

The Spirituality of Long-Distance Relationships

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu" (1919) by Edvard Munch

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded. Amen.

Scripture: Colossians 2:1-7 (NRSV)

For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Spirituality of Long-Distance Relationships

Sarah and I first met each other long-distance. Sarah volunteered for nearly a year as a nanny for a missionary family in Southeast Asia—who just so happened to be my sister’s family. Sarah got pretty close with the whole family. My sister got an idea—Sarah and John would be a great match. I was open to my matchmaking sister’s suggestion. I called my sister back at a later date for more information about Sarah.

“Hey Ann, do you happen to have the phone number of your former nanny you mentioned to me?”

I do, but she also just happens to be right here with me in California, would you like to talk to her right now?

I was not expecting that. The adrenaline started pumping. My introverted self took a deep breath and said,

“Yes, I’d like to talk to her.”

So Sarah and I talked on the phone for a few minutes and it was actually a pretty good conversation in a potentially very awkward situation. I didn’t make a total fool out of myself and I really liked Sarah’s voice. We exchanged email addresses. Sarah was living in Tempe at the time and I in Washington state. The first email I ever wrote was to Sarah. It didn’t take long for me to become a professional email writer—every day we wrote each other. I still have Sarah’s emails saved in my Hotmail account from back in the day.

We started also calling each other. Writing snail mail too. We met for the first time in December. The first movie we saw together in the theaters was “You’ve Got Mail” with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. I was Tom. Sarah was Meg.



We got engaged after being together for only a week. Sarah went back to Tempe. Our long-distance relationship continued, seeing each other a total of two other weeks before the wedding date. We got married the next May. That was 21 years ago. Sarah and I aren’t recommending to our kids or others our courtship strategy, but hey—I had to act quick before Sarah came to her senses!

Long-Distance Relationships

For the last half-year we've all been in a lot of long-distance relationships. Whether it be zooming with family or business meetings, seeing loved ones through glass doors at nursing homes, or calling family on our cell phone from our hospital bed. It seems like all our relationships are long-distance relationships.

Immanuel—you and I have been in a long-distance relationship this last half-year. In my mind's eye, when I'm preaching in our empty sanctuary, or preaching from my bedroom on quarantine, I imagine I'm not looking at my iPhone camera, but each and every one of you in the eye. Worshipping online has been great—but as we all know, it's nothing like being together in person, gathered as the people of God. We're going to get there soon.

And so for now, we text, email, call, and write letters. We have drop offs and pick ups. We see our loved ones' images on computer screens and social media feeds. And most importantly, we pray for each other.

The Apostle Paul was in many long-distance relationships too—with all of his churches, really. What a great letter-writer he was! I love how he put it to the Corinthian church,

"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts."

Thankfully the churches preserved Paul's letters, reading and re-reading his correspondences publicly, passing them to other churches, and copied them for others. Paul's letters became a sizeable part of our New Testament. Our Bible is the fruit of long-distance relationships.

Colossians is Paul's love letter to the people of Colossae, Laodicea, and to all those he had not yet seen face to face in that region. He couldn't see them because he was in seclusion—not from being in quarantine during a pandemic, but he was in a Roman prison, awaiting trial before Nero. In all likelihood Paul would receive the sentence of death.

In our passage, we get a glimpse of Paul's struggle. He struggled that he couldn't be with his churches. Struggled to be a strong and steady leader as his young and fledgling churches looked to him through his letters for guidance. But Paul's greatest struggle was love's struggle: He struggled on behalf of his churches in prayer. He used an athletic word: wrestling. Strenuously travailing with all the energy that God powerfully inspires within him. Notice Paul was struggling for the Colossians. He wasn't struggling against them. Struggling for the saints. Struggling in prayer on their behalf. Struggling for the well-being of the community.

When we're stressed, when we're irritated with all the inconveniences, and exasperated from this pandemic—it's easy to struggle against others. To take out our annoyances, our anger, our anxiety on others. Paul resists and redirects this negative energy. He channels his intense feelings—literally the Greek word is *"agon"* where we get the English word agony.

Paul's prayer is my prayer for you Immanuel. I'm agonizing over you in prayer—striving and struggling in prayer. And I need your prayers as well. The leadership needs your prayers, struggling on our behalf.

