

Sunday, May 10, 2026
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A)
Acts 17.22-31; John 14.15-21
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

“I will not leave you orphaned.” Jesus says these words to his disciples in the early part of his Farewell Discourse. He has already told them multiple times that he will be killed. He is sharing a final meal with those closest to him before his Passion, before his death. The disciples are obviously anxious, confused, distraught, even devastated at the mere idea of this coming to pass. In the first part of his Farewell Discourse—both in his words that we heard last week, and in the words we heard a few moments ago—Jesus is seeking to calm the disciples’ fears, and particularly their concerns about what his departure means for them. “I will not leave you orphaned.” An interesting choice of words.

As I sat with today’s Scripture readings, I was repeatedly drawn back to those words: “I will not leave you orphaned.” As I lingered over those six words, I realized something about myself. Images from childhood. Something that I had never completely processed, certainly not at the time, being only a child. Something that I had not thought about in years, in decades. Something that I have never told anyone else, until now. When I was a child, I had a fear of being orphaned. Not an ongoing fear; rather more periodic. Coinciding with times when my father was stationed overseas: once in Vietnam and once in Okinawa. Particularly when he was in Vietnam when I was in first grade. I knew that he was there fighting in a war. It only happened once that I recall, but there was one night I woke up crying, having had a nightmare that my father had been killed. While I do not ever recall another such nightmare, after that I would occasionally have moments of fear about what would happen to me if something happened to my parents. What if I were orphaned? Thankfully, that did not happen. And thankfully, the fears subsided as I grew into adolescence and adulthood.

I imagine my own childhood fears were akin to what the disciples were feeling in the moment. Although their fears were undoubtedly far more intense, given the impending reality. No, Jesus was not their biological father, but he was their spiritual father. In this role he had profoundly changed their lives. He had reshaped who they had been into who they had become. He had called them out of their old lives and livelihoods to follow him. They had sat at his feet as he taught them the mysteries of true and abiding relationship with God. They had watched him as he put those teachings into action. Jesus modeling a new way of being, just as parents ideally serve as a model for their children. With the disciples experiencing in a deep and intimate way what it means to be loved, to be children of God.

Interesting that this parental imagery and language happens to be in our Gospel reading on Mother’s Day. It is purely coincidental, given how our lectionary works. Nonetheless, perhaps the coinciding of Mother’s Day with this Sixth Sunday of Easter can serve to reinforce what Jesus is talking about with his disciples. Perhaps as we celebrate and honor our mothers, as we

reflect on the qualities of mothers, of our own relationships with our mothers—be they still living or passed into glory leaving some orphaned—we might gain a more personal understanding to what Jesus was seeking to convey to those who were as children to him, to the disciples.

It is also interesting to note that this year Mother's Day and the Sixth Sunday of Easter occur just two days after the feast day of Julian of Norwich, the English mystic and theologian who lived in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Through a series of visions, or "showings," she came to understand God to be both Father and Mother, and particularly that Christ exemplified the maternal face of God. As she wrote, "Thus, Jesus Christ, who does good against evil, is our very Mother. We have our being in him, where the ground of motherhood begins . . . As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother."¹ Incorporating the fullness of parenthood, father and mother, in the Godhead. With the earthly embodiment, of course being Jesus. This attribution of maternal qualities to Jesus adding further significance to his choice of words regarding his impending death and to the fate of his disciples.

Beyond the poetic and theological implications of Jesus' words, "I will not leave you orphaned," the use of that term carries far greater weight than simply the loss of one's parents. The Greek word translated as "orphaned" carries far deeper meaning than the personal, familial, even sentimental loss we associate with it. In Jesus' time and cultural context, to be orphaned carried societal and even legal implications. To be orphaned was to lose much of what it means to be a person: the loss of legal standing, economic security, protection of family, and public honor. In a world in which one's identity and wellbeing was based on relationship to one's parents, being orphaned meant effectively becoming a nobody. Being orphaned meant losing all social, political, and legal standing and identity. It meant being completely undefended and vulnerable.

In using the term "orphaned," Jesus is implying that the disciples are his "children." That their identities are solidly rooted in him and his identity, just as a child's identity is rooted in that of its parents, particularly its father. For the disciples, who in following Jesus had come to have their own identities and place in society defined by their relationship to Jesus, his death would have been akin to being orphaned. Not legally or societally, but certainly in emotional, spiritual, and vocational terms. This has undoubtedly crossed their minds. "What will become of us?" Sure, they could probably go back to their old lives. Not that it would be easy. They had, after all, given up everything to follow Jesus. Including their old identities.

