

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Father of Orphans”

Rev. David K. Groth

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“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (Jn. 14:18).

My handy dandy thesaurus of American slang has 118 ways to say you’ve been abandoned, which means it’s one of the things we fear: that a friend will drop us like a hot potato, that our spouse will fly the coop, that a team member will leave us high and dry, that an accountability partner will wash his hands of us, the boss will throw us overboard, or God himself will leave us in the lurch.

Jesus had his own way of talking about abandonment. “I will not leave you as orphans” he says. In the Bible, an orphan was anyone who lost his father. There were far more orphans in the ancient world than there are today. Poor health care, poor disease control, poor nutrition and sanitation, war deaths, death during childbirth, greater differences in age between husbands and wives: all these factors led to the high numbers of orphans in the ancient world. And they were the most vulnerable group, because widows and orphans had no protection, no power, and so there were endless ways in which orphans could be victimized.

The expectations of God are that his people would be different than the surrounding nations. Hebrews who themselves were enslaved in Egypt, should never take advantage of widows and orphans but should be sensitive to their needs. So, God is always advocating for good treatment of widows and orphans as well as foreigners. Psalm 10 calls Yahweh the “helper of the orphan” (v. 16). In Exodus 22, the Lord commands, “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.” Then follows an unveiled threat, “If you do . . . I will certainly hear their cry. My wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword [that is; you will become a casualty of war] and **your** wives will become widows and **your** children fatherless” (v. 22). In Deuteronomy, the Lord instructed Israelite farmers to leave some grain unharvested so that widows and orphans and foreigners could glean the leftovers (Dt. 24:17-22). In addition, tithes of every third year were to provide for widows and orphans (26:12-13). Isaiah 1:17, “Bring justice to the fatherless” and “plead the widow’s cause.” A couple of verses later, the ruling class is condemned as “Companions of thieves. They all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless” (v. 23).

So, when Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans”, there’s some historical content packed in that word.

Our text is part of the discourse given to his disciples immediately after the conclusion of the Last Supper in Jerusalem. The situation is tense. That very night Jesus will be arrested and the next day Jesus will be crucified. He is summing things up, preparing them for separation. The disciples are confused and anxious. “Where are you going? Why can’t we go too? Do you have to go? Isn’t there some way to avoid this?” He consoles them. “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

It is an important part of biblical theology. Genesis 28, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go . . . I will not leave you” (v. 15). Joshua 1, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (v. 5). In a sense, God is adopting a people, the Israelites, as his own. Exodus 6, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” (v. 7). Remember what Moses told Pharaoh? “This is what the LORD says: ‘Israel is my firstborn son . . . Let my son go.’” Despite all the disobedience and wickedness, it remains a strong promise of Scripture, a promise that Jesus repeats here, “I will not leave you as orphans.” Because orphans no longer have a living biological father, Psalm 68 calls Yahweh the “father of orphans” (v. 5).

Paul picks up on this. In Ephesians 1 Paul writes, “In love God predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:4-5). In a sense God took us and adopted us as his own. Romans 8, “We are God’s children now, and if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co—heirs with Christ.”

When an adopted child grows and matures, he or she often wants to know how he was adopted. One good answer is, “We chose you. You weren’t just assigned to us. We picked you. We saw pictures of you, heard about you, read about you and said, ‘that’s the one for us!’”

“You did not choose me” Jesus says in the next chapter, “but I chose you . . .” (Jn. 15:16). The child does not adopt parents; the parents adopt the child. It’s not as if you gave your life over to God. He gave his life over for you and redeemed you on the cross. In Holy Baptism, God loved you first, like a parent adopting a child, long before you ever came around to loving him. And he loves us, not for any attributes we have, but because he loves us. In Isaiah 49, God says, “Even if a mother could forget her child, I will not forget you. I have carved you in the palm of My hand” (v. 15).

Realize God usually chooses to work through his church to be present with us, so that we are not abandoned as orphans. An example: In the ancient world, unwanted children were simply taken outside the city gates and abandoned. Many died of exposure, some were taken in to serve eventually as slaves. The early Christians changed that, they started going around and picking up these abandoned babies.

Adoption was already known in the ancient world, but it was typically done by family or friends of the deceased. The early church fathers changed that and strongly advocated adoption as a way of addressing the needs of all these orphans. Christian couples who were childless were especially encouraged to adopt.

By the way, the first orphanage was the invention of Christians trying to care for so many abandoned children. It was unique to us, and that long history extends even to today. Karen Schempf recently volunteered at a Christian orphanage in Uganda. Years ago, a team from Good Shepherd volunteered at a Christian orphanage in India. I’m currently supporting an orphan in Kenya through our Synod’s mission known as “Christ’s Care for Children”. He’s 13. We write back and forth. His mother is very poor, and unable to care for him . . . but for relatively few American dollars he’s able to go to one of the residential Lutheran schools our synod operates in Kenya. Pastor Schempf has visited these schools and seen them in action and says they are doing very good work. (If you want to know more, talk to me. It’s a great way of extending God’s care and concern to orphans or children at risk.) “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.” Again, God usually works through his church to be present with us.

Another example: Not too long before she died, Mother Teresa was invited to speak at the National Prayer Breakfast. It's an event that is intended to be non-partisan. Speakers seem to make concerted efforts to avoid partisan controversies. At the head table was then President Clinton and his wife Hillary along with Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper. Mother Teresa was 83 years old at the time, hunched over, standing four-feet-six-inches tall. Even with a platform for her to stand on, her head was barely seen above the podium. Though she spoke with a thick accent, she spoke slowly, clearly, powerfully. She talked about serving the poor and dying in the streets of Calcutta, and many were nodding their heads with approval.

But then she started talking about abortion, and the room grew very quiet, and tense. Abortion, she said, is the "direct killing of the innocent child . . . And if we accept that a mother can kill her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill each other?" She went on at length, uncomfortably so for many in that room. She proposed a solution for parents who don't want their unborn child: "Give that child to me" she said. "I want it. I will care for it. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child." She reduced abortion to its most simple terms: death or life, abandonment or love.

One last example of how God refuses to abandon us but uses his church to fulfill this promise. I had a member in St. Louis who was 17 and pregnant. Just a few years earlier I had confirmed her as an 8th grader. The father had since disappeared, wasn't answering any phone calls, and his parents were mute and unhelpful. The daughter was ashamed and afraid to talk to me, but she was doing the right thing. She was having the child and wanting to get him baptized. Grandma called to make the arrangements and was hoping for a quiet, little private baptism. I talked them into doing it as part of regular church service, because it's not just God making promises to the child, not just God adopting the child. A part of baptism is the people of God, taking the child in as one of their own, and if there was ever a time for the people of God to surround a child and mother with love and care, it was now.

So, a few weeks later, down the aisle came the small family. The mom was just a girl, embarrassed, avoiding eye contact with me and with the congregation. She had so many challenges ahead; everyone could see that.

The baptism happened. In the movies, at this point, the church going people would all be looking on the scene with silent contempt. But not those people, not that crowd. The liturgy itself was teaching us how to think about such a baptism. Those familiar words: "In Holy Baptism God the Father has made you a member of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and an heir with us of all the treasures of heaven in the one holy Christian and apostolic Church. We receive you in Jesus' name as our brother in Christ, that *together* we might hear His Word, receive His gifts, and proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light." I was never more grateful to hear the loud, enthusiastic response of the congregation. **"Amen! We welcome you in the name of the Lord."** Many were smiling, and that congregation really leaned in to help, beginning with a very large baby shower.

"I will not leave you as orphans" Jesus said. "I will come to you." Amen.