Paul says his heart's desire is that your hearts would be encouraged. That you would be united in love. The heart is an important word—it's the inner life of a person. The very core of our being. The heart is the source of our will, our emotions, our thoughts, our affections, our spirituality. Immanuel, may your heart be encouraged and whole. Let's pray also that we would be held together by the invisible bonds of love—even when we're apart. God is love. And without love, we're nothing. Prayer for each other strengthens our invisible bonds, so that in Christ Jesus, you might be equipped with every kind of wisdom.

In fact Paul mentions three different kinds of wisdom in our passage: Sunesis, Gnosis, Sophia.

- "Sunesis" is discernment—the ability to assess a situation and know what to do.
- "Gnosis" is the intuitive and relational power to recognize and grasp the truth.
- "Sophia" is wisdom that can internalize and communicate that truth.

Paul says that these three kinds of wisdom are found in Christ. *"In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* As Jesus says, *"store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."* Christ is where the real and lasting wealth is. Christ is our hidden treasure and Paul helps us find the X, the Cross, where to dig.

Let's keep praying for each other Immanuel, that we might have wisdom and direction to make so many tough calls and mind-numbing decisions. I'm not ashamed to say this: *Jesus is what it is all about.* He's the key to life, the hope of glory, and the image of the invisible God. Christ is our everything, but we always need more of him. Christ is our life. Christ holds everything together. He keeps us in one peace.

Paul keeps pressing further up and further in prayer.

- May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his power.
- May you have the strength to meet with fortitude and patience whatever comes your way.

I like how scholar NT Wright puts it:

"Being a Christian is like riding a bicycle. Unless you keep moving forward, you will fall off the bike."

Immanuel, we've got to keep moving forward in Christ. Let's keep walking with Christ and living in Christ. Let's keep our eyes on the prize and keep running towards the finish line. Christ in us individually and Christ in us collectively as the Body of Christ helps us discern falsehood from truth. To stay the course and remain on track, not veering off the straight and narrow.

The Greek word that Paul uses for the deceptive, yet "plausible arguments" of the world is "pithanologia." There's a lot of pithanologia out there these days too. It's kind of therapeutic to say pithanologia. In fact, repeat after me: "pith-an-o-lo-gia." There's so much pithanologia out there—seductive and discouraging voices on the news and the internet—that are toxic to the core, poisonous to the soul, leading you down rabbit trails and dark places. These voices entice and incite us to hate and demonize those we disagree with. They divide, rather than unite. They tell us to kill rather than be compassionate, to walk not with Christ, but to walk in fear. Reading the news these days is utterly depressing. Then we get all the political ads on top of that. Stay informed, but let's

turn to Christ to keep us from getting sucked into the vortex of all the pithanologia out there. It's Christ and Christ alone that helps us rise above it all. It's Christ who not only invigorates us, but he connects us. He doesn't polarize us. Like a magnet he draws us together. When you're in Christ, and I'm in Christ—we're together, even though apart.

"... absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit."

So hear the good news Immanuel: We've received Christ the Lord—he's a gift to us. We're rooted in him—like a tree, with deep roots in the soil of the Savior. We're built upon him—Christ is our foundation, our cornerstone. Don't lose sight of the fact that God has been and is at work in us! Christ establishes us, fashions us, builds us up—even in prisons or pandemics or protests, we abound in thanksgiving. The ancient philosopher Epictetus wasn't a Christian, but he sure showed us what it means to abound in thanksgiving. Epictetus was small, well-advanced in years, a slave, and had a limp—but he had a beautiful mind and a grateful heart:



"What else can I, a lame old man, do but sing hymns to God? If, indeed, I were a nightingale, I would be singing as a nightingale. If a swan, a swan. But as it is, I am a rational being, therefore I must be singing hymns of praise to God. This is my task; I do it, and will not desert this post, as long as it may be given me to fill it; and I exhort you to join me in this same song."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us praise God, from whom all blessings flow. There's something contagious about gratitude—it draws others in. Let us struggle for each other, not against each other. Let us abide in Christ together—our Savior who connects us in body and also in spirit.

To close, I have an assignment for you right after this service—I've cheated and already done it myself. Write Colossians 2:6-7 on an index card or post it note. Put it on your bathroom mirror or computer screen. These two verses are a summary of the whole book of Colossians. Reflect on it, repeat it, pray it. It will encourage your hearts and unite us in love.

"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

Amen.

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