

No Longer Orphaned
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – May 14, 2023

Please read:
I Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Our gospel text on this sixth Sunday of Easter is, as Diana Butler Bass says, about “practicing resurrection.” It begins with love and ends with love. It’s a strange passage from when Jesus was saying goodbye to his disciples. What struck me in reading this text on this day when we celebrate the love of our mothers, was Jesus’ promise, “I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you.” It’s a promise that we will never be alone, and that even when we feel alone or abandoned, God comes to meet us where we are with love and compassion and calls us forward to new life with love and compassion.

I’ll never forget the time I tried to run away from home. I was 16 years old, and a fairly cocky young man. I had an argument with my mom over the use of one of the cars, and when I did not get my way, I left the house in anger. I walked out and kept walking. We lived out in the country and so I walked probably a couple of miles before my mom pulled up alongside me in the car, and said, “Get in, I’ll give you a ride...” What’s significant about that for me is that I’m sure I didn’t deserve it, but my mom came after me with love and compassion.

Jesus talks about the Advocate. The word here in the Greek is παρακλητον. It’s hard to translate, but basically means Encourager, Advocate, or one who comes alongside. I hope most of us have someone who encourages us in our lives. It may be a parent or other family member. It could be a teacher or friend. We all need someone who advocates for us, who cheers us on to be our best selves. My mom was someone who encouraged me from an early age to read and learn and I credit her for giving me intellectual curiosity. I may not be the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but I am learning to ask questions and keep learning... mainly because my mother taught me that study and intellectual curiosity is a gift and a privilege.

Jesus wasn’t talking about my mom, though. He was talking about the Holy Spirit. Just an aside, but the word for Spirit is feminine in the Hebrew, neutral in the Greek, and masculine in Latin. In other words, it’s perfectly biblical to talk about “she” when referring to the Spirit. In fact, “wisdom” in the Hebrew is feminine too and so when Jesus talks about the Spirit of truth, I think of my mom encouraging me to always ask questions and seek wisdom and truth. What’s amazing is that Jesus says that he will ask God to give us this Advocate, and this Spirit of truth, well... she will be *with* you and abide *in* you.

In the Greek Orthodox tradition this is called *theosis*. It's a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God. Jesus says when the Spirit comes, "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." That's astonishing really. We in the Protestant tradition see this as a recovery of the *imago dei* in all people. As we commune with the Spirit of God, there is healing, recovery, salvation, redemption, resurrection. We may use different words to describe it, but it is a return to the loving relationship that God intends for all creation.

Too often, we live like we are alone, like orphans. We act like the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Spirit of truth is not with us and not in us. That's why it's so important to take time to pray, to listen, to center ourselves and make space to be still and know that God is with us. It was wonderful to be back in Paris. We were able to spend time with our son Matthew and see friends and take walks and eat our way through some of our favorite restaurants in the City of Light. We also stayed at the American Church in Paris. When we returned home to New Canaan, both Kim and I were amazed by how quiet it is here, how you don't notice how much noise is in the city until you're away from it! I think the same is true for our inner being. There is a cacophony of noises that distract or even block us from hearing God's voice. It takes practice to quiet our hearts and minds, to tame the "monkey mind" so that we can be still and hear the Spirit when she speaks to us.

One afternoon while Kim was having lunch with a friend, I decided to spend some quiet time in the sanctuary. Inevitably, my attention was drawn to the Ascension Window on the north wall of the sanctuary... and I remembered how God spoke to me when I felt called to serve that congregation 15 years ago. I was serving at the First Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, and loved the congregation and my calling there, but one of my professors suggested I apply for the position in Paris. With a wife and four kids, I wasn't necessarily eager to leave a comfortable position in Colorado for what I knew would be a challenging assignment in Paris.

