

“No Longer an Orphan”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

May 14, 2023 - Sixth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21](#)

Happy Mother’s Day to those of you who are moms. This is a day for you to celebrate as you are celebrated, and I hope that your day is filled with joy.

While this is a day of celebration for mothers and others, especially greeting card companies, florists, and, historically anyway, church offering collectors, it is can also be a very difficult day for many others, namely those whose are remembering a mother who is deceased, those mothers who are remembering a lost child, those who would like to be mothers but are not able, or those who are or were distant from their mothers or abused by them. It can also be a difficult day for orphans, children and youth who have lost or never had parents, including mothers, to care and provide for them.

We read about orphans in today’s reading from the gospel of John, in which we find Jesus telling his disciples, while sharing his final meal with them, that he would soon be leaving them as he sensed that his life would soon be taken away. Jesus seeks to comfort the likely stunned and disbelieving disciples that that while they would no longer have him present with them in body, he would not leave them as orphans, without someone to care and provide for them.

And life for orphans, living without parents to care for them, was exceptionally difficult in Jesus’ time, just as it remains today in much of the world. Elsewhere in the Bible, they are recognized as being among the most vulnerable people in their society, and we have passages such as James 1:27, which instruct members of the Christian community to look after distressed orphans as a pure expression of their faith.

The distress and difficulties faced by orphans is also recognized in many great works of literature. Characters such as Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist, Cosette in *Les Misérables*, and Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book* series are just a few examples. And in comics and the movies made from them, some of the most popular superheroes are orphans, including Superman, Batman (and Robin), Spider-Man, Captain Marvel, and Captain America. The identity of all of these

characters as orphans emphasizes that they all experienced -- and in many cases overcame -- great adversity and anguish over the course of the winding journeys of their lives.

Jesus, in telling his disciples that he will not leave them as orphans, promises to them that they would not have to experience the adversity and anguish of having to continue their own life journeys without one to spiritually care and provide for them. Jesus promises that they would not be orphaned, but that another Helper, or Advocate, would be sent by God to be with them and to be in them. This Helper is the Spirit of Truth who will constantly reveal God and God's ways of living in love to disciples in all times and places. In coming to and into the lives of those following Jesus, they will be united in fellowship with God. And as all believers are to enjoy the same Spirit, they will be united with one another. They will be one family.

I am reminded of this truth being offered in a beautiful song, one of my personal favorites, by American singer and guitarist Gillian Welch called "Orphan Girl." Welch, who was herself adopted, sings from the perspective of an orphaned child,

I am an orphan on God's highway, but I'll share my troubles if you go my way. I have no mother, no father, no sister, no brother. I am an orphan girl.

I have had friendships pure and golden, but the ties of kinship, I have not known them. I know no mother, no father, no sister, no brother. I am an orphan girl.

But when He calls me, I will be able to meet my family at God's table. I'll meet my mother, my father, my sister, my brother. No more an orphan girl.

Blessed Savior, make me willing and walk beside me until I'm with them. Be my mother, my father, my sister, my brother. No more an orphan girl.

Indeed, we find with this orphaned child that we are not orphaned at all, but that God is with us already with us on our journeys -- no matter who we are or where our journeys have already taken us. God is walking with us always as our Mother, our Father, our Sister, and our Brother. The first disciples were not orphaned when Jesus left them, the community that received the gospel of John a

generation or two later were not abandoned by God to deal with their own difficulties alone, and all of us who have followed Christ through the centuries still have God's Spirit with us, helping us, advocating for us, speaking truth to us, guiding us to live in love, and uniting us with God and one another as one family of faith.

Shortly, we will be proclaiming this truth together as we recite "A New Creed" from the United Church of Canada, our sibling denomination to the north, which begins by stating that we are not alone and concludes with these words: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God." Yes, thanks be to God!

And let us live this truth today and everyday by being family for one another, letting God's helping, advocating, empowering Spirit work through each of us for each other. May we be present with one another, may we lift one another up, may we take care of one another and provide for each other. And may we offer ourselves to be used by God together to bring these gifts to the people of the world, all of whom are God's beloved children. May the Helper work through us today to bless all of God's children that none would feel orphaned or alone. Amen.