

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Sixth Sunday in Easter  
May 1, 2005

## **Distancing Techniques**

John 14:15-24; Acts 17:22-34

Today's reading from John's gospel,  
brings to us a message which is at the heart of the good news:  
God wants to be close to us.  
God hangs around with us all the time.  
God has gone to immeasurable lengths, in Jesus,  
to show us this great desire of his heart.  
It is so much the desire of God's heart to be near us, to accompany us,  
to guide, and support, and help us in life,  
and just to have fellowship with us, God's creatures,  
that the name given to God in this passage is:

*the Alongside One.*

Here, in this version, the translation is "Advocate."

In other versions, "Comforter" or "Counselor."

But the literal meaning of the Greek is "called alongside of,"  
and the assurance of this passage is that, even though we cannot see our Lord,  
even though he is not physically present with us, as with the first disciples,  
he remains with us, among us, alongside us.  
God has been revealed to us as One who wants to be near us,  
and will endeavor with every ounce of the divine heart  
to entice us to want the same thing back,  
to want God's nearness, to want God's love.

Today, I want to talk to you about what to do if this makes you uncomfortable.

If God's nearness is undesirable to you, or an inconvenience, or bothersome.  
As in any human-to-human relationship, there are in the human-divine relationship  
certain "distancing techniques" which can be used  
to keep the relationship from developing beyond a casual acquaintance.

1. One very effective distancing technique is to *look busy*.  
If you look like you're working very hard,  
like your schedule is filled and overflowing  
with very important and pressing matters,  
very good and noble endeavors,  
or even just basic survival,  
then perhaps God will be impressed  
and will figure that you don't need to be bothered.

Constant running to and fro, from one thing to the next,

allows for no time to stop and think, let alone to pray.  
Perhaps God will understand how busy you are and stop wanting so much of  
your attention.

Perhaps God won't notice that you still found time to eat and drink,  
to buy that cup of coffee,  
to check your investments online, and answer 30 emails,  
and check the weekend weather on The Weather Channel,  
or watch your TV show or shows, or go to a ball game,  
or read that novel you can't put down,  
or the sports page,  
or work the crossword puzzle.

The first thing to do if you want to keep your distance from God: *look busy*.  
Actually make yourself busy, with lots of other things, so you have no time for God.

2. Another way to hold God at a distance,  
and this is particularly effective for churchgoers like ourselves,  
because it is especially subtle and still give us the appearance of being  
close to God, while not actually being very close at all:  
The technique is to *think and talk about God, but never actually talk to God*

This is a good way not to feel badly about keeping God at a distance  
because, ironically, God can actually be on your mind a lot.  
You may think to yourself, "God would like this", or "God would not like that."  
Or "If God will bless me, this day will go well."  
Or "God must exist and be the creator of that beautiful sunset,  
or mountain, or starry sky."

But by no means, unless you want God getting close to you heart,  
by no means ever say something *directly to God*, like,  
"God, help me see what would please you today... in this situation...in this relationship."  
And certainly don't thank God directly by saying something like,  
"God, your creation is beautiful. Thank you for that sunset.  
Thank you for those flowers. Thank you for giving me life."  
And if you must say something to God, try to keep it as generic as possible,  
don't get too specific.  
Don't ever actually thank God for a particular blessing you have received;  
which would bring God way too close to home.

And then there's the "L" word.  
It is an especially dangerous word when talking to God,  
because using the "L" word  
can utterly eliminate the distance between yourself and God.  
If you want to keep your distance from God, never tell God directly, "I love you"  
because God never leaves that one unanswered,  
and you will very likely hear God saying back to you, "I love you, my child."  
An expression of love like that

can undermine even the most effective distancing techniques.

So never speak in the first person to God, saying “I, we, my, or our”  
and never in the second person, saying “you, thee, thy, our thou.”  
That is, to be safe it’s best not to develop what is called an “I-THOU” relationship.  
It is much safer to simply think and talk about God  
than actually to talk to God.

3. The third distancing technique is not ever to listen too carefully to God,  
especially if you think God may be trying to tell you something.  
Better to make up your own mind about what God wants,  
don’t study the scriptures too closely; don’t even consult them at all;  
don’t spend time really listening to Jesus’ teaching.  
If you don’t know or understand what Jesus commanded, it’s easier to plead ignorance.

Better just to assume that being a good American citizen makes you a good Christian.  
Or assume that being a political and social conservative,  
or a political and social liberal (whichever strikes your fancy)  
makes you right with God, puts you on Jesus’ home team.  
Whatever you do, don’t spend too much time simply listening to what Jesus says.  
He has a mysterious way of enticing a person deeper than they intended to go with him.  
He has a way of complicating what used to be so very simple and understandable.  
He has a way of changing people who listen to him too much.  
It can be risky to really listen to Jesus, and the God he reveals.  
Once you really hear him,  
it’s doubtful you ever be able to keep him away.

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Sometimes when I preach and teach I worry that I’m telling people things  
that they already know.  
If so, I apologize. If you already knew these techniques for holding God at bay,  
forgive me.  
As for me, I am familiar with all the techniques, having practiced them often myself;  
I think of myself as a pro; but you may be as familiar, or more so, than I am;  
these may be your primary ways of relating (or not relating) to God.  
At any rate, I hope something I’ve said may have been helpful.  
Of course, if you’re one of those who would like to draw *closer* to God,  
it is possible to reverse these distancing techniques,  
perhaps more easily than you might think.

And one more disclaimer: I cannot promise that these techniques will ultimately work.  
God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Father of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen,  
this God is a persistent deity – one might even say clueless.  
God just can’t take a hint, sometimes.  
And God’s pursuit can be relentless.

God has pursued us in Jesus, who has gone the full distance of love for us.  
And then God has come in another way,  
    as this Alongside One, this Advocate, this Comforter, Counselor, Spirit  
        who will not leave us alone, catching us in our unguarded moments,  
        and insists on getting mixed up  
            in all our affairs.

There are some who manage to keep their distance;  
    like those debaters in the Athenian marketplace  
        who *would spend all their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.*  
Some of them openly scoffed.  
Others were skillful enough to stick to mere speculation;  
    they remained uncommitted, saying to Paul only *We will hear you again on this.*

But *some of them joined him and became believers.*  
Some of them slipped,  
    first, by taking time to stop and acknowledge the light that shone from Christ  
        into their existence;  
    then, by actually talking directly to God,  
        instead of sticking to safe speculation from a distance;  
    finally, by listening and allowing themselves to be taught and changed  
        by the Word of God which makes all things...new.

And before they knew it, they found that they loved God,  
    and that God loved them, and had come into their lives,  
    and as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had made lodging with them,  
        abiding with them, in every moment.

One last warning, since we are approaching the table of the Alongside One.  
    If you wish to remain aloof from God's abiding love.  
    If you wish your life to remain undisturbed by God's pursuing heart.  
    If you wish to be master of your own domain, giving authority to no one.  
        Then I would suggest steering clear of this table.  
For here you will meet the One who is the master of closing the distance.  
    Here you will find communion; steadfast faithfulness; unrelenting compassion.  
    It is nearly irresistible.  
And if you keep coming here for long,  
    sooner or later, God may find a way to break through  
        to dwell in your heart, and never let you go.