

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
May 14, 2023 - The 6th Sunday of Easter

The Orphan and the Advocate

A few days ago I wrote in my very short weekly message about the complexity of Mother's Day – the huge range of emotions that people bring to this day. There can be great joy, but there is also sadness, grief, longing. It has been a long time since I received so much feedback from one of those posts. One person who has been trying to have children for many, many years, and who has most recently been on that great gut-wrenching ride called the adoption process said, "I think of all the holidays, this is one makes me feel the most alone."

In this passage from John's gospel, we find Jesus' disciples also anxious about being alone. The scene is the Last Supper hours before Jesus' arrest and his passion. Jesus tries to calm their fears, and in doing so, he uses a particular phrase. He says, "I will not leave you as orphans." The Greek word for orphans means bereft, so built into the word we use for losing parents, is sadness, mourning, bereavement.

As I pondered this phrase, it struck me that so many stories, down through the centuries, have been centered in the concept of the orphan, those who have lost or who have never known their biological parents. In Roman mythology, the foundational story of the beginnings of the city of Rome, hinge on twin orphans: Romulus and Remus. Abandoned by their mother and left to die by the banks of the Tiber River in Italy, they are rescued by a she-wolf who nurtures them into greatness. We might think of Cinderella made to scrub the floors by her evil step-sisters, a folk tale told for thousands of years but then finally written down in the 17th century in France.

As the modern era begins, orphan stories become even more common. As industrialization lures people out of the familiar, multi-generational networks of their small towns and villages and people begin to migrate into big, loud, dirty cities, there is more of a sense of alienation, loneliness, abandonment. An orphaned character uniquely captured that pervading sense in the modern world that you were on your own. Charles Dickens seemed obsessed with orphans, giving us so many memorable characters: Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Pip: kids struggling to find some connection, to find wisdom, without parents to guide them.

And if anything, our post-modern era has only become more captivated by orphan characters. So many of our most popular heroes have been raised without the security of parents: Spider-man and Batman, orphaned in the heart of the city. Luke Skywalker, scanning the skies way out in the rural part of the galaxy. By far, the most beloved literary character created in the last 30 years is an orphan. Harry Potter, made to live in the cramped cabinet under the stairs by his Uncle

Vernon and Aunt Petunia, begrudgingly raising him because his parents were murdered by “he who must not be named” when he was an infant.

I wonder if we are captivated by orphans because modern society has a way of making us all feel less secure, less connected, more alone. Even if we grew up with 2 biological parents. Some of us walk around with a subtle, hard-to-place, sense of threat, like right below the surface of your mind, you are on alert for the possibility of further abandonment. Perhaps you never actually articulate it to yourself, because when you say it out loud it seems so ridiculous, but it’s like you think if you make the wrong move, say the wrong thing, you could be cut off, out on your own.

As I get older, one of the things that always hits me on a day like Mother’s Day is how young my parents were when I was an infant. And they were not even that young. My dad was 30, my mom was 26. But still, there is a cruel irony to the fact that our bodies are made to start bringing children into the world at 14, but we are so much better equipped emotionally, so much better equipped cognitively the closer we get to 54 or 64 or 74. Mothers and fathers are raising these incredibly vulnerable, impressionable, infants while battling their own demons, fending off their own modern sense of loneliness, carrying the inevitable wounds from their own parents. Some are also having to do it while battling the enormous stressors of poverty.

In this passage from John, Jesus says that despite what we may feel, existentially we are not alone. He says to his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned...I will ask the Father, and he will give you an Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” This Spirit of Truth becomes known as The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit of Truth is forever pushing back against the lies whispered within us: “You are not truly loved. You are on the verge of being abandoned.”

Jesus uses another name for the Spirit of Truth, *Paraclete* in Greek which is rendered as “the Advocate” in many translations. This Greek word *Paraclete* has many connotations: helper, counselor, comforter, but also defense lawyer. It’s like Jesus could intuit that part of the human condition is feeling like one is alone, orphaned. The Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, can cry “Objection!” to this great lie. The Spirit comes alongside us to give us wisdom, like the very best kind of Parent.

In so many of our most well-loved stories, the orphan in the story comes to know an Advocate, maybe not a “Spirit,” but rather another human being who comes alongside them. And isn’t that the way the Holy Spirit most shows up in our lives, embedded in another person. Almost always placed within the top 3 of great American novels, *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* centers on an orphan boy, Huck. The turning point for Huck comes when he finds Jim, a man who has recently escaped being the house slave of Miss Watson. In so many ways, Jim plays the role of

the Advocate; he's a counselor and a companion. Jim helps Huck question the prejudices of the time; helps form his moral compass, like the best kind of father.

In the case of Harry Potter, many people collectively embody the Advocate for him. From Hagrid the half-giant to Hermione to his uncle Sirius Black, perhaps no one more than the most powerful wizard, Dumbledore. All of them, in their own way, help Harry to battle the voice in his head; all of them counselors and comforters who gradually give this boy under the stairs a sense that he is not alone, and the courage to do battle with evil.

My point in all of this: If we all have some orphan in us; we also all have some Advocate in us, too. When you are part of a church community, you step into a whole network of Advocates; the Spirit of Truth embodied in all shapes and sizes, all ages and temperaments. A healthy church community is chock full of Obi-Wan Kenobis and Peter Parkers and Professor McGonigals.

On any given Sunday, you just never know how much the person in the pew next to you is feeling that orphan inside them; you just can't know the week they've had; you can't know the loneliness and isolation they may have battled, you can't hear the threats they may have heard in their own head. But you don't have to. You just do your best to embody some of that Spirit of Truth. Like "You may feel like you're alone, you may feel the orphan in you weighing heavy, but I'm standing here as a living, breathing objection to that voice in your head."

And we pray for the grace to embody the Advocate for those who are not in these pews. Those born into places that don't look that different from Charles Dickens' England, those who live in parts of rural America that feel more and more like they are on the marginal edge of the galaxy, those who need to know that they are not forgotten; that they are not alone.

Please join me as I close with a prayer:

Almighty God, we thank you for not leaving us as orphans. We thank you for the gift of your Spirit, the Advocate, in all the various forms She takes, from mothers and fathers to the people knit together in this very church. We ask you to calm the fears of our little orphan hearts. We ask you to strengthen the Advocate within us. Fill us with your Spirit of Truth, help us proclaim in word and deed that we are all part of the one, large, human family, all children of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one Lord and Mother of us all." Amen.