

6th Sunday of Easter – May 21, 2017
John 14:15-21
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Have you ever experienced it - one of those “God moments” when Scripture seems to come alive and nearly springs off the page into real time? It was the first time I met Lloyd, a thirty-something, attractive red-haired, fair-skinned man who came to Sunday worship one morning at Reedsville United Methodist church where I was pastor in the early '90s. He came in alone, and quietly sat down by himself in a seat three-quarters of the way back on the right. He was attentive, keeping his eyes trained on me while I preached. His face bore an open, searching expression. His face said, “Will I find it here? Hope, acceptance, love - God?”

After the service, I stood at the front door greeting the morning worshippers. I introduced myself to this young man whom I had never seen before. He looked at me with a hint of sadness in his eyes and thanked me for the sermon. He said, “I feel like an orphan.” The text for that day's sermon was today's gospel passage. United Methodist pastors usually title their sermons. The title that day? “No Longer Orphans”.

Though Lloyd was unknown to me, he was not unknown to most of the church's longtime members. In fact, Lloyd had grown up and been raised in the Reedsville United Methodist Church. He left the area after high school, and eventually settled in Texas, where he had lived for about ten years. He had recently moved back to Reedsville, where members of his family – his parents, his twin sister and her two daughters, and an aunt still lived. He owned a business in town.

It was my pastoral practice to schedule a visit at the home of anyone who had worshipped with us for the first time. Lloyd was pleasant, warm, and gracious. He had three Shelties that we spent a good deal of time fawning and bonding over, as I had a pet Sheltie myself at the time. Lloyd tentatively began to share his story. He explained that he had not been in a church in a long time. Lloyd was a gay man and had a partner, with whom he shared a life and home. His partner had developed HIV AIDS and they had decided to move back into the area so they could be closer to family for emotional support.

Lloyd had lots of questions. He was spiritually hungry. He wanted to learn about Scripture. And he wanted to know if, as a gay man, he would be welcome in the United Methodist Church. I could see he was searching, albeit tentatively, hoping he might find a safe spiritual home, perhaps even at this church, the one he had attended as a boy, the church where he was baptized and nurtured in the faith. “Of course, you and Clay are welcome here at Reedsville Church”, I told him. I thought I needed to be upfront and truthful with Lloyd, so even as it broke my heart, I gently told him that the “official” policy statement of the denomination was exclusionary, in effect treating sexual minority persons as “second class”, errant and flawed in their living and loving,

according to Scripture and the tradition of the Church. The truth was that he would find varying levels of welcome, acceptance and inclusion across the United Methodist Church. He wasn't naïve. I didn't need to tell Lloyd that there might be those who would not so warmly welcome him there in the church of his childhood. I understood more deeply than Lloyd knew what it feels like to be a spiritual orphan.

If we pay attention, we encounter people every day who believe they will always be alone and isolated in the world because for whatever reason, they have come to accept that they are unlovable. Most any life challenge we face – financial strain, physical or mental illness, emotional isolation, spiritual desperation, job loss, basic needs like food, shelter, a safe place to live going unmet, anxiousness about our common life as citizens, disrupted and broken relationships - any of these things may find us questioning life, wondering if we have been abandoned and are unworthy. So many people live with the primary fear that they are unlovable.

Orphaned. Alone. Without guidance. Without support. If it's children who are orphaned, they are without parents – lost and vulnerable. Orphaned. Without anyone. Mostly, “orphaned” means being so isolated in this world that it feels like no one cares whether or not we live or die.

Jesus is at table with the disciples for their last meal together. Their feet are still damp from Jesus' washing them. Some are shocked at Judas' abrupt departure, puzzled and alarmed at Jesus' frank prediction of Peter's denial. Jesus' “new commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you”, strikes a dissonant chord between the sound of Judas' running off into the night and Peter's vowing that he will be faithful unto death. The disciples have just witnessed a stunning act of service that captured their Lord's entire ministry among them as the truly human, living Word of God – the Word forgiving, cleansing, teaching, healing, demonstrating his loving obedience to God who sent him.

The disciples have begun to sense the growing gravity of this time, though somehow – perhaps blessedly - they have managed to avoid the pain of full understanding. When Jesus makes clear that this meal marks his leaving them, they can skirt the truth no longer. Disbelief and growing distress hangs heavy in the air. Dismay and discouragement begin to settle over them like some dark, ominous cloud. Soon they will find themselves scattered, set adrift, dazed by their sudden disconnection from him. Facing a fight against disillusionment and despair.

