

God's Offspring

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Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21

I remember when my grandfather, my father's father, died. My grandmother had died more than a decade earlier, and he faced widowhood with extraordinary grace. I remember. It was a Palm Sunday, and my 92-year old grandfather got up, had breakfast, put on his suit, drove to church, sat down in his pew, and died. Just like that. Other than some presumed drama for the church ushers (!), it's how I imagine many of us would like to go. We lived in another town, and I remember when the church called our home to tell us. My father took the call and hung up. Then he simply said: "Now I am an orphan."

Now I am an orphan. I thought it both a poignant thing to say and unexpected. My father, an only child, was almost 60, fully an adult with a spouse and children. His father had lived a full and long life. "Now I am an orphan." It wasn't mine to understand, but certainly mine to remember.

I was far from a psychology major, but I remember at one point learning about something called the "hierarchy of needs," a theory devised in the 1940's by psychologist Abraham Maslow to help understand what motivates people, what makes us happy. (Now I know there are some counselors in the room – please cut me some slack!)

Maslow's theory is often portrayed in a pyramid, from most basic to most complex.

1. *Physiological*, what your body needs, like food and water and sleep
2. *Safety*, security of body, security of resources
3. *Love/belonging*, of friendship and family
4. *Esteem*, self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of and by others
5. *Self-actualization*, morality, creativity, problem-solving

Now remember that I was far from a psychology major, and I certainly wouldn't psychoanalyze my father, but my hunch is that for him, and for all of us, in fact, when we face a traumatic loss, is that our sense of safety and security is shaken – what has always been is no more – and our sense of love and belonging is shaken even more.

The Bible makes two interconnected moves this morning. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul makes a dramatic speech, in which he reminds his non-Christian listeners that they are, regardless of their beliefs, God's offspring. And Jesus, in words we read after Easter

but that were uttered before the crucifixion to comfort his followers, tells us that he will not leave them orphaned.

Two parts of a whole, a rhythm, a cadence. We are not orphaned because we are God's offspring, God's children. And because we are God's children, God's offspring, we will never be orphaned.

- This is a vision and promise intended to comfort followers and listens then, and now.
- It is a promise and vision intended to embolden us, so that we may live life unafraid.
- And it is a vision and promise intended to activate us, because if such good news is meant for us, how can it be meant *only* for us.

Therefore, we are called to share this good news with all, and especially with those who do not believe, or who find it hard to believe, or whose experiences have built barriers – self-constructed or other-constructed – that have gotten in the way of claiming God's love in their own lives.

Paul is building a case for the faith. His own conversion experience has led him to prison and on an odyssey, from community to community. He was forced to flee from the city of Thessalonica and is delivered to Athens, cosmopolitan, diverse, pagan, secular. Paul comes to know the city, and, we are told, is deeply distressed by what he discovers, a city full of idols.

He takes his case to the synagogues, to debate devout Jews. And he takes his case to the marketplace, to the public square, to take on the public philosophers. On one hand, they dismiss him. On another, they are intrigued. They bring him to the Areopagus, a kind of open forum, where Paul makes his case and takes his stand. He notes the religiosity of Athens, but he differentiates their gods – the ones who live in shrines – with his God – who made heaven and earth. He declares that the Athenians have been searching for such a god – the God in whom they live and move and have their being. Search no more, he says. And he told them of God, of Jesus, of the resurrection. Some scoffed. But this claim – that they are the offspring of God, and not an idol made of silver or gold, compelled many, who believed, and followed.

God's offspring, which gives us a deep assurance not only in this world, in this moment, but for all time. God's children. God's offspring. The word implies family, community. And because Paul so clearly and deeply connects this relationship to resurrection, we, too, connect it to back to Jesus' core message.

Last week Jesus told his followers of the place he was going to prepare, God's house, where he would take them. He continues with a reminder: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

This is something like Jesus' commencement address. We are in prom season and commencement season, and hundreds if not more commencement exercises are happening. Speakers – some there because they are accomplished, some there because they are wealthy

and have contributed serious financial resources to a school – do their best to impart wisdom to a bunch of graduates who could hardly be less interested in what they must say.

Nonetheless, we have commencement speakers, and this section of John’s gospel is kind of like that commencement address. How it differs – and the disciples will still be unaware of this – is that *Jesus* is going and they are staying. He is attempting to prepare them up for his death, for that time when he won’t be with them. First a charge: “If you love me, keep my commandments.” The commandments are the roadmap.

But he knows how difficult his absence will be, more than they can know. So he tells them that he will ask God to send an advocate, the Spirit, to be with them.

And then this: “I will not leave you orphaned...In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.” ***I will not leave you orphaned.***

Anna Houseman-Butler writes: “Orphaned. Alone. Without guidance. Without support. Without parents. Without anyone. Mostly, ‘orphaned’ means being so isolated in this world that it feels like no one cares whether or not we live or die. Orphaned. Really depressing. At least, it can be—and terrifying, too. 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.”

She then tells her own story: “I lost my father to cancer when I was eight years old, and so became a ‘half-orphan,’ and thus appropriately half-terrified...I became a child who on the surface was fine, but inside was frantic in my love for my mother, always on the edge of panic where her well-being was concerned, desperately afraid that something would happen to her and I would be completely alone in the world. Anxious fear was a constant childhood companion.”

Houseman-Butler continues: “...if we really look to see, we find orphans of some kind every day...If we really look, we encounter people every day whose primary fear is that they are unlovable, and thus, will always be alone and isolated in the world because the world tells them they are.

People we encounter every day if we choose to see them deal with so much—financial trauma, job loss, physical illness, spiritual desperation, emotional isolation, instability, want, disrupted relationships, abandonment, violence ... the list goes on. Any one of those things not only can make us feel abandoned by the very concept of love, but also unworthy and for sure unlovable by anyone.”

I do not know where you are in your own life journey, your own life narrative. I don’t know where you are in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

“If we really look,” Anna Houseman-Butler says, “we encounter people every day whose primary fear is that they are unlovable...” I don’t know when or where you have found yourself in that affirmation, or where those you know have, your children, your friends, your aging parents. But I bet there has been a moment, a year, a season, where your own lovability has been in question. By others. Even by yourself.

And Paul reminds us that we are God’s children, an unshakable, unbreakable relationship that we’ve done nothing to achieve. And Jesus assures us that even when he is gone, he will not abandon us, leave us in the world. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he says, and it is in that promise that we are called to abide, especially in those moments where we might feel orphaned the most.

We belong to God, our tradition teaches us. We belong to God, and to nothing or no one else. I believe that, even when it feels difficult to believe. I believe that, always imperfect belief.

These lines were scratched into the wall of a German concentration camp in World War II. You will hear them in a lovely setting at this afternoon’s service of choral evensong: : “I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining. /I believe in love even when I don’t feel it. /I believe in God even when He is silent.”

This is not easy faith, but Easter faith. Faith wrought by experience. Faith wrought by a promise and a relationship. Faith that will not orphan or abandon us, but will love us, and love us, and love us still. Amen.