

Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter (John 14:15-21)

The phrase that always strikes me when I read this gospel passage is: “I will not leave you orphaned.” At some point in time, we all need to hear these words. They speak directly to some of our greatest fears and challenges; abandonment, isolation, loneliness, vulnerability. They remind us that we are not destined to walk this earth without an identity or direction. We do not stand alone.

There are seasons of life, moments, when the transitions, changes, and tragedies can leave us feeling as orphans and questions begin. What will I do now? Where do I go? What happens next? Who will love and guide me? Who stands on my side? What will become of me? Those are the orphan’s questions. Those are the questions I imagine running through the heads and hearts of the disciples into gospel.

It is the last supper...Disciples have been fed, feet have been washed, the betrayer has left. It is night, dark, and Jesus announces he is leaving. The one for whom they left everything now says he is leaving. “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” “Show us the Father.” More orphan questions.

Anyone who has ever loved and lost – a spouse, a child, a friend, security, hope – knows the orphan’s questions. We fear becoming orphaned. That fear points to the deeper reality that by ourselves we are not enough. It is not because we are deficient, but because we were never intended or created to be totally self-sufficient. We were never intended to stand alone as individuals. We were created to love and be loved, to live in relationship as persons giving themselves to each other, to dwell, abide, and remain within each other even as the Creator is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Creator. This is what I preach at weddings.

“I will not leave you orphaned” - that is the promise. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, storms, deaths, separations, we have never been and will never be orphaned by God. How strange that must have sounded to the disciples. In the same conversation Jesus tells them that he is leaving and coming - sounds like opposites. It's not something to figure out, but rather a means to see and live in a different way. Jesus would say, “Even though we are apart I will never leave you.”

That is what Jesus has set before us in today’s gospel. The question is whether Jesus, for us, is a past memory or a present reality, a sentimental story that makes us feel good or a living experience that challenges, guides, and nurtures our life.

The Gospel presents us with a call to love, a call that can be, and often is challenging. Jesus tells us that God is a *personal lover*, and offers us not only *love*, but also *friendship*. We are invited to be friends with God! And friendship is always a mutual relationship, which must be accepted and fostered.

According to Jesus the answer to that question is determined by love that is revealed and fulfilled in keeping his commandments. The commandment to love our neighbor as

ourselves, to love our enemies, to love our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Whose feet do we wash and whose feet do we ignore? What are the boundaries of love?

Do we keep the commandments? Is our love growing, expanding, transformative of ourselves and the world? If so, Jesus is probably a present reality for us and we know the fulfillment of his promise that we are not left orphaned. If, however, we are not loving so much, we remain isolated and we relegate ourselves and each other to the orphanages of this world. Jesus' promise is still real and he remains faithful - we simply need to claim it for ourselves.

Keeping the commandments is our access to Jesus' promise that we will not be left orphaned. Keeping the commandments does not make Jesus present to us, it makes us present to the reality of Jesus' presence. The commandments do not earn us His love. They reveal our love for him, a love that originates in his abiding love and presence within us. Every time we expand the boundaries of our love we push back the orphanages of this world creating space within us where our Creator and Jesus make their home.

"I will not leave you orphaned." Over and over, day after day, regardless of what is happening in our lives, that is Jesus' promise. Love with all that you are and that you have, even as our Creator and Jesus love us with all that they are and that they have.

A sailboat got caught in heavy seas. A rogue wave flipped the boat over. The heavy keel righted the boat, but there was severe damage. An SOS brought the Coast Guard. The seas were so rough the Coast Guard ship could not rescue the crew. So, it placed itself as close as it could to the sailboat, protecting the sailboat from the brunt of the 10 foot waves. Finally they made port. **The Holy Spirit plays the same relation to us...taking on the brunt of our troubles. The Spirit not only lives in us but also walks beside us, bringing us safely into port.**

The Spirit is one who will be right next to us on our journey as a companion – to support us so that we seldom fall on our faces. If I find myself in a stressful situation, the Spirit will be waiting patiently for me in the moment. I need to fall back on the promise of Jesus, "I will not leave you orphans." I expect the Holy Spirit to deliver, but this Holy Spirit, this Helper, this Advocate, is not a party crasher. The Spirit waits for an invitation from us to lead us to truth; to guarantee we are God's children; to help us to pray; to offer us hope; to empower us to help other believers; to aid us to be Christ for one another.

The Holy Spirit is love between the Creator and the Son, and the Holy Spirit is love between God and the world. Jesus was not pulling the legs of the apostles when he told them He would not leave them orphans. **And as people of faith, we do not accept that this promise has gone somewhere into limbo.**

The Disciples were working for the Gospel in almost hopeless situations. Yet, none of them showed fear. They were serene, and the Spirit had much to do with that serenity. They had

not forgotten the promise of Jesus. They did not feel like orphans. Their main advocate, the Holy Spirit, stands before them like an unconquerable mountain.
(excerpts from Fr Michael K Marsh & Fr James Gilhooley)

We meet Jesus in different ways. We meet him in the daily contact with one another. And we meet Him through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who “remains with us and will be in us” as we have heard in the Gospel. We also meet the Spirit in prayer.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit – a spiritual 'gift card'

I was Confirmed when I was 13 years of age - that's 57 years ago. Through Jesus, all of us receive these Gifts in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are described in the Book of Isaiah (11:2-3).

- **Wisdom** - helps us recognize the importance of others and the importance of keeping God central in our lives.
- **Understanding** - the ability to comprehend the meaning of God's message.
- **Knowledge** - the ability to think about and explore God's revelation, and also to recognize there are mysteries of faith beyond us.
- **Counsel** - the ability to see the best way to follow God's plan when we have choices that relate to God.
- **Fortitude** - the courage to do what one knows is right.
- **Piety** - helps us pray to God in true devotion.
- **Fear of the Lord** - the feeling of amazement before God, who is all-present, and whose friendship we do not want to lose.

I received those gifts then - or rather a 'spiritual gift card' - to cash in as my spirituality matured in my adulthood. Perhaps it's time for me to remember back to that time, renew my acquaintance with the Holy Spirit and reconnect with these special gifts. How about you?

COME, HOLY SPIRIT, ENKINDLE IN US THE FIRE OF YOUR LOVE! Renew the face of the earth!

Deacon Greg Cecere
May 21, 2017