

“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Acts 17: 22-31 and John 14: 15-21

For in [God], we live and move and have our being; as some of your poets have said, we too are [God’s] offspring. (Acts 17:28)” It seems so easy to forget. Just like when Jesus told us, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you. (John 14: 18)” Are you sure? We know how humans work. They often make promises, but sometimes those promises are not kept. Humans we can see, touch and know, but God sometimes seems distant and hard to see, touch and know in the first place. How can we believe that God will not leave us orphaned? In short, how can we trust God? How do we *know* that when Jesus (or Paul) makes promises to us that they indeed will occur? It is so hard for us to trust. Our trust has been broken by other people so often. Some of us can’t even imagine that God won’t forsake us as well.

Indeed, religion hasn’t always been helpful either. Sometimes religion seems more a human construction than a God-given truth. We come up with all sorts of ifs, ands, or buts to whether God will indeed remain among us. We

individualized sin, which isn't very biblical. And we often think of God as just a human with more strength or superpowers that we could benefit from if we'd just say the magic formula correctly.

When Jesus tells us that he will not leave us orphaned, he doesn't finish the sentence with, if you click your heels three times, or some other formula. In fact, he tells us that not only will he not leave us orphaned, but he is also coming to us. I don't understand why it is that so many people of faith believe that we must earn God's love, we can lose God's love, or that we can ultimately control God's love. Who really is God here? If we have all the control, what does God do?

In our scripture, there is a call for human faithfulness. Yes, there is a call for human belief and trust. God does get angry when humans treat each other poorly, create gods out of statues and other earthly things. God does allow the Israelites to be sent into exile. God never promised us that everything would be perfect all the time, everywhere, and that if you're faithful, nothing will ever happen to you. In fact, we are told that the more faithful we are, the more likely the world will not accept us. We may take on additional suffering the more we love the world like God loves the world.

What God does promise us is presence, acceptance, love, adoption, and not to leave us under any circumstances. Even in the midst of the exile, or the wandering of the Israelites, or when Jesus was on the cross, there is no example of God simply walking away never to return. Would it be true that humans were able to do that for each other! Instead, we make promises we can't keep, overextend ourselves, or just plain drop the ball. Further, sometimes humans rightfully reach a limit of their own power and ability to care for another. I know I have stories in my own life of when I had to let go of people because I couldn't "save" them. I could love them, but I couldn't be there in the ways they wanted me to be there. I found I have limits. I believe that you have found the same in yourself. Often someone's needs are beyond our capacity to fix whatever is going on. We do everything in our power, but the problem exceeds our power.

God doesn't have that problem. God's love is so deep, so immense, so broad, and so wide, that there is no one beyond God's ability to love and to care. That's why when Jesus says that we shall not be orphaned, he means it. As Christians we believe in the Trinity: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Jesus says to us in this scripture that the presence of God will now be through the Spirit...a spirit we can touch, and feel, and experience in the depths of our soul. We will not be left, even if the whole rest of the world leaves us, God never will. God

simply can't. God would not be God if anyone were to "slip through" God's fingers.

"I am coming to you," Jesus says. There is a period on that sentence, not a comma. There are no parentheses or "if, then" statements. "I am coming to you." He goes on to tell us that in a little while you will not see him, but you will receive the Holy Spirit. All I'm saying is that it is true that humans cannot always be counted on, and that humans have limits, but God doesn't. All we're called to do is receive. Receive God's presence. Receive God's mercy. Receive God's love. And upon receipt, allow God's love to transform us into the best possible version of ourselves. Further, it is when we receive that we also can then give. You've heard the statement that you cannot care for another unless you care for yourself. I think it's equally true that you cannot love another until you receive love. And the beauty of the promise of God is that we all receive God's love simply because that is who God is.

In the baptism liturgy this morning, we didn't mark Jason as finally good enough for God. Instead, we stated that, "baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward presence." Guess who is already present in someone even before they are baptized? Baptism then doesn't become your ticket to paradise, but

instead, baptism invites you to mark and inward presence, and, like Jesus, begin your own ministry. No, it doesn't mean that you can't minister without it, but baptism does mark you in a special way that recognizes something in you that you may or may not have seen before. Whether you saw it or not, God was and is present within you. And no one, nothing, can take that away.

"I will not leave you orphaned." Jesus told us. "I am coming to you." And in Acts we hear that it is in him that we "live and move and have our being." No matter what the world throws at you, you are not now, nor have you ever, been left alone. God will be with you, and with me, and with all people everywhere, until the end of the age. In other words, forever. "For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever," we say every Sunday. And forever God's we will be.

Receive the gift of God's adoption. Trust it. Then, let God's love flow through you.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

