

“I will not leave you orphaned”

John 14:15-21 (May 14, 2023)



Jesus saying farewell to his eleven remaining disciples, from the Maesta by Duccio, 1308–1311.

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

It’s another promise that comes from Jesus in what is known as “the farewell discourse” in the Gospel of John. Chapters 14 to 17 contain the last words of Jesus to his friends before he’s arrested and put to death.

I say “farewell discourse,” but it’s not really farewell, is it? Oddly enough, even though death looms right around the corner, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be with them. “The world will no longer see me, but you will.” They don’t know what Jesus means by this. Nevertheless, the promise he gives them is profound. “I will not leave you orphaned.”



When I think of an orphan, I think of *Oliver Twist*. The story was invented by Charles Dickens and published originally as a serial novel from 1837 to 1839. Dickens wrote to expose the social evils of poverty, domestic violence, and children living on the street. Sometimes I wonder how much progress we’ve made since then.

The story has been re-told many times, in many settings. When I was in grade 8, our school staged it as a musical. This scene shows the young orphan, Oliver, in the workhouse, daring to ask for another helping of food.

“Please, sir, I want some more.”

“The master,” writes Dickens, “was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

‘What!’ said the master at length, in a faint voice.

‘Please, sir,’ replied Oliver, ‘I want some more.’



Well, you know how that request turned out. Eventually Oliver escapes the desperate conditions of the workhouse, but life outside the orphanage was not a whole lot better.



“I will not leave you orphaned,” says Jesus. And that’s a very good thing!

What does it mean to be orphaned today? Technically, an orphan is one who has lost their parents. Mine have been gone about 20 years. On Mother’s Day, and other times as well, I do miss them. Maybe some of you are orphaned in that way too.

To be orphaned can mean to be alone. To have no other advocate or helper. To have to fend for yourself. To be orphaned can mean to be lonely, forgotten. To feel vulnerable.

Even a piece of machinery can be orphaned, when it's design is out of date, or when it's no longer profitable to manufacture. So the company stops making replacement parts. That model, they say, will no longer be supported.



“I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.” Did you hear that? Jesus tells the disciples that he's coming to them. Which is very odd, considering that he's about to die. But this death will not be an ending. This death will be a new beginning. “The world will not see me, but you will. Because I live, you also will live.”

And then he goes on to speak of something really important. Something that will overcome our isolation and loneliness. Jesus will incorporate us into a living fellowship with God and with each other. No one will be lonely or isolated. No one orphaned. No one left behind.

“On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you.” You in this sentence is plural, by the way. All of you disciples. This fledgling community of faith. You and me, all of us together. Jesus promises to be with the Father, and with us, united in one beloved community. No one is ever meant to be alone in the family of God.



Did some of you wonder what this is on the front of your bulletin cover? What could it be? A rope, a puzzle, a plate of spaghetti?



In fact, it's a symbol from the ancient Celtic church, a religious symbol representing the Trinity. Look carefully. Can you see the three corners? These represent the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And look at the way they are joined together, weaving in and out and around each other. If you follow the line, you'll discover that it's never ending. It's one continuous loop. You can't pull the persons of the Godhead apart. They exist together in a relationship of love.

And to stress that unity in the midst of diversity you can see a circle woven through all of it, and holding it together.



Now I should pause there and say that there is no fully developed doctrine of the Trinity in scripture. Not like those developed by later theologians in the church. But there are hints and signs of this triune God everywhere.

Our scripture today is one of those places. Jesus is in the Father. The Father is in him. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth. ... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

So we have the Spirit in us, Jesus in us. Jesus in the Father, the Father in him. In and out and all around. And on it goes. Abide in me and I in you, just as I abide in the Father.

Later on Jesus says that he is the vine, his Father is the vine-grower. It's all about connection and relationship! He says we should abide in him, as branches attached to a vine. He is the source of our life, and without him we cannot bear fruit.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”



See what I mean? It's all intertwined. And all of it is rooted in love. God's love, is the thing that holds us all together.

It's why we can't stop talking about it in the church. And why, when we drift too far away from love into contentious things that tear us apart, we get into trouble.

The Trinity shows us that love is at the centre of God's very being. “God is a mystery of relationship,” writes the Franciscan priest and theologian, Richard Rohr, “and in its deepest form this relationship is called love.” In the Trinity, he says, there is “mutual self-emptying and infinite outpouring.”¹ Father, Son and Holy Spirit – giving and receiving. Love moving back and forth, reaching out, drawing in.



This is not some rigid, static doctrine of God etched in granite. This is dynamic, fluid, moving, embracing. This is the very nature of love.



We are called by Jesus, to become part of a loving community. To embody God's love, as much as possible, within our earthly human lives.

On this Mother's Day, I remember not only my biological mother, but *all* the “mothers” who have cared for me over the years, encouraged me, helped me to grow in relationship with God and others.

One of the first memories of church I have is my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Smythe. She had a beautiful smile that me feel so welcome.

I think of another one of these “spiritual” mothers, who embraced a young pastor fresh out seminary. Who extended kindness and plenty of humour.

And another mother who took a special interest in our children, inviting them into her home. And yet another who called regularly throughout the pandemic, just to keep in touch. She did that for the whole congregation!

There are no orphans here! We are part of a beloved community.



We are brothers and sisters to each other. We are mothers and fathers to our children.

¹ List email from Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr Meditation: Oneing, November 25, 2016.

But, you say, we don't have any children. Really?

A Lutheran theologian, Andrew Root, describes an aging congregation. The neighbourhood around them had changed. The children had grown up and left.

A pastor had come and spent lots of energy on new innovative things that drew a crowd. But when the pastor left the crowd went with him.

When a beloved elder of the congregation died, the people of that church met her grandson at the funeral.

He'd lived with his grandmother and his heart ached for her when she was gone. But the people loved him. And in loving him, befriending him, they helped him find his way to God.²

"I will not leave you orphaned."



I think of the children we have. Some grown up and moved away. Some struggling on their path through life, and others thriving.

And grandchildren – all learning to find their way: Who they are in the world. Who they are in relationship with God.

We pray for them. They are part of the family that God has given all of us. They are the grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of our congregation. We are called to love and pray for them, and for each other.



How far can God's love reach? At what point do we stop caring? The answer depends on how deeply we ourselves are rooted in the love of Christ.

"Those who love me will keep my word," says Jesus, "and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

There is in all of us a deep existential loneliness. A sense that we are on our own in a very large and empty universe. This kind of loneliness can only be satisfied in communion with God.

Dorothy Day writes: "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."³



When we are rooted in God's love, we find that we are not alone. We are orphaned no more.

We are brought into relationship with God's own self. And being drawn into relationship with God, (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), no longer separated by sin and death or time and distance, we also find that we are drawn into beloved community with others.

² Andrew Root, "Churches and the Crisis of Decline," c. by Andrew Root, Published by Baker Academic, 2022.

³ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dorothy_Day, Accessed May 14, 2023.

With the earthly families that God has given us, with our church family (the community of faith), and with our neighbours, and with our world.

So the intertwining of our lives grows deeper. And our love for God and others grows stronger.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” May our hearts be open to receive him, with joy and great thanksgiving. Amen.