

John 14: 15-23 “Never Alone” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/17/20

When I was a teenager in Boise, ID, I began babysitting for the local Disciples pastor and family there, the Deckers. Not having been around a lot of younger children growing up, it was a learning experience. The kids were well-behaved so it wasn't too much of a challenge but I will never forget one afternoon, the 5 year old boy was having a particularly difficult time sharing with his older sister. Still learning the art of negotiation, I knew I had to come up with some consequence if his behavior didn't change. After all, there was no one else in the house, I was the one in charge and I had to take responsibility. So I told him he could either share with his sister or... or... I looked around the room and spotted the letter I was writing to my best friend back in Kansas, so I blurted out “I would ship him off to Kansas in the mail.” At that very moment, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there was the mailman dropping off some large mail. The boy took one look, screamed, and went running into his room. To say the least, I never used that phrase again.

As I look back now, I realize what a frightening thing it must have been to come face to face with suddenly being shipped off, isolated from family, a virtual orphan with nowhere to turn. Whether we are 5 or 55, when we hear our text read today, we find comfort. It is the reason it is shared in so many funerals over and over. “I will not leave you orphaned,” says the Lord. Orphaned. Alone. Without guidance. Without support. Without anyone. In our text, “orphaned” means being so isolated in this world that it feels like no one cares whether or not we live or die. Although an image of children first comes to mind when we use that word, any of us can be orphaned at any age. In fact, on any given day, a lot of us are orphaned, at least in spirit. There are thousands of children left to their own devices because of abuse and neglect,

or best-case scenario, poor or self-centered parenting. Working as a foster parent and then as a CASA volunteer, it was mind boggling to me how many children live in a secret orphanage, one which isn't defined by bricks and mortar but by parents who simply can't or won't take responsibility for their kids and the circumstances in which they find themselves. For some, the weight of becoming an adult grows so burdensome that these parents digress back into childhood patterns and then it becomes hard to tell who is parenting who? People we encounter every day fear down deep being unloveable, and therefore, they always feel alone and isolated in the world because the world tells them they are. If we are honest with ourselves, we all know a bit of what that feels like. At home, I have a plaque that says, "I cannot adult today." I covered up the word "not" so it says "I can adult today" – I did it as much for my young adult daughters as I did for myself. Growing up, maturing, is hard especially when a big question mark hangs over our future. We understand all too well 1<sup>st</sup> grader Carol's statement to her younger brother in kindergarten after school one day. "Don't ever let anyone teach you how to spell 'cat'," she said. "Why?" asked her little brother. "Because the words only get harder after you learn to spell 'cat'."

As I transitioned from the child being babysat to the babysitter, from the one being cared for to the one caring for others, today's scripture took on new meaning. It even happened as I transitioned from Associate Minister to Senior Minister, the one in charge. In a time when everyone is becoming a theologian, asking why doesn't God stop this virus, why doesn't God bring our jobs back, save our economy, turn the Titanic around, I am aware that many are looking to the church with both hope and fear. They expect ministers to have all the answers; I should know better what God is doing and what our future holds. We are expected

to exude confidence and create the same thing in others. 70% of Americans believe that COVID is some sort of wake-up call or sign, but of what is the question. Our friend Bruce Epperly just recently came out with a book called "Faith in a Pandemic" in which he reveals how this pandemic has uncovered so many "isms" of our country, not the least of which is nationalism where we hold to the notion that we are better, superior, to everyone else in the world. The writing is on the wall and we have come up short - we are now living the cost of the death of the American illusion. Don't get me wrong, this is not about being proud of our nation; this is about being blindly arrogant about our nation. But then again, maybe it is just easier to forget how to spell cat, to go back to letting someone else take responsibility and be the adult so we can continue to live in our own illusion.

In essence, that is what the disciples wanted as Jesus was giving his farewell speech to them in John 14. He was telling them it was time for them to adult, to pick up the reins, handle disagreements in peaceful negotiations, care for the most vulnerable, and carry on. He knew his death would strike fear and terror in those who loved him, he knew they would feel abandoned, orphaned, isolated. He understood what German philosopher Schopenhauer taught about the human race. He likened humanity to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. He said, "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness." Christ gives an alternative to this state of porcupine loneliness by sending us a Guide, a Comforter and Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will never leave us. The Spirit teaches us how to forgive one another for the pokes we receive

and inspires us to lay down our sharp quills in exchange for gentle compassion and care for one another. Christ speaks to God's beloved not just then but now with words of hope promising the coming of the "Spirit of truth... who will abide with you and in you." If there ever was a text for the living of these days, this may be it for the Greek root for "abide" means to "stay in place" and "endure," pointing to the constant presence and guidance of the Spirit even as we shelter in place. The Spirit works within us to embrace our responsibilities as Christians, as the responsible ones who must carry on in Christ's name looking out for those that have been placed within our care.

The details are a bit fuzzy but John seems to transition from Jesus leaving his disciples in charge to promising he will come again and not just at the end of time. The place Jesus is coming is not out there somewhere but right here, where you are, a place in the present where God dwells with those who love Jesus and keep his word. Jesus says, "We come to them and make our home with them." Abiding seems to involve becoming part of a larger extended family, and a holy one at that. As Barbara Taylor puts it, "When God and Jesus move in with us, apparently, they make lots of keys, keys for the Spirit, keys for other disciples, keys for all kinds of indwelling cousins in Christ. Coming and going, we learn to recognize each other, and to call upon each other for everything that people who live together do. Whatever else this is, it is very good news for babysitters, for those in charge, because it means we are not alone in the house. There is someone else at home, in us, and for those whom we care, which means that we do not have to be God-sized for them or have all the answers. We can be human-sized instead, with room within us for God to dwell and heal all our hearts from the inside out." Every day, we are being called to adult, to grow up and mature, with the guidance of the Holy

Spirit. It is also good news for orphans, because God takes orphans and adopts them as God's own; whenever we feel orphaned, God takes us in for we are loved unconditionally and that love is powerful. We are reminded that those who truly love us live inside us, and no one shall snatch us out of their hands. Jesus makes a promise that is still alive today. We have here a sum total of how to claim a fulfilled life despite not having all the answers and even in the face of fear, isolation, loss and grief. Straight from the horse's mouth as it were comes what it means to live faithfully and with maturity in the midst of times which make us want to regress and act like orphans, to forget who we truly are. Coming or going, Christ is with us reminding us again and again, "You know the Spirit of truth because the Spirit abides with you and in you...love one another and don't be afraid, believe in God, believe also in me." We are never alone. Thanks be to God.