

Separation Anxiety
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 115:1-13
Reading from the Gospels: John 14:15-21

While I have not closely followed the hit HBO series, *Succession*, I can say that I have seen enough to choose not to see any more. While the critics, bloggers, and cool people fawn over the pathos, manipulation, and insecurity of the Roy clan, the .001 percent version of the Trask family in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, I find myself, not drawn in, but rather put off by the characters and their dialogue as they wallow in a perpetual state of emotional immaturity, seemingly incapable of authenticity, and who, unable to convey any depth of thought, cover their lack with the incessant chirping of every imaginable declension of that king of cuss words. If they acted on every utterance of it, they would have populated a city the size of Mumbai by now. Less than ten minutes into the script, you want to shout, *Just be quiet.*

If the producer's intention here is to hold up a mirror to the American family, we are a toxic waste site with expensive clothes. Surely, such dysfunction is not our inevitable end. Surely, there are families and friendships to be found that bear a more hopeful witness to the unsurpassable worth of relationship.

My dear friend Richard Boyce recently retired from his position as Dean of Union Presbyterian Seminary here in Charlotte, but for twenty years he made the daily commute from Belmont to the seminary campus in Southpark, sometimes cruising, but often crawling along 485 in his destroyer-sized Mercury Grand Marquis, the iconic everyman land-yacht of a bygone era. *Ahoy, ye matey!* However, those daily Interstate cruises were not spent idly. In fact, they would become perhaps the most sacred moments of Richard's day, initiated with a mere touch on his father's name, high among the favorites gracing his smartphone screen.

Calling dad was neither duty nor obligation, rather, it was the feast of conversation that sustained Richard's days in a variety of ways. The Rev. William Moore Boyce lived fully into the life of a pastor, spouse, and father. His was a life marked by faithfulness, patience, compassion, wisdom, a keen and inquiring mind, and a heaping helping of common sense. He served as an Army chaplain during the Korean War, and pastored churches in North Carolina and Virginia, where for 24 years he served as pastor of Lakeside Presbyterian Church in Richmond. However, for the kids of Richard's childhood neighborhood, his dad was the go-to guy when your bike needed to be fixed. They'd be quick to report that he was as comfortable with a

wrench as he was with a Bible. In fact, when Richard's dad retired, the church he was attending asked about his interest in teaching or preaching, but Bill resisted, saying what he really wanted to do was serve on the property committee ... certainly a path neither Richard nor I will want, or even be allowed, to pursue.

What Bill Boyce did pass down to Richard was an abiding love for scripture and a pastor's heart. Each morning of his childhood, Richard remembers the family gathered at the breakfast table where his father would share a passage of scripture, and perhaps read a simple devotional from *These Days*, that old pocket devotional familiar to long time Presbyterians. Then his dad might ask a couple of questions about the subject or just about the day, and conclude with a prayer. So often, such simple, yet consistent practices are the seeds from which a life of discipleship blooms.

Well, defying the stereotype of the preacher's kid as rebellious hellion, Richard looked to his father as a model to emulate, a counselor to advise, a practical thinker who could patiently abide with him as he sorted through the challenges of ministry, household maintenance, or parenting. His dad

was that priceless and accessible confidante Richard needed as he navigated the perilous shoals of politics and the church. You could say that those rush hour phone calls were a new version of an old habit. It was as if they were once again gathered around the breakfast table where the main dish was wisdom. They might talk about the text for a sermon, commiserate over a household repair, discuss issues at the church and seminary. To Richard, his father was an accessible sound board, a reliable voice of wisdom, an adept problem-solver with the head, heart and hands that could help Richard tackle ... well ... life. You may hate Charlotte traffic, but by the grace of God and a shared genetic predisposition, Richard had found a sacred space with his father amidst the chaos.

Perhaps there is a person who inhabits that sacred space in your life. It could be a parent (*Certainly, on this day, we affirm the moms who have played*) a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a mentor — someone you trust; someone who knows you and actually likes you; someone who is wise, perceptible, practical, truthful, and patient; someone whose voice just simply has a way of bringing you back to you.

Some of you had that in your life, but now, in a most disorienting way, find the script has been flipped, and you are the caregiver, counselor, problem-solver, eyes and ears for the person you once relied on. You have expressed how your absence or inaccessibility raises their anxiety and their dis-ease. You recognize that the voice you relied on, now relies, even more acutely, on you. You want to meet the moment and fill that role, but how do you achieve that without the voice you relied on for so long?

Similarly, there may be a voice you trust, upon whose presence you depend, who is accessible and whose hand can hold yours as you find your way back to the center; the voice that is always there to help you regain your balance. So, the news hits you like a locomotive when you find out they are moving away, or dying, or have died, or are in some way inaccessible from this point forward. The rush of anxiety runs from your toes to the top of your head. As Peter pointedly asked Jesus, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of life.”

