



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

I Will Not Leave You Orphaned

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A, John 14:15-21

May 14, 2023

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Liz knew what it felt like to be abandoned. Her mother struggled with all sorts of problems and her home became an impossible place to live. So, Liz moved in with her grandmother here in Memphis. But her grandmother was blind and ailing with diabetes and strokes, and spent more and more time in the hospital. Liz would stay with other families when her grandmother could not take care of her.

Gradually the home of Leigh Anne, one of her friends from church, became her mainstay. Leigh Anne's mother Virginia became a second mother to Liz. She welcomed her into her home and into her family. But when Virginia tried to hug her, Liz would shy away.

Liz was worried that she was setting herself up to get hurt, that Virginia and Leigh Anne were just being good Christians and didn't really love her, that their interest in her was temporary and would fade. Liz was afraid of her own yearning for a mother. She had never had a lot of affection and, although she craved it, she couldn't count on getting it. So, she dealt with this tension and her fear by not letting herself get too close.

In our Gospel passage from John, Jesus sees a similar fear on the horizon for his disciples. He has just finished his last supper with them. He foretells his death by telling them, 'Little children, I am with you only a little longer.' Can you imagine what's going through their minds? 'Where is Jesus going? If it is to die, then what is the meaning of these last 3 years? We uprooted our lives and gave up everything for him. Has all that he taught us and shared with us been real? Can we still trust him? Could we ever trust him? If we are indeed Jesus's little children, are we now orphans?'

To be orphaned is like being a high-wire artist without a net. It is to be without guidance, without support, without parents. It is to be abandoned.

Mother Teresa knew what it felt like to feel abandoned. Due to the political situation in Albania, she and her mother were unable to communicate for 11 years. Years after her death and canonization as a saint, Mother Teresa's private journals and letters revealed she spent much of her life feeling the devastating absence of God. She wrote of this paradox in her soul:

'To be in love and yet not to love, to live by faith and yet not to believe. To spend myself and yet be in total darkness.'

Mother Teresa, who did much to alleviate hunger in our world, said that perhaps the greatest hunger in the world, the most terrible anguish, was not physical poverty or deprivation. It was the anguish of not being wanted, of being forgotten or rejected, of having no one.

Jesus knew that is the way his disciples, now his friends, would feel after his death. He reassures them that he will come back to them. He also tells them that he will arrange with the Father to send them another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be with them forever. He pledges that he and the Holy Spirit will be an abiding presence within them and with us always. Jesus concludes his promises and reassurances by telling them that he will love them and will reveal himself to them. The love that he gives is not temporary, nor is it transactional.

Linda Lee Clader suggests that the Greek words usually translated ‘in you’ can also be translated ‘among you.’ She says the life and love of Jesus and the Spirit within us is an active presence in a communal context. Linda writes, “Might that reduce or anxiety about whether we are really ‘right with God’? Might it, in fact, lead us to dwell less on our own, individual worthiness and focus our energy rather on an active life of faithful service?”

That was the path Mother Teresa took. She got up each day to bring relief and hope to the poor, the lepers, and the orphans. She wrote of the times when she could not pray: “If Jesus is in my heart, let him pray, let me allow him to pray in me, to talk to his Father in the silence of my heart. Since I cannot speak – He will speak; since I cannot pray – He will pray. That’s why often we should say: ‘Jesus in my heart, I believe in your faithful love for me.’” Even in the midst of her doubts and dark nights of the soul, Mother Teresa found ways to accept the embrace of Jesus as she lovingly gave his embrace to others.

At the 10:30 service (In a few moments), we’ll baptize a handsome little boy, Henry Rowlett Nelson. Immediately after he’s baptized, Scott will say, ‘Henry Rowlett, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own *forever*.’ Jesus will never abandon him. He will not leave Henry orphaned. Nor will we – his parents, his godparents, and we as his church community, as we promise our support and our love to him. Jesus and we will always embrace him, as we teach him to love and embrace others.

Liz, the woman I spoke about earlier, eventually accepted and returned the hugs of her second mother Virginia. Years later, Virginia’s daughter and Liz’s friend Leigh Anne married Sean Tuohy. Their story of adopting Michael Oher from Hurt Village here in Memphis was depicted in the movie “The Blind Side.” One day, Michael was talking with Liz and wondered aloud why the Tuohy family took him in and whether Leigh Anne’s affection for him was real. Liz just shrugged and told him, ‘It happened the same way with me and her mom thirty-plus years ago.’

Liz not only found that Virginia’s love was real, she found a way to share it. Liz became a teacher and coach in Memphis public schools. Celeste was a 7th grader on one of Liz’s teams and the daughter of a single mother in a housing project.

One night, Celeste’s mom was involved in a shooting in their building. Celeste’s mom was convicted of murder and later died from an asthma attack in prison. Celeste became an orphan at age 13. Celeste remembered her mom, ‘When she left physically, she was still with me spiritually. It’s still hard.’

Liz took Celeste into her home, at first temporarily but later permanently. Celeste went on to Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, and helped her team win championships in basketball. More importantly, Celeste earned a master's in education, and came home to teach and coach basketball at White Station High School.

She is the mother of three, daughter Jaila and her twins, Laila and LeBron. Liz is proud of all of them and claims them as her grandchildren. Celeste said Liz is the most influential person in her life. She said Liz taught her more about Jesus, to depend on him, to lean on him. Celeste reflected, 'Christ means everything. At times when I didn't have anyone, he was there. He was going to work through someone to help me.'

Liz is also still teaching and is a leader in our schools. She is still always on the look out for the child or adult who feels rejected or abandoned. It's easy to spot her. She's the one giving a hug. *Amen.*