

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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Newark, Delaware

Acts 2:1-15
John 14:15-21

“Not Orphaned – Never Alone”

April 25th – a month ago -- we celebrated the Head of Christiana Trail race. A signature event for Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church and our missions with the homeless. This year a Family Walk was added to conclude the racing. It was a one mile excursion on a trail down through the White Clay Creek woods. I was the final person to begin the walk. Along the meadow ... into the woods ... down a never-ending hill ... along the flowing creek. The trees and shrubs were budding and blooming. And I began to fade. Certainly I've walk more than halfway. But a long return uphill trek lay ahead.

So now I made a bend in the trail ... and started up hill. I was bushed. Where can I sit down? If I find a place to sit, will I be able to get up? Maybe I twist my ankle? No cell phone in case of an emergency. Why did I take this walk? Pat had already gone to the church to count money. I could spend the night down here. Then who will preach Sunday morning? This was not funny!!!

And the hill seemed to never end and this could turn-out to be something bad. Finally, I reached the meadow. Off in the distance I spied the Pavilion. And I spied a person, way off there, coming towards me. And it was Brian Huffman. If I had embraced him with a hug, I would have dragged him to the ground. Brian said, I thought about you. Wondering if you were okay? I decided to come and see how you are doing.

There are pangs/longings that therapists sometimes call **“separation anxiety.”** I'll tell you, separation anxiety had grasped me. Will I make it back home ... and in what condition? Perhaps, at times, separation anxiety has haunted you.

Let me tell you about Gloria, who was an attentive daughter, Jim, a wayward and wandering son, and their aging widowed father, whose health was slowly deteriorating. For years father and son

hadn't been able to live with each other or without each other. Jim's comings and goings broke his father's heart, and now he's leaving again and tries to say good-bye to his father, who is slowly slipping into dementia.

The old man draws his hands into his lap and turns away. 'Tired of it!' "I'm tired of it all," the old father repeats. Jim nodded. 'Me, too. I'm bone tired'"—and he leaves.

Separation anxiety: it is the background for the passage of scripture I just read. This section of John's Gospel is often referred to as "Jesus' Farewell Discourse." It is the last evening of his life. Jesus and his disciples are at table, at what would be their Last Supper. It is time for summing up, for final words. The hours are solemn and significant. John gives it several chapters, including Jesus' long prayer for his disciples, in which he asks God to protect them,

to keep them together,

to give them joy,

and to send them into the world in his name.

And at this crucial junction, Jesus explains,

"I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you." God will send God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit—the very presence of God, to be with you. You will not be alone, even though Jesus will no longer be physically present with you.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus promises.

I think his friends must have been in **full separation anxiety mode**. They were acting and sounding like frightened children.

"Why are you leaving us, Jesus?"

Where are you going?

Why can't we come along?

Can't we just slip out into the night and

head north, back to the security of

Galilee, and be together for the rest of

our lives? We can't imagine what life will

be like without you."

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus insists.

The Bible regularly uses parental language to talk about God, and not exclusively masculine language.

God in the Bible is not only a king and a father, but also a mother who cannot, and will not, abandon her nursing child.

God in the Bible is like a mother who bends down to pick up and hold her child.

Jesus uses parental language and images for God, both male and female: God is like a waiting father running down the road to welcome a prodigal son home,

God is like a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” he tells his frightened, anxious friends—God is an intimate, cherished parent.

A decade or so later, the Apostle Paul will begin to think and write about what Jesus means and what difference Jesus Christ makes. He too will use parental language, adoption language.

For Paul, in Jesus, the Christ God adopts us as beloved children. That is a promise and an image we remember every time we baptize an infant: “Annabelle ... Brendan ... you are children of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism. You belong to Jesus Christ forever.”

I love the story about a couple who, unable to become pregnant, adopted a baby girl. And as sometimes happens, almost immediately, the mother became pregnant and had a little boy nine months later.

Years later the time came to explain to their daughter that she was adopted. They decided to tell both of their children. They gathered brother and sister and said all the prescribed things:

“We chose you to be our daughter.

We picked you out. When we saw you we said, she is the perfect baby for us. She’s the one.”

Her slightly younger brother, listening in, asked,

“Can I be adopted, too?”