So, I asked God for a sign that I would understand; something unique that would get my attention. We were invited to spend a few days interviewing in Paris, and when they showed me the sanctuary, I saw the stained glass window called the "Ascension Window," designed by Charles J. Connick. I asked to go up to the balcony where I could get closer to see the images on the window... And lo and behold, there in the bottom right corner of the window was a full-size rendering of a man name Sheldon Jackson. Now you probably never heard of Sheldon Jackson, but Sheldon Jackson founded the First Presbyterian Church of Fort Collins, Colorado. And there he was in the Ascension Window of the American Church in

Paris! I almost fell off the balcony! God spoke to me loud and clear through that window. I just needed to be at the right time and place, and open to hearing God.

Last week, we heard Jesus declare he is the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through him. It's a gracious invitation that unfortunately has been weaponized over the years. Jesus was preparing his disciples for separation, and we'll talk more about that next week when we celebrate the Ascension. I believe Jesus is the unique revelation of who God is and the only way to knowing God with the intimacy of a parent child relationship...

But Jesus says four chapters earlier, "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So, there shall be one flock, one shepherd." What we don't know, however, is what language Jesus speaks to his other sheep! We live in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural world and so we should expect that God surely speaks in languages we don't understand, but that others do... We believe God speaks through the revelation of Jesus most clearly, but we also know that God can speak through other religions and cultures so that people even of other faiths hear God's voice, too. I love Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "Kingfishers Catch Fire," with the line that *Christ plays in ten thousand places...*

This is the truth about God, that God's love is for all people, even the so-called enemies of God. In Christ God is reconciling *the world* back to God's self, back into relationship *with* God. God will speak to us because God abides with us and is in us, if only we would listen.

Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." On this Mother's Day, some of us are very thankful for our mothers and for all the love and compassion that we have received from them, but some of us did not know our mothers, or had painful experiences with our mothers. This is where our parents may give us some inkling of what God is like, but even the best of parents are a far cry from the amazing grace and steadfast love that we find in God.

We are the Body of Christ, and so we become the real presence of Christ to one another, young and old alike. And in this sense, we are never alone in the church. Christ does not leave us orphaned but comes to us through one another. Sometimes, Christ meets us in the wisdom of an elder, or through a youth like Gordie who spoke to us here today. Sometimes, Christ meets us in the whimsical carefree playfulness of a child.

Perhaps that's why Jesus begins and ends this passage with the connection of receiving God's love and the responsibility of sharing God's love by keeping his commands? It's critical for our world today that we love one another, but share God's love with all people, even our enemies. That's the command! Nadia Bolz-Weber writes,

Remember: sometimes the Holy Spirit shows up in other people. In this divided nation, [the church] is a place where die-hard Republicans and blue-blooded Democrats and independents and third party folks and people who don't or can't vote come to the same table and eat the same bread and worship the same God every single week. This is a place where liberals and conservatives eat dinner together and hold each other's children and giggle with one another's grandchildren. And that seems really nice, but it doesn't always mean it's easy or comfortable. It doesn't mean that sometimes we don't have wildly different interpretations of the news or even what it means to be the Church these days.

You see, the Holy Spirit has a way of stirring things up. The images at Pentecost for the Holy Spirit aren't exactly cute and fuzzy: tongues of fire. Rushing wind. The Holy Spirit has a way of stirring things up, of turning things upside down, of pushing us to be more than we were before. Now, make no mistake: the Gospel has political implications. However, one of my pet peeves is when people use the word "Gospel" when they clearly don't mean "Good News." The Gospel is Good News. For all people. If it's not Good News for all people, it's not the Gospel.

Theologian Fredrich Beuchner put it this way: "Wherever people love each other and are true to each other and take risks for each other, God is with them, and they are doing God's will."

So friends, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, siblings in Christ: May love find you in this place: no matter who you are, where you came from, whom or what you love, or what you hold as a political reality. God's love is for you. And whatever road you may be traveling, may the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, come alongside to encourage and remind you that you are beloved, and help you figure out what God would have you be and do in the world. The best part of all is that Jesus reveals the way, and the Spirit of truth, one way or another, always finds us. God will not leave us orphaned in this crazy world: God is still coming alongside to forgive and love us, to help us practice and even experience resurrection.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.