

Sermon for July 19, 2009
Ephesians 2:11-22

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (v. 13)

I grew up with Sesame Street and my children did the same. One of my favorite characters on Sesame Street is Grover. He has a wonderful sketch on the concept of near and far. Here is what it looked like.

You see him very close to the camera when he says now I am near. Then he runs away from the camera so that you can barely see him and as his voice echoes, you hear him say, “Now I am far.” He then hustles back to the camera and declares, “Now I am near.” This takes place three or four times. Now Grover is panting and exhausted as he runs back and forth between near and far. The lesson is learned. Near is in your face and intimate. Far is distant and out of reach. Grover also shows that it can take a lot of work to get from near to far and back again.

I learned about near and far again this past week. I told you last week that I was flying to Knoxville for the International Conference of Police Chaplains annual training seminar and that I did not anticipate any adventures as I traveled. I went from near to far and back. In order to get far away I needed to fly. My flight to MPLS was scheduled for 3:00pm last Sunday. When we arrived at the airport at 1:45 I put my credit card into the Kiosk so that it could identify me, the message was, “You have missed your flight.” Wait a minute! That flight wasn’t scheduled to take off for over an hour. It had taken off at 1:20. Here we go again! I was put on standby. However, they weren’t going to charge their normal \$50 fee . As I was waiting for the 4:35 flight in the terminal, I noticed that Sen. Dorgan was in the terminal. My mind began to race. If I am next to the Senator, what would I want the conversation to look like? I got my seating assignment as soon as the ticket agent came to the gate. It was 2D. As I boarded the plane, guess who was sitting in 2C? That’s right. I spent an hour seated next to Sen. Dorgan.

While there are certainly things I would have liked to communicate to him regarding policy, we discussed our families. Before we deplaned, I asked him if there were any matters of concern for which I might be in prayer for him throughout the week. He expressed appreciation over my prayerful concern for his life. It isn't every day that one gets to sit next to a person whose influence and vote in Washington can impact so many lives. How do you respond when you are given opportunity to be near people of influence or, a better question, how do you treat those whom the Lord has placed near you in your life? Does it sometimes feel like those who are closest to you are the ones who seem to be the most distant? That can be really very devastating.

While I was in Knoxville, my thoughts often returned home. I wanted to be near my family. I missed them. Through texting and several phone calls a day, I was able to stay in contact. It was almost like I was home even when I was some 1600 miles from home.

Our Lord desires to be near us. He wants to have a close relationship with us. There was a time when we were, as the epistle lesson indicates, "separated from Christ... having no hope and without God in the world." (v. 12) That is what we were by virtue of the sinful condition into which we were born. Adam and Eve became alienated from God when they chose to go their own way by eating of the forbidden fruit. We have been suffering the consequences of that ever since.

It shows up in our relationships. We don't trust people. You can only be burned so many times before you finally just conclude that you would be better to go your separate ways. While people say they have our best interest at heart, we really question their sincerity. I would guess that you can think of at least one person that you see on a regular basis whom you would be willing to send away. They drive you crazy. Perhaps it is a supervisor at work who just doesn't listen to your needs. Maybe it is a family member whose words and attitudes are an embarrassment to you. On the flip side it could be a family member about whom you care deeply. They have either spoken unkind words to you or have retreated from the close relationship you used to have with them. You are devastated and hurt. You have lost all hope of restoring the chasm. The wall of separation causes such great pain. Sometimes those closest to us do feel so very far away.

Although the Lord desires that we be near to Him, many times we run away from Him. When difficult circumstances arise in our lives, we are quick to blame God. We conclude that He doesn't really love us. We feel sorry for ourselves and conclude that there is no hope. In those difficult times we seek comfort measures in food or in in-appropriate relationships. We might look to numb the pain through alcohol or other drugs. We go places where the Lord desires we don't go. If a person has caused us harm, rather than going to them and, in love, showing them their sin, we sin against them by talking about them to others. This causes even wider separation and deeper hurt.

Just as a parent is devastated over a child who runs as far from them as possible and cuts off all ties, so our Lord is deeply hurt when we run away from Him. Worse yet, when we forget that He even exists.

We were in great need. Our sin has caused ultimate and eternal separation from our gracious Creator. We have no excuse. Our selfish desires and grievous actions deserve such punishment. We don't deserve any of the blessings we receive. Just as Christ lovingly permitted the 5,000 to draw near to Him as He taught and then fed them, He provides for all of our needs. We are often more like the disciples in our attitude. They didn't want the 5,000 to be near to Jesus. They would have preferred them to be far away from Jesus. Let them go and find their own food. Let them fend for themselves. We want Jesus all to our selves.

Thankfully, our Lord has seen fit to draw near to us. The Father sent His Son, Immanuel, God with us, to be near us. He came as one of us so that He could live a perfect life in our place and then die the death that we deserve. Far from abandoning us and moving far from us, Jesus has come as near to us as possible.

That's why St. Paul talks about the church as being the very bride of Christ. He gave His life for us in order that we might have life in His name.

I met a police officer, Kabinge, from Kenya who serves the role of chaplain for his department. He is not a citizen of the United States. He, along with the chaplains who attended from Canada and Jamaica needed a passport to be given permission to be in our country. We will need a passport if we go with Pastor Baneck to the Holy Land in March, 2011 or if we attend the ICPC ATS in Jamaica in July, 2011. We are not citizens. We need to seek permission to visit. That permission slip is our passport. We have the stringent security at airports because we are afraid of another 9/11 attack.

By nature, our citizenship has us listed as foreigners in God's kingdom. We are aliens. We are not worthy to come into His holy presence. In baptism, He came directly to us and adopted us as His dear children, washing away all of our sins. He drew near to us and even gave us His Spirit to dwell within us. Jesus took all of our sin and sorrow and guilt when He went to the cross. In exchange He restored our hope by forgiving all of our sins. He has also made it possible to have all of our broken relationships restored through the forgiveness of sins.

He wants us to stay close to Him. He wants to care for us. He comes to us in the Divine Service where He serves us with His precious Word and through His Body and Blood, given and shed in our behalf. His invitation is this, "Draw near and take the body of the Lord. And drink the holy blood for you outpoured; Offered was He for greatest and for least, Himself the victim and Himself the priest." [LSB 637]

Jesus desires that we come close to Him not just for this life, but especially in preparation for the life to come. He has removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west in order that we might draw near to Him. We don't have to fear coming in to God's holy presence because we have been made holy through Christ. The punishment for our sin has been paid in full through Christ. He loves you, and through the blood that Jesus shed, His love for you will never end.

