

## **On being Orphaned**

Easter 6A – John 14:15-21

### **Slide: Confirmation Picture**

A week ago, almost to this very moment, seven of our young people affirmed their baptism right up here donning their faith stoles and wearing a very white alb. They renounced the powers of evil, proclaimed the Apostle's Creed, and said that they would follow in the promises of baptism with the help of God. Now, before that worship service, these brave seven had some natural anxiety about how the service would go. They had some questions about when to stand, what to say, and although we had a rehearsal, of course I would want to go over it again, too. To stand up publicly in front of 200 people to say something out loud is daunting, to say the least. And they did so beautifully. To ease their anxiety beforehand, I quoted this part of John's Gospel: "I will not leave you orphaned. I will be there to guide you, help you if you need it, and tell you exactly what to do. I would never leave you up there without help and if you simply do what I tell you, all will be well." It's possible they didn't know that it retrospect, I was very much quoting scripture to them. I wanted them to be reassured.

Seeing that this very text from John's Gospel was about to come up this week, on Monday I began to think about that very word, "orphaned". I will not leave you orphaned, says Jesus. Technically, orphaned means: Alone. Without guidance or support. It also can mean without parents – without anyone. Mostly, the word insinuates that you are completely on your own, isolated and without help. It is a terrifying prospect, to be left completely alone. And, while as many if not most of us cannot say we are without parents, at least we all can say that we have had times of feeling completely alone. Maybe some people feel it more deeply than others, but in spirit anyway, just about everyone feels alone and without help at some point, even if it isn't technically true. The sense of isolation for some is intensely acute.

### **Slide: Me and My Mom**

My mother Joanne, who will be 95 years old this summer, knew what it was to actually *be* an orphan. It was a time in our history now called The Great Depression. It's not as if my mother and her brothers didn't have parents. She had parents with no resources at all to care for their children without all of

them starving. The Great Depression, which included the Great Dust Bowl period as well, was intensely difficult for so many families. Many were left with nothing to live on. In the 1930's our great country did not have the support systems of today such as food pantries, government programs or anything like that. It was one of the worst days of my mother's life when her and her two brothers were brought to a Lutheran orphanage in Toledo, Ohio, to live there because her mother had no choice but to bring them there. I'm sure it also was my grandmother's worst day, too. In order to thrive, they had to live in an institution that could help them.

Today, we now have placement in Foster Care, quite a different situation. But, my Mom lived in this orphanage for eight years until she was 18 years old. For many years, she was invited to Sunday school classes and confirmation classes to share her experience of living in an orphanage during the Great Depression and what that was like. Children would sit and wonder about her life and ask a lot of questions. She did this to help all generations understand how difficult it is to be in a situation like this as a child. To this day, my mother has great compassion for children without parents and to this day, she supports ways to help those who are separated from their parents for any reason. Today is Mother's Day. How thankful I am that I had a home when I was growing up.

### **Slide: I will not leave you as Orphans**

Anyone who has ever loved and lost a spouse, child, friend, security, or hope knows the orphan's questions in life. If we admit it, we all have times of feeling alone. That fear leads to the deeper reality that as individuals, we are not enough, not because we lack anything in any way, but because we were never intended to be enough just on our own. In the goodness of God's love, we were created to be in community, to love and be loved, to live in relationship, as we hear Jesus even say "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." It's the exact opposite of being alone.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus says. There is a promise in those words, but what does it mean? Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, whether storms, death, separation, God promises never to orphan us. I can only imagine how strange these words were to the disciples. Clearly something is going on that is causing them anxiety. In the same conversation,

Jesus says he is leaving and coming. What does that mean? Is he saying that they will be apart from each other but still together in some way?

### **Slide: Before I Go**

In what is known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus is taking the time to give words of promise and comfort to his friends in the Garden before he is arrested and killed. Here Jesus is, likely in his own anguish, knowing he about to be betrayed and abandoned by his own disciples, literally left orphaned himself, and *he* gives words of promise to *them*. It's an amazing thing Jesus says for them and us. Here he promises to always dwell with us despite the fact that we do not necessarily do the same for him. Leaving and coming, presence and absence - Jesus is holding these words in tension as he comforts them. But, this is no sentimental story here. This tension confronts us as well with Jesus being with us as not merely something that happened in the past tense, but also something that is now. And, this indwelling of Jesus in our lives isn't just a platitude. Jesus makes it actually quite clear on how we know we are not abandoned by him:

### **Slide: Jesus' Final Words**

**By keeping his commandments.** In fact, he says it right there in today's scripture, *"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father and I will love them and reveal myself to them."* According to Jesus the answer to that rootedness in his presence is revealed in keeping his commandments, the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, to love our enemies, to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and the new commandment to love one another. When we keep these commandments, we will better feel and know that Jesus is with us. For, when we keep the commandments of God, we better know the promise of Jesus to not be left orphaned as a present reality. If we remain closed off from God or isolate ourselves from each other, the promise, though still there, is harder to know deeply for ourselves.

But, how do we do this? The Commandments are difficult. How can we know the promises of God when we don't always keep the commandments? But, Jesus says here that he will give us help to keep these commandments. In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus says that we will not be orphaned to do this on our own. God will send an Advocate, one who will help us to discern

both when we do love and when we don't. The Greek word for this Advocate is "Paraclete", which also means comforter, helper, or one who will be alongside us.

This Advocate will help us to follow the commandments and love Jesus, not to mention to tune into the dwelling of Jesus' presence. This Advocate of whom Jesus speaks is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, who resides within us. This Advocate, this Holy Spirit becomes a part of us at our baptism, the one who pours upon these following gifts for us to live by: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5).

**Slide: But I will Send You...**

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit grants us particular spiritual gifts: knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, gifts of working miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various tongues and languages, and interpretation. All these gifts are not only used at our church here by all of you as the amazing volunteers that you are, but these gifts are used to help us to follow the commandments, love God, and love one another. These gifts also help us to know that we are not alone. God is with us. (1 Cor. 12).

All this Jesus gives us in today's Gospel as he comforts his disciples who will have the first difficult task of faith without his physically being there. In sending his Advocate, Jesus keeps his promise and will continue to keep it, and in doing so, call us every day, good and bad days and in-between, so that in the midst of life, orphans all, we can proclaim the following:

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.