

I Won't Leave You as Orphans

John 14:15-21 (Common English Bible)

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.

"I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

I'm an orphan. Are you? I've been one for almost 11 years. My dad died in 1987 and my mom died in 2010. It usually happens to all of us sooner or later. It's a major turning point in life's journey. And one of our primal fears from birth – abandonment – becomes reality.

Preaching professor Tom Long tells the story of Jack Casey, a paramedic and ambulance driver. When he was a child, Casey had dental surgery that required general anesthesia. He was terrified. A nurse said to him, "Don't worry, I'll be right beside you, no matter what happens." She was true to her word. When he woke up, she was there and everything was okay.

Years later, as a paramedic and ambulance driver, Casey was called to the scene of a horrific traffic accident. The driver was pinned upside down beneath his pickup truck. He was terrified and crying out he was afraid of dying.

Casey crawled inside the cab of the truck to reach him. As gasoline dripped on them, rescue workers started to use power tools to cut the metal. One spark could have produced a catastrophe. Jack crawled beside the man and said, "Look, don't worry. I'm right here with you. I'm not going anywhere." It was exactly what the nurse told him years before.

When it was over and the man recovered, he said to Casey, "You were an idiot: you know that thing could have exploded, and we'd both have been burned up." Jack told him, "I felt I just couldn't leave you" (Thomas G. Long, "Preaching from Memory to Hope," p. 49).

In each of us there's something therapists call "separation anxiety." The words may conjure up images of a child's sobbing meltdown at school drop off. But that's only one type. Separation anxiety is extreme distress that's triggered by being apart from your parents, primary caregivers or close companions. It can affect anyone. Many of us experienced it during the chaos and uncertainty of this past pandemic year. Regardless of our age, being separated from our family members and friends caused excessive worry and fear, nightmares, panic, and depression.

Separation anxiety is the background for the scripture reading we just heard. This section of John's Gospel is referred to as "Jesus' Farewell Discourses." It's the last evening of his life. He and the disciples are sharing their Last Supper. It is time for final words. The occasion is heavy, pregnant with significance.

John uses several chapters to paint the picture. He includes Jesus' long prayer for his disciples, where he asks God to protect them, to keep them together, to give them joy, and to send them into the world in his name.

Just before that, he says, "I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you." Jesus promises that God will send the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, to be with them. John uses the word "Advocate" which is sometimes translated, "Counselor" or "Comforter". It means "someone who is called to one's side." The disciple will not be alone, even though Jesus will no longer be physically present. "I won't leave you as orphans."

His friends and followers must have been in a full separation anxiety. They acted and sounded like frightened children. "Why are you leaving us, Jesus? Where are you going? Why can't we come along? Can't we just slip out into the night and head north, back to the safety of Galilee, and be together for the rest of our lives? We can't imagine what it will be like without you."

"I won't leave you as orphans," Jesus says.

The Bible uses parental language to talk about God, and it's not exclusively masculine language. In the Bible God is not only a king or father, but also a mother who cannot, and will not, abandon her nursing child. God is like a mother who bends down to pick up and hold her child.

Jesus uses parental language and images for God: a waiting father running down the road to welcome a prodigal son home, a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings.

"I won't leave you as orphans," he tells his frightened, anxious friends. God the intimate, cherished parent will not desert you.

As I noted at the beginning of this sermon, there comes a time in life when we all become orphans. Our parents die, and we must go on without them. One day we're someone's daughter or son, and then they're gone. Whenever it happens, it's a major life change.

Sometimes it happens before the end of life, when a parent descends into dementia or Alzheimer's. It can be more painful to become an orphan this way. I've watched Libby and her sister go through this difficult process with their mother. Bonnie's daughters have assumed responsibility for her care. They've reversed roles and become their mother's parent.

Linda Rooney, wrote about losing her ninety-year-old mother to Alzheimer's. She said, "Though the physical care required is constant, and at times challenging, it is the emotional death that I grieve—the loss of connectedness to the woman who has always been the mainstay of my life."

Rooney reflects, "My mother has forgotten me, and every time I look at her my heart weeps. If my mother forgot me, will God? Is there any comfort left in contemplating God's mother love?"

She says there is, and then shares this intriguing thought: "God's memory is not brain-based but heart-based. It embraces all the nuances of who I am as a human being and stores as only a creator can each cell of my existence."

The ancient psalmist shared a similar thought: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You are acquainted with all my ways. You hem me in, behind and before; You lay your hand upon me.” (Psalm 139:2)

Rooney says when she looks at her unresponsive mother, her trust in God, who does not forget any one of us ever, consoles her. “(As) physical co-creator of my being...(my mom)...stores somewhere within the unconditional love she always gave me, a memory of me so blessed that it need not be spoken to be known. She may not be able to tell me that I am her daughter, but that does not mean she does not remember the child of her womb” (quoted in Context, edited by Martin E. Marty, May 2009).

“I won’t leave you as orphans.” Sisters and brothers, I want to encourage you to trust in God’s mother love as we journey through our final three months together. Let us hold on to God’s heart-based memory and know that we are not alone.

Many of you have expressed sadness after learning about my impending retirement. I share in that sadness and tears. I have come to love you deeply and I cherish our time in ministry and mission over the past 19 years.

The love that we share is not lost with my decision. Nor will the work we accomplished for God disappear. All of it remains as a testimony to grace in our hearts, in this community, and in God Spirit. I know the long, healthy relationship we experienced will guide and direct this church as you search for and find a new pastor.

Beloved, the precious relationships that we created and nurtured over the past two decades do not end, because God’s memory is heart-based. We are never alone. Trust and believe in Jesus’ promise, “I won’t leave you as orphans.” Amen!

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