The setting for today’s text is John’s version of the Last Supper. We think of the Lord’s Supper, that poignant meal shared by Jesus and his disciples on the night of his arrest, as a serene, quiet, and meditative event.

Indeed, in our celebration of the sacrament, we hope to push aside the worries of the world and focus our minds and hearts on the meal's host, Jesus Christ. *This is my body... This is my blood...* However, on that first occasion, while there may have been quiet, there was little serenity. Jesus may have spoken in hushed tones, but the undercurrent of anxiety was deafening. The disciples were unnerved and confused by some of the things Jesus had been saying. They had heard Jesus utter disturbing, perplexing words like: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — 'Father, save me from this hour?'" "I lay down my life for the sheep." "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." Those are not statements that calm spirits and raise hopes.

In addition, the disciples were certainly aware of the growing animosity, suspicion, and judgment surrounding Jesus, particularly from people in positions of religious authority. The disciples could see the frowns and hear the whispers of the officials clustered at the periphery of the crowd, where they were plotting a strategy for how to silence this Jesus. And then, Jesus lights the fuse of this little firecracker that will blow their minds: "Where I am going you cannot come." The disciples are getting

nervous and have started asking questions. Peter asks: “Lord, why can I not follow you now?” Thomas asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

You can sense the tension of separation anxiety surrounding that original Lord’s table. Certainly, Jesus senses it, feels it, knows it. The nervous eaters were stuffing bread into their cheeks. Those with nervous stomachs were pushing their bread and fruit around their plates.

Jesus’ first strategy for easing their separation anxiety was the humble, poignant, and loving act of grabbing a wash basin and towel, kneeling before them, and gently washing their feet. Yet, for some that only increased their anxiety. *(I know it would increase mine! Whaaat is he doing?)* Maybe not for the same reason, but I’d probably be echoing Peter, *You’re not touching my feet!*

The disciples were anxious. The disciples were confused. So, Jesus shifts to Plan B. The Message translation phrases Plan B this way: Jesus says, “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you. I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t

take him in because it doesn't have eyes to see him, doesn't know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be in you!"

Jesus knows that if the disciples are confused and anxious at this point, within a couple of hours they'll be freaking out when Jesus is cuffed and paraded in history's most profane perp walk. *Everything you say will be used against you.*

Jesus understands what the disciples cannot yet conceive, and he wants to give them something to hold onto, something to look to and rely upon amidst the coming chaos. In a sense, Jesus is saying, "Things are about to get real up in here. But look, I have given you the tools you will need, and I have even arranged for the world's greatest mentor to set up a 24/7 office in your heart."

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." That's your toolbox, and when you open it, you will find all wisdom and insight wrapped up in four simple words: Love God; Love neighbor.

In every circumstance, those words are the only essential tools you will need. Those four words are the primary answer to every question. If

what you are thinking, or what you are about to say, or what you are about to do fails to be consistent with those four words, you are off target and headed in the wrong direction. There is no place where and no time when those words do not apply. Before every decision, every encounter, every challenge; in the face of every conflict, every dilemma, every obstacle — consider those four words. Love God; love neighbor.

Jesus is reminding his disciples and telling us to carry that toolbox with us at all times. Don't leave home without it. Don't go home without it.

Yet, knowing we are who we are, Jesus doesn't stop there. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever ... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

It's like Jesus is saying, "Listen, I know you well enough to conclude that it is probably not a good idea to send you out there alone. I've seen your work. That whole love concept? I've seen your moves ... It's not pretty. So, I put in a purchase order with the home office, and we're sending you a counselor, a guide, a light to get you through the darkness, someone to hold onto in every storm.

“This Holy Spirit is coming from the top, straight out of the executive suite. Just as I am with you now, in a short time that Spirit will be at work in you, awakening you to the presence of God, empowering you to meet the demands of those four central words: Love God, love neighbor. And when you sense that stirring warmth in your heart; when you sense that call to comfort the afflicted or to pursue the good, (Jesus is saying) that’s Me at work in you.”

Jesus promised his anxious disciples and us: “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

There came a point when my friend Richard would have to endure that daily 485 game of *Frogger* without those sacred moments in conversation with his father. But you know what? His father had been preparing him for this moment all through this life, allowing him to be comfortable with the knowledge and language of God’s essential and accessible truth — God for us; Christ with us; Spirit in and among us.

When I told Richard I was looking at the Paraclete narrative in John and couldn’t help but think of his morning conversations with his father, Richard knew exactly what I was talking about and immediately caught on

to the connection. His dad gave him that. "I will not leave you orphaned."
And guess what. God gave Richard four daughters who know how to use a
phone and who actually look forward to talking to their dad. The gift
continues in ways beyond our understanding.

So, when you hear a preacher say, "God be with you," remember, that
is not a hope, but a reality. Amen.