the Last Supper. In the discourse, Jesus explained some things

more fully, told them some things he had not told them before, and made it clear that he was about to return to God. In many ways this was good news for Jesus, not so good for the disciples. Jesus told them they were about to solo, and they were not at all sure that they were ready.

That discussion in and of itself is interesting. It really gets interesting, though, from my perspective, when Jesus adds, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away....” It is to your advantage that I go away. Really? I cannot think of a time when it would be more of an advantage for us to be without Jesus than to be with Jesus. The disciples had to be thinking the same thing. In what universe were they better off without Jesus?

The only way this makes any sense at all is when we read the entire statement. Jesus said, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” Ah, there is the catch. The disciples were not going to solo, not exactly. Jesus was going to leave them, yes, but he was not going to leave them alone. The Advocate, another name for the Holy Spirit, would be with them. They would be alone unalone.

This all connects to the long-term plan of God and to everyone’s role in that plan. Even Jesus had a role. He was to proclaim the coming reign of God, demonstrate that reign with teaching and miracle, and defeat the power of sin and death by way of his atoning death to make salvation possible. The disciples had two roles, really. First, they were to be disciples, students of Jesus, learning about the kingdom and helping their rabbi. But they were also to be apostles, messengers for Jesus. They were the ones in charge of getting the word out.

Now here is the thing. As long as they were disciples, they could never be apostles, not fully. They would not be spreading out proclaiming the word. They would be with Jesus, wherever he was, listening to him proclaim the word. They would not be recruiting, teaching and training others to help them in their mission. They would be with Jesus, being trained by him and helping him with his mission. They would not work miracles. They would defer to Jesus to do that. In other words, ironically, if you want to think of it this way, the presence of Jesus hampered the disciples from being what they were truly called to be – apostles.

This is why Jesus said it was better if he left. The teacher who never metaphorically lets the student out of the classroom also never allows the student to ever become a scholar. The mentor who does not pull back never allows the mentee to lead. The parent who refuses to let go never makes it possible for the child to be an adult. The instructor who never gets out of the plane never sees the student pilot become just the

pilot. If Jesus did not leave, the disciples would never head out on their God-ordained mission.

It is to your advantage if I go, Jesus said. We can understand that in that context. The other part of that, though, is that they were being sent out on an impossible mission if they were without God. Enter the Holy Spirit. I talked about different roles a moment ago. Well, the role of the Holy Spirit is to empower and enable Christ's followers to succeed on the mission to which each has been sent.

This is what we talked about on the Day of Pentecost last Sunday. Jesus had stepped out of the plane so the disciples could solo. Theologically we call that the Ascension. Oh, but the disciples were not flying very well. They sat huddled together in a locked room, afraid and clueless, while the world gathered outside their door. It looked like they were going to crash-land. Then the Holy Spirit arrived, righted the plane, and sent them flying worldwide. Empowered and enabled by the Spirit, the apostles were able to accomplish all that God had called them to do.

This is exactly what the Holy Spirit continues to do. The Spirit does this in a variety of ways. One way we may never think about is that the Spirit enables us by imparting wisdom. We heard some of this in our lesson from Proverbs this morning. "Now my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it." Wisdom is not the same thing as education. No diplomas or degrees are given to the wise. Wisdom involves understanding the ways of God and the ways of the world, enabling the wise to make good decisions and to see as others cannot see. If you are in a conundrum and you decide to go and see someone because you think he or she will understand the situation and know what to do, you are going to see someone you consider wise. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...." Proverbs would say the Spirit imparts wisdom.

The Spirit also provides gifts needed for ministry. This we are most familiar with. We often talk about spiritual gifts and many have taken inventories to learn about their gifts. What is important to remember about this is that this is a group experience. There are many spiritual gifts, but no one person has them all. The gifts are useful, then, only when combined. This is one of the fallacies of believing that one can be a Christian in isolation, not needing the church or community of believers. Being Christian includes serving God, fulfilling the God-given mission, and we since we each only have a piece of what is needed to do that we need each other. Jim Harnish, in his book we studied together during Lent, talked about a parishioner who was fired up for mission work and was greatly disappointed that his spiritual gift was administration. He wanted the gift of preaching or teaching or healing or witnessing, something that would be useful in mission

work. When the church wanted to send a team for an overseas mission project, however, he discovered that the team together had all kinds of gifts that would be needed on-site but no one who could organize and actually make the trip happen. His gift got them there. Others gifts met the needs there.

The famous church potluck dinner is always a great meal because each person brings a unique dish, and when all are put together, it is a smorgasbord. Have a potluck by yourself and your meal will consist of one dish. Being a Christian in isolation is like holding a pot luck dinner by yourself.

One of my responsibilities is to see that all the myriad tasks that need to be done in the church are covered. This requires dozens and dozens of people. Often folks who do a great job move away or get sick or appropriately are ready for a change. I wonder who can and will fill those shoes. Inevitably, someone comes forward with just the right gifts or someone new comes to church and, low and behold, that is their area of interest. This is the Spirit at work. We are going to see a video in a few minutes put together by our fourth and fifth graders about spiritual gifts. We will get their take on this.

The Spirit also does empower and enable us in specific situations. I am always grateful when someone speaks to me after a funeral or a program or a Sunday service to say my words touched them or were just right for the situation. I am glad, but they are not exactly my words. The Spirit has made it possible for me to know what to say and has opened others ears to hear in a particular way. You may have had occasions when you had no idea what to say but somehow said what was needed.

In the same way, we may be moved to call or visit someone, or we come up with an idea and we do not know how, or we feel guided during a difficult situation, or we find we have more courage than usual, or maybe more grace than usual or insight we did not know we had. These are all signs of the Holy Spirit empowering and enabling.

We might wish we could walk and talk with Jesus as the disciples did. Maybe they did not have for a lifetime, but they had him for some time. We do not have that experience. We are alone. Well, yes, but we are alone unalone. The Holy Spirit is with us empowering and enabling us to fulfill our mission. Jesus has done his part. The Holy Spirit is doing his part. It is for us to do our part.

When the instructor steps out of the plane, the student pilot is truly alone. When Jesus steps out, it is not that way. God the Spirit is yet with us. Given that, if you are piloting the plane, hand over the controls. Things will fly much better.

Amen.