It was all so confusing! It was all unfolding too quickly, their life together barreling down the tracks, gaining speed like a runaway train. Those dear disciples, our brothers (and sisters) in the faith, just looked at each other as Jesus said: **“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”** “What do you mean, Jesus – you're going, but you're coming? You're not making any sense.”

“Orphaned” is the word Jesus uses. It is a potent and powerful promise that Jesus makes. Of course they were going to be orphans. He was about to leave his beloved disciples and go and die. He must have known that his death would strike fear and terror in them, these men he knew intimately, these friends who loved him, and whom he loved sacrificially, his brothers.

He surely knew they would be left vulnerable, feeling utterly abandoned.

He surely knew they would panic.

He somehow expected they would turn and run for their own lives, leave him the very moment when things got rough and dangerous.

He must have understood. And still amid the chaos, confusion, and concern he kept right on loving them anyway. This is what the gospel writer John emphasizes. There is no mention of Jesus’ sense of loss and panic, his own sense of being orphaned. He speaks only of the love of God, and the coming of another Advocate. In Greek the word is “Paraclete”, which means “one who comes alongside”. There is another powerful one who will “come alongside” them, just as Jesus has lived alongside them. The promise is that this other Advocate, the Holy Spirit will never leave them.

Whether they heard him or not, Jesus only speaks words of hope in John’s telling. He speaks of complete union in him with God, and the grace that comes within that union, grace that never ends. Yes, he is leaving them physically. But his spiritual power and holy presence will be there as alive and real as he is to them in that moment, sitting at the table talking and breaking bread.

Jesus made an audacious living promise to the disciples. It still sparks hope, leaves us breathless and wondering – could this be true? In these few words of John’s gospel is the pearl of promise pointing to how we can claim a full life in the face of the fear, terror, panic, isolation, loss, and grief that comes to us. The strain and struggle that comes to us simply from living, that comes simply from the very nature of our being alive in this world.

What does it mean to live faithfully in the midst of life? It is to live as though we know with full assurance that we are loved, *no matter what*. Jesus’ word to us is to trust in the abiding presence and love of God, which never ends, never fails. And one thing more – it is to remember *we are never alone, no matter what*.

I was struck again in this reading how Jesus’ promise of *another Advocate*, a “Paraclete” who comes alongside, was given to a **living community of the faithful**. Jesus does not go to the disciples one by one to deliver his promise. This Advocate, this One who will come alongside them after Jesus is gone, will be revealed and experienced in their life together as a community. In community, they will be guided and taught and sustained and grow in love. Not as individual islands, but as a group of dedicated and determined disciples will they experience Jesus’ living presence and power. Jesus needs them to carry on and complete his ministry of self-giving love. And they will need each other to do that.

My friend Lloyd, who admitted at the door of the church that he felt like an orphan, over time became an active member and lay leader in the Reedsville United Methodist Church. He sang in the choir. His relationship with God was renewed and deepened. His prayer life became more consistent. That community of the faithful helped him learn that he was not an orphan, though he spent years feeling like one, believing he was an orphan, abandoned by God and Jesus' community. Lloyd's faithfulness and confidence grew and touched others, including his twin sister who also later returned to find a place in the life of the faith community.

Many of us have such stories of spiritual homecoming. My story of spiritual homecoming followed the path leading to the Anglican tradition and the Episcopal Church. I found healing community in several different Episcopal congregations, especially St. John's, Carlisle, and here at St. Andrew's. Flawed institutions and their leaders do abandon us. Even well meaning people close to us disappoint, betray and leave us. But with God there are no orphans, no spiritual underclass of misfits, no unmentionables, no unlovable ones. There are only sons and daughters of God, all of whom God has embraced through the forgiving and life-giving love of Jesus.

The joy and the challenge for us is to remember that we are called to be and act as a "paraclete" kind of community. We are meant to be Jesus' advocates who come alongside each other for strength and comfort. Advocates who come alongside the marginalized, the vulnerable and desperate, the broken and searching ones who live all around us. So many of the ministries here at St. Andrew's are just that – ministries of coming alongside others. It is wonderful to hear about the mini-mission projects the youth of St. Andrew's are engaging in – doing this very kind of ministry - coming alongside to be with and serve vulnerable ones in Jesus' name.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you." Christ continues to keep this promise and we get to help him fulfill it! Each day we are called to grow up, to grow stronger by abiding in the constant gift of God's loving presence revealed in the dying and risen Christ. Abiding, dwelling in the love of God so our gospel work can be fueled and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Though American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's words were not written specifically referring to disciples of Christ, their truth fits us as believers: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Friends, citizens of God's kingdom, may it be so for us. Amen.