

“Your Forever Family”

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Fourth in a series on John 14

John 14.15-21

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Jesus told them, *“When you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.*

“I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

John 14.15-21

Common English Bible (alt)

“I won't leave you orphaned.”

Jesus promises this protection. His promise rests so deep in who we are, and what we fear, and what some of us have known. Orphaned.

Barb and I are watching *Anne with an E*, the remake of the *Anne of Green Gables* stories.¹ Anne is happy with Marilla and Matthew. Still, she has this big gap to fill.

Anne was orphaned as a very young child. An orphan's young life is trampled far too soon by tragedy. We usually think of an orphan as having lost both parents. In other cultures, it might include losing one, a mother or father. That was the sense in Jesus' time.²

Anne lost both. Had they left her by choice — they didn't want her? Or circumstance — they couldn't care for her? Or death? This unanswered “why” makes Anne wonder if she can be wanted.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_with_an_E

² For information about the 1st century, I've used J. T. Fitzgerald, “Orphans in Mediterranean antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Acta Theologica* (Bloemfontein, South Africa, Volume 36, Supplement 23 (2016). Available from scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1015-87582016000200003

Who were they? Where had they come from? What were they like? How is Anne like them? "Orphaned" can leave us cut off. A vital connection to who we are is broken.

In Jesus' day, the early death of your mother was, of course, terrible. The death of your father was a catastrophe. Everything in that culture connected you to your dad. He provided for you. He protected you. He gave you your social standing and honour. You were, because you were his. Without your mother, you were grief-stricken. Without your dad, you were in danger.³

"I won't leave you orphaned," Jesus promises. A historian estimated that almost half of the children back then had lost their father before they were sixteen! Among those first disciples, how many knew exactly what Jesus was talking about? Maybe Jesus himself?

II

"I will not leave you as orphans."

These weeks we're listening to Jesus unfold this image of his "Father's House," the *bêt 'āb* in Hebrew. It can be a building, the family home. More important, it's family itself. In Jesus' day it was patriarchal, with everyone centred on the father. That's all they knew, so that's what Jesus talked about.

God the Father has sent him, God the Son, to bring us into God's Family.

"I will not leave you as orphans." Why say this? Because Jesus was about to leave them.

It is Jesus last meal, their final few hours together. Too soon he will be taken from them. Even after, when the glory of his cross becomes the glory of his resurrection, even when they see him again, touch and travel with him, that will be short-lived. He will go away.

So Jesus needs to say, *"I will not leave you as orphans."* That's so good.

III

Then I got to thinking. . . .

Maybe I'm taking this too literally, but bear with me for a bit. How would they be orphaned? In this family portrait he is painting, Jesus is not the Father.

³ Throughout the Bible extra attention is paid to protecting orphans, because they needed protection.

If Jesus' role is to bring us into relationship with God — to guide or even carry us along the way to the Father — well, he's done that. If Jesus' work is to break down the barrier of our sin, our guilt, and our shame that cuts us off from God — that barrier we are powerless to break and only God can — well, he's about to do that by his crucifixion and resurrection.

Yet somehow, Jesus leaving us could orphan us from God.

So in our relationship with God, Jesus is always necessary.

He'd just said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* It's not just that Jesus *shows* us the way, though he does that. He is not only our Guide and Teacher. It's not just that Jesus makes the way possible by clearing the path, though he's done that. He is even more than our Rescuer, our Saviour. Jesus himself is the Way, always and continually. He brings us into the Parent-child relationship with God, and holds us there. It is in Jesus and with Jesus that we share in God's family. He is indispensable.

So if he leaves, it is the greatest crisis imaginable. Without him, we are orphaned in the worst way. So he needs to say to them — and I know he's saying it to you and me too — *"I will not leave you as orphans."*

IV

"I will not leave you as orphans." Why? Because *"I am coming to you."*

Jesus says, *"I will ask the Father, and he will send another . . . who will be with you forever."*

Forever. Not just the three-ish years Jesus was with his first disciples. Not only the thirty-ish years of his in-the-flesh presence. Forever.

Who is this "another?"

The Greek word here is *parakletos*. It basically means is "someone who is called alongside." Like you're in a tight spot, and someone stands by you. You're having a rough time, and someone sits with you. You are hauled into court, and someone defends you: your lawyer who knows the law and acts on your behalf, or a friendly witness who says the truth for you.

It's hard to find a word that covers all this. Advocate. Helper. Counsellor. Comforter. Encourager. Friend. True Friend. All of them.

Is this Jesus? Not really. He comes alongside us. But he says God the Father "*will send another . . .*" So someone like Jesus. But Jesus also says that he will be with us forever.⁴

This "Another" is the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit. We've got this whole picture of the Trinity here. It's the Family portrait, but with colourful swirls of confusing-to-us mystery. The Spirit is not the Son, but makes the Son present with us. The Son is not the Father, yet is in the Father and the Father in him.

We're not going to figure this out. (We can't figure out our own families!) God the Trinity is for us to experience. The Divine Family, Who is perfect love and unity, overflowing sharing and generosity, everlasting delight and life.

∨

You'll never be orphaned. Jesus the Way has brought you in and keeps holding you in. The Holy Spirit — our comforting Companion, our True Friend — is coming alongside you, always and forever. God the Father, your Divine Parent, has created you and keeps on giving you life, abundantly and eternally.

"I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you."

The Holy Spirit, your True Friend, comes alongside you, lives with you, and will be with you. And the Spirit says to you:

No matter what may fall on you, I will always protect you. No matter what you might lack, I will always fill you. No matter who might try to push you out, I will always make you belong. No matter what anyone says or what turmoil you are living, I will tell you are who you really are, because I know Whose you are; you are Mine. No matter what "family" has been for you, I make you belong within that most basic and vitally life-giving relationship: My family, your Family; Me, the Family who is God.

Forever.

⁴ Matthew 28:20.