

Sermon for May 17, 2020 – “I Am With You”

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Rev. 21:1-7; John 14:15-21, 25-27

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“I will not leave you orphaned” Jesus says this to His disciples in our gospel reading. An interesting word: “orphan.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word as “a child deprived by the death of one or usually both parents.” As sad as that is, however, most children who live in orphanages are not orphans by that standard. Rather, today, according to the Dave Thomas Foundation, named after the founder of Wendy’s, something like “4 out of 5 children in orphanages worldwide have at least one living parent and most having some extended family.” Not an overly cheerful statistic which, in my mind, makes it even worse. Worse, because it implies that these children are **abandoned**. However you define it, regardless of the statistics cited, it seems to me that being orphaned, being abandoned, unloved, perhaps imagining themselves as unlovable, whatever might be the worst thing that can happen to anyone.

Imagine being alone, without guidance or support, without parents or family, without friends, without anyone. Imagine being so isolated in this world that it feels like no one cares whether we live or die. Orphaned. Very sad, depressing by any stretch of imagination, even terrifying.

As some of you may know I was orphaned. I don’t know much about the circumstances but as far as I know I was born in a Salvation Army William Booth Maternity Home and left there. Abandoned. As I said, I’m not sure of the circumstances. I don’t know exactly what happened or why and I’m not sure I want to. Now, what I do know is that I was incredibly blessed and was taken into foster care not too long after I was born, and at three months was adopted by a really nice couple who raised me as their own. I even got an amazing sister to cinch the deal. I’ll say it again...I was incredibly blessed, and I remain so. Unfortunately, not all children are. There are an estimated 163 million children worldwide, from infants to teenagers, who’ve been orphaned. There are nearly 13 million orphans now living in institutions or on the streets. In the United States, there are almost 443,000 children living without permanent families in the foster care system. A federal study done a few years ago has found that at least 22,000 babies are left in hospitals each year by parents unwilling or unable to care for them.

Now, although an image of children first comes to mind when we hear the word “orphan”, any of us can be orphaned at any age. In fact, on any given day a lot of us **are** orphaned, or at least, can **feel** orphaned if only in spirit. But, if we open our eyes we would find orphans of some kind every day. If we really looked we would encounter people every day whose primary fear is being alone.

We would see people who believe themselves to be unloved and unlovable and thus will always be alone, isolated from the world because they've been abandoned, because the world tells them that they aren't worthy of love. Let me say it this way, there is every chance right now that someone you know is alone and lonely.

In May of 2018, an article in Fortune magazine related the results of a study which found that nearly half of all Americans feel lonely. This particularly so among seniors especially, though somewhat surprisingly, those who remain in their homes. But social isolation isn't just a problem for the "orphan elder." Cigna, a health service organization, took a nationwide survey of 20,000 adults and found that 54% of respondents said they felt that no one actually knows them well. Additionally, 56% of people said that the people they surround themselves around "are not necessarily with them" and approximately 40% said they "lack companionship", their "relationships aren't meaningful", and that they feel "isolated from others." When I read that the Beatles song "Eleanor Rigby" came to mind... "*All the lonely people – where do they all come from? All the lonely people – where do they all belong?*"

Think about it, people we encounter every day, people we know and love if we even bother to look deal with so much. They deal with financial instability, trauma and physical illness, spiritual desperation, physical AND emotional isolation, violence and deprivation, broken relationships...the list goes on. And then of course, there's this pandemic thing and the social distancing mandate! I mean, life's tough enough and any one of those things can not only make us feel orphaned, abandoned by the very concept of love, but also unworthy and unlovable by anyone including God. They can leave us feeling orphaned.

So, when I read in today's gospel reading that Jesus uses the word "orphaned" well let's just say He has my full attention. I say certainly that—certainly—for personal reasons. But I also say it because it's a powerful metaphor for what Jesus was about to do which was to leave His beloved disciples and go and die. He surely knew that His death would strike fear and terror in those who loved Him, those He loved so closely and so well, so sacrificially and rightly so. He had to have known they'd feel vulnerable, that they'd panic, that they'd turn and run for their own lives, abandoning Him, the very moment things got rough. Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied Him. But ALL of the disciples, with the exception of John, abandoned Jesus. He knew all of these things but loved them anyway. Incredible! Yet Jesus' words in this passage reveal none of His own sense of loss and panic, His own sense of being orphaned. He speaks only of love of God, the coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who will never leave. He tells them that "**the Spirit of Truth abides with you and in you.**" Whether they heard Him or not, He only speaks words of hope. He speaks of complete union in Him with God and the grace born within that union forever. Amazing, unending grace.

So what we have here is a promise. More precisely, we have the continuation of a promise. A promise made so very long ago. A promise that's not only still in effect but one that's continually being fulfilled day after day.

Last week we spoke of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We spoke of the vigilance of the shepherd, the lengths to which the Shepherd would go to protect his sheep, the one who came that we would **"...have life and have it abundantly."** Here in today's readings we hear words that offer a way to live out that life. Words of comfort like those of the prophet to a people in exile. Words that offer hope in the face of the fear and anxiety, isolation and abandonment, loss, loneliness, and grief, things that we all face, all part of the fabric of human existence. Words that offer courage to live faithfully under ANY set of circumstances to live in the sure and certain knowledge that we are loved—no matter what. Words that offer a reminder of the abiding presence and unceasing love of God, a reminder that we are never alone. We hear their echo in Jesus parting words from Matthew's account of the Ascension which we will celebrate next week, **"Remember, I am with you always...to the end of the age."** They resound in God's revelation in the last days, **"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them, they will be His peoples and God Himself will be with them, He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new! "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."**

They are indeed. This is the promise and ours is a God who keeps promises. We know this because of Christ, the abandoned cross, and empty tomb stand as proof. **"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. and do not let them be afraid."** This is the peace he left us. The peace he gave us. His peace. A peace the world cannot give. A peace that passes all understanding.

Therefore, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."** Do not fear, for HE has redeemed us, He has called us by name. We are HIS. When we pass through the waters, HE will be with us and through the rivers. They shall not overwhelm us. When we walk through fire, we shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume us. For HE is the Lord our God, the Holy One of Israel, our Savior. Because we are precious in HIS sight and honored, and He loves us.

Brothers and sisters let there be no doubt, God is with us. We are not alone and never will be. We have not been abandoned and never will be. No matter what.

Christ is Risen.

Christ is Risen indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.