

Going away and coming closer (John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15)

How could it be better for Jesus to go away?

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I have long wondered if the church has ever fully pondered the implications of John 16:7: “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.”

I wonder about this because, at least for those of us raised in certain modes of Christian piety, nothing could be more desirable than proximity to Jesus; conversely, nothing could be less desirable than distance from him. Whether in hymns (“Nearer my God to Thee” and “In the Garden”), in ethics (“What would Jesus do?”), or in time-tested theological subtleties (Christocentrism, imitation of Christ, etc.), staying close to Jesus is a venerable good. How could it be better for Jesus to go away?

The answer, interestingly enough, seems to be inherent in the logic of incarnation itself. To be incarnate into an actual, fully human body (as Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology insists is orthodoxy) is to be enfleshed in spatial particularity, and thus spatial limitation—Jesus, as a body, can only be in certain places at certain times. The force and power of the Holy Spirit’s work in and through him is spatially bound. Jesus cannot be present when Lazarus dies; he is overwhelmed by crowds; he is deeply human in his incarnate spatial finitude.

Beginning with Acts and proceeding throughout the early church, though, the story of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost is the story of this Spirit’s work taking on flesh across multiple bodies, multiple geographies, multiple contexts. Augustine’s famed dictum that the works of the persons of the Trinity *ad extra* (that is, in the world) are indivisible is relevant here: wherever the Spirit works, across time and place, is the site of Jesus Christ’s own work as well. When you get the Spirit, you get all of Christ.

Thus, Jesus’ “going away” is, stunningly, not a withdrawal at all: it is an expansion and intensification of presence, both across space and time and (quoting Augustine again) bringing Christ nearer to us than we are to ourselves. The coming of the Spirit is the coming nearer of the Christ, and this time for the healing of all that God loves.