In a world where many children are unwanted, abused, ignored, and abandoned: newborns left on the doorsteps of hospitals and churches, even in a dumpster—for them, adoption is literally redemptive, life giving. Adoptive parents and adoption agencies

work hard to give this gift of life and health to a child who in some way may have been abandoned or not wanted.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus said. “I will not abandon you. I will be with you forever.”

There comes a time in life when you become an orphan. Parents die, and we must go on without them. One day you were someone’s daughter or son, and then they’re gone. Whenever that happens, it is one of life’s profound events.

And sometimes it happens before the end of life, when a parent declines into dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. In many ways that is more difficult, more painful, to become an orphan that way. It is a difficult situation for all—the parent and particularly adult children who assume responsibility for care and, in a very real sense, reverse roles and become their mother’s or father’s parent.

A daughter reflects on her mother’s slow drift into Alzheimer’s. “Though the physical attention and care required is constant and at times challenging, it is the emotional death that I grieve—the loss of connectedness to the woman who has always been the mainstay of my life.”

“Now my mother has forgotten me, and every time I look at her my heart weeps.

If my mother forgot me, will God?

Is there any comfort left in contemplating God’s mother love?”

And then this intriguing thought: “God’s memory is not brain-based but heart-based. God’s memory embraces all the nuances of who I am as a human being and stores, as only the creator can, each cell of my existence.” As the ancient psalmist wrote:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You are acquainted with all my ways.
You hem me in, behind and before;
You lay your hand upon me.

This daughter continues ... “My mother may not be able to tell me that I am her daughter, but that does not mean she does not

remember the child of her womb.” (Linda Rooney, (quoted in *Context*, edited by Martin E. Marty, May 2009)

So maybe human memory is not brain-based but heart-based, like God’s memory. I think so.

I’m certainly not a psychologist, but I believe that human consciousness is so complex and multifaceted that somewhere deep inside there remains the best of the person we were and still are, our strongest and deepest loves are still there, regardless of what is happening with the electrical circuits of our brain.

I believe that faithful, grieving, hope-filled daughter is correct. Her mother has not forgotten her child, even though she can’t say it. Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia take away the mind and sometimes the physical ability, but it cannot take away the heart or the soul. Those realities last forever.

Pastors learn that at hospital bedsides or in home visits that seem to be going nowhere: but sometimes people who don’t communicate at all become responsive to words of scripture or hymns that are remembered deeply in the heart.

A woman who hasn’t said a word for months joins in singing Silent Night, Holy Night.

A man, restrained in a wheelchair ... mute in a nursing home hallway ... not speaking for weeks ... receives the sacrament of the Lord’s supper and repeats my words ... “The Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed ... took bread. Took wine.”

Nurses have long known and remind pastors that patients who seem to be comatose continue to hear, and so we learn not to talk about the patient as if he or she is not present and listening, because in all probability that person is. So in that situation, talk, speak, sing, say **“I love you. I’m not going anywhere. Don’t be afraid. God does not leave us orphaned”**

Here is what I believe ... what I know -- that even as we lose a parent or spouse, or dear friend to Alzheimer’s, we are not orphans, because deep within there remains the love that once could express itself.

And when a dear one or friend dies in the same way, the essence of who they were in relationship with us, though gone on the surface, remains true and deep in the heart.

And when parents die, it is our dearest belief that the relationship that created us, nurtured and blessed us along the way, never ends, because God remembers them and us. Behind all of that is Jesus' steadfast promise,
"I will not leave you orphaned."

So today is Pentecost. The day fifty days after the resurrection, and after the ascension of Jesus. And God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, came to Jesus' disciples and followers and filled them with new life, new energy, with new spirit.

At Pentecost, the church, filled with the Spirit of God, was born. That is usually what preachers talk about on Pentecost. But in a much quieter and cherished sense, Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise
"I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."

So may this day be a reminder to you that you are not alone, that our most precious relationships are permanent. Enduring. They never end. Even in the darkest hour, when we feel most alone, we are not alone.

May this Pentecost day remind us that God is with us, that Jesus Christ, our brother, our father, our mother, our dear friend has promised us that **we will not be orphans**, not now, not ever. Thank you, God. Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Amen.