Just as Jesus had intentionally used a legalistic term to describe how the disciples would likely feel orphaned, he also uses a more legalistic term to express just how they would, in fact, NOT be orphaned, how they would NOT be left adrift upon his departure. He promises to send an Advocate to be with them forever. The Greek term for Advocate, "Paraclete," means a "helper." Literally one "called alongside," or "called to one's aid." In the original Greek, often referring to a lawyer coming alongside a defendant, being one who provides counsel, as well as defending and supporting. One who advocates for, who works to restore legal and social standing and identity.

Of course, the disciples will not actually lose any legal standing with the death of Jesus. But they face the loss of their identity as those who follow him, unless they have someone to work with

them to retain that identity. Someone to help them redefine who they are as followers of Jesus. Someone to help them redefine what it means to be followers of Jesus. Someone to help them live into their identity as those who continue his mission and ministry without his bodily presence.

While the disciples may have been uncertain as to what Jesus was talking about—at least in the moment—this side of the resurrection, this side of the Pentecost event, we recognize that this Advocate, the one Jesus refers to as “the Spirit of truth,” is the Holy Spirit. God’s ongoing presence in the lives of God’s people. The Holy Spirit which will be Jesus’ ongoing presence with the disciples post-resurrection. In due time, particularly following Pentecost when God sends the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, they will come to realize and more fully understand who they are as followers of Christ. Energized by the Holy Spirit, they will go on to expand the community of faith and build the Church that is the Body of Christ. With the Advocate, the Holy Spirit providing the ongoing connection between Jesus’ earthly ministry and the Church that will develop and grow as the primary means by which that ministry continues in the world. More than a connection. This Advocate, this Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, would become a part of who they are. Would become an integral part of their identity as followers of the Risen Christ. As Jesus told them about the Spirit coming among them, “You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.” The Spirit would be an integral part of who they are, further expanding and strengthening the identity they feared they would lose with Jesus’ departure. Allowing them, as we heard last week, to “do greater works” than he did.

We live in different circumstances than the first disciples. We did not have to live through the fear of being orphaned because of Jesus’ departure. We did not have to wait for an Advocate, for the Holy Spirit, to be sent to reclaim our identity as God’s Beloved Children, as the Body of Christ in the world. We were born into a time when the Holy Spirit was already well-established and present in the world. We were born into circumstances where the Holy Spirit was already integral to who we are as followers of the Risen Christ.

Paul beautifully describes this in his encounter with the Athenians at the Areopagus, in his famous description of how God operates—the God he worships and is seeking to make known to the Athenians. “In him we live and move and have our being.” God is not just some entity out there somewhere. A deity who occasionally drops in for a visit. God is not a remote being that we have to seek out. God is not isolated, dwelling in special “sacred places.” Paul upends the entire notion of how God—our God—is manifest and revealed in the world. Namely, that God is intimately present everywhere, such that it is we who are inside God’s loving presence at all times. “In him we live and move and have our being.” It is because of our existence within God’s presence and God dwelling within us as holy temples that we have our existence, that we are motivated and energized to work for his kingdom, that we have our very identity. Only possible because the Holy Spirit, God’s ongoing presence among us and in us, is an integral part of who we are.

Even so, in our own day, there are times when we might feel as if we have been or may be in danger of being orphaned. Not from God. For we will never be orphaned from God. But there are other ways of feeling we are or might be orphaned. Due to circumstances outside and beyond our control. Due to earthly powers seeking to deny, to strip us of, what makes us who

we are. Even due to our own self-doubts. All ways in which we may feel, or made to feel, that we are less than who God has created us to be.

In such times, in such circumstances, we need to remember that when Jesus says “I will not leave you orphaned,” that is a promise. He will not, he does not, leave us orphaned. He has seen to it through the Advocate, whom we know because he abides with us and is in us. At the same time, “I will not leave you orphaned” is also a challenge. A challenge to always seek to remember who we are and whose we are. A challenge to show forth in our lives, in all we do, the One in whom we indeed live and move and have our being.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2024* (New York: Church Publishing, 2024), 224.