

“I Will Not Leave You”

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18).

The average person uses around 16,000 words each day. They each have meaning, but as you know, not all words are created equal. Some words have an outsized impact, and rather than floating through the air unnoticed, these words evoke an immediate response. For instance, words like “vacation” or “retirement” create a sense of expectation. Other words like “fiancée” or “honeymoon” take you back to a time of young love and untapped possibilities. Today, as we celebrate and give thanks for the women who gave us life, “Mother” is a word that colors our consciousness.

Some words warm our hearts and lift our spirits, but there are also words that do just the opposite. For instance, words like “divorce” or “hospice” carry a totally different weight. These words create anxiety and cast a shadow over our lives that impacts everything from our summer plans to the quality of our sleep. In today’s Gospel reading, in sharp contrast to the Mother’s Day we celebrate, we find one of those dark words, and that word is “orphan.” Orphan. This term stings the soul and plays on our most primal fears. It’s a word that suggests a story of loss and implies abandonment. “Orphan” conjures up images of desperation that cut to the heart, and today, Jesus uses this weighty word as He tells His disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans.”

Jesus employs this sobering word to anchor His promise because He knows that He is about to leave them, and He knows how His disciples will feel. You see, John 14 takes place on the night before He goes to the cross. Jesus is preparing His disciples for a departure that will include His suffering and death, and, as He speaks, you can imagine the disciples’ concerns as they begin to ponder life without their leader. At the heart of their anxiety is the question, “Will we be left alone?” And this question also gives voice to one of our greatest fears.

When life suddenly shifts, when relationships break, when plans fall apart, and when the future suddenly feels uncertain, this question becomes ours in the most poignant way possible. Not only do these reversals raise practical questions about this life, but they also cause fear in a spiritual sense. When prayers go unanswered and God seems silent, it’s easy to feel abandoned by the Father and begin to question our eternal future. And yet, if we are honest, the deeper and damning truth behind these questions is that we are the ones who have walked away. All of us have wandered, and all of us have strayed, and the fear of being left alone is one we have brought on ourselves.

In today’s reading, Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And with this statement, the Law does its condemning work. You see, faith in Christ is not just a feeling or intellectual concept. It is a life shaped by His Word and lived for our neighbor. And yet, this is where our failures are most obvious. We are so easily distracted from calling, and the truth is, we trust ourselves more than we trust Jesus. We put our own needs ahead of those who clearly need help. We follow the noise of the world instead of the voice of our Shepherd, and like children who let go of a parent’s hand in a crowded store, we willfully walk away. We leave the path the Word has shown us and, before we know it, we find ourselves disoriented, afraid, and alone.

And today, into this fear and into our wandering hearts, Jesus speaks. And, with a beautiful promise, He assures us: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Notice what He does not say. He doesn't say, "If you stay strong," or "If you remain faithful enough." He doesn't say, "If you keep it all together" or "hold up your end of the bargain." No. He places the promise entirely on Himself. "I will not leave you. I will come to you." That is the Gospel, and this is the good news: Even when we leave Him, He does not leave us. And when we wander, He always pursues. And He proved this in the most profound way possible. He proved it on the cross.

In today's Epistle reading, Peter writes, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." This means that on the cross, Jesus experienced the deepest abandonment imaginable, and from this place of isolation and anguish, He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, He experienced the pain of the orphan so that you will never have to, and in His death, our sins were punished, and we, forever, stand before the Father as His forgiven children.

And Jesus' promise does not end with forgiveness. He went even further and said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper...even the Spirit of truth...He dwells with you and will be in you." Jesus not only promised that He would come back someday. He promised that He is with you right now through the Holy Spirit. And this is no abstract, ethereal whim. Instead, through the concrete, tangible means of His Word and Sacraments, the Spirit is always working not only to call, enlighten, and gather His people, but to make real the promise of presence Jesus made to you.

You see, this is how the risen Christ keeps His promise. This is how He comes to you. This is how He speaks to you. This is how He forgives you. And today, in these Means of Grace, the Risen Christ and living Son of God dwells with you. And because He lives, you also will live. This is not wishful thinking. This is the reality of the Resurrection, and this means that you are not and will never be alone. Not in your struggles. Not in your doubts. Not in your failures. Not even in death. You are not an orphan. You are a child of the Father. You belong to Christ.

On this Mother's Day, think of the way little children follow their mother. They follow, not because they understand everything, but because they trust the one who leads them. And that is the life of faith. Faith is never confidence in yourself or your own knowledge, effort, or emotion. Faith is trusting in the One who leads, the One who loves, and in the One who promises that He will never let you go.

Today, Jesus says, "I will not leave you as orphans." And He means it. He proved it on the cross. He fulfilled it in His Resurrection. He delivers it through His Spirit. And so, today, no matter what dark words you may be thinking or difficult days you may be facing, you can say with confidence, "I am not alone. I am not abandoned. And because He lives, I will live also." Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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