

ADOPTED, NOT ORPHANED
Acts 17:23-31 and John 14: 15-21
May 17, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

A black bear gives birth to two cubs, with one dying fairly soon after delivery. Then, the mother bear dies, leaving the surviving cub to care for itself. That's how a short documentary film begins. Little black bear, now an orphan. Alone. Unprotected.

The camera frames the baby's eyes, and in them lives fear. Standing in the tall grass, a lion, no doubt looking for its next meal. Then, for whatever reason, the lion turns and disappears back into the wild. Into the picture lumbers a giant male black bear. The baby bear cowers. Then, most likely instinct kicks in and big bear nudges the little bear to follow. Away they plod as if the adoption papers have been signed and sealed.

Papa Bear begins teaching baby the ways of the wild, and a bit of self-care. Like my husband, the bears know that scratching their backs against tree bark, or in the case of my husband, a door frame, will bring relief.

The two become separated one day and the cub wanders to the water's edge. Stopping in his tracks, he spies a lion, maybe the same--who knows—watching, waiting from the other side. Papa Bear is nowhere in sight. And then, lessons learned kick in. Stretched upward on his hind legs, the cub bares his teeth, spreads out his paws, and growls...with the power...of a growler-in-training. The mountain lion...runs away!

The camera swings past the little bear still standing on all fours, and captures the picture that the cub cannot see. Behind him, at full, ferocious height, his sharp, white teeth bared in a snarl, stands Papa Bear. No sound roared from his mouth, and yet, he was there, is there. The cub could not see his adopted Papa, but that did not stop the Papa from standing guard, protecting and caring. The little cub had power available greater than anything he could produce on his own. He was not alone!

You and I are not alone! Oh that all persons could find peace in this truth.

An article entitled *Without* describes being orphaned in this way: Alone. Without guidance. Without support. Without anyone. In a world that searches for new, for exciting, for different, in whatever new ways, surprising adventures, risky business or futures we never imagined,

Jesus told and lived a different story, a story with promise and staying power. Hold fast to this truth, he said: by the presence of the Holy Spirit, abiding...living in you, in us...I will never leave you orphaned. What a needed message as social distancing is taking its toll on mind, body and spirit!

Our God is a God of partnership, even in the midst of change. As a matter of fact, part of going deeper in a relationship requires that we understand life is change, and in change, newness is birthed. For our faith to mature, we are called to embrace the new life that Jesus offers, so much so, that we desire to live and move and be more like him, every changing day.

It is into this world of “new and changing ideas” we find Paul speaking to the Athenians, intelligent folk and religious by their definition, and yet they were drawn to the need to figure out or explain all things. Blind faith was not a priority in their agenda for living. The Stoics among them believed they could capture the divine, put God in a box. The Epicureans thought God was so distant that interest in human life was not even on the radar screen.

Standing between these two factions, we witness the bold apostle uncharacteristically not fueling the fire by taking any sides. He admits his calling is not to win an argument about God’s love in Christ, but to live it. The Holy Spirit who will do the stirring up, so, Paul uses this opportunity to be the conduit through which the Spirit can open the minds and hearts of the people.

Speaking of open hearts and minds, here are some self-reflective questions: How often have I tried to box God in, believing that what I think, say or do is the only way pleasing to God? Or when have I boxed God out, thinking that surely God has no interest, no stake, no need to be involved in my life?

Paul’s message comes at a good time for me. I hope for you, too, because at its heart, it is a message of truth that God is bigger, more present and more powerful than any of us can imagine. We cannot box God in or out! God is fully and deeply invested in our lives, and Paul intends this “bigness of God” to deepen our relationship, not overwhelm us. God came to live among us that we might know our Maker better. Repeatedly Jesus says, if you know me, you know God.

A memorial service ends and someone says, “I wish I had known him/her better.” This response often follows, “but you knew the father, mother, brother, so in many ways you did know him/her. There is an inborn bond between us. We were created with partnership and community in mind. Paul reminds us, we were, all of us, formed and fashioned by the same hands of God and made alive by God’s breath. We were created with a longing to search out God because, in our creator, we live and move and have our very being. And one day, Jesus has already told them, God will have a heavenly homecoming party, with rooms ready.

Knowing what the future holds, should hold great comfort and peace for the disciples, right? For us? Jesus will die and live again. One day we will be alive with Jesus. So, I have to wonder if the thought crossed the minds of the disciples that all they need do with this assurance is wait this life out? Keep their noses clean? Hold on to our faith? Rest in the present because of an old promise about the future. By now people either believe Jesus to be the long-awaited Savior or not. If Jesus could not convince people, what makes them think they can? We can?

The disciples could have announced! At least we are “in!” Saved! We have room reservations! Game over!

Not by a long shot says Jesus and Paul echoes that message. The witness of Jesus has made such a difference in his life that he cannot not live, move and have his being, in Christ, made known so that others can be made different! Why is different so important? Well, Jesus put it very succinctly. After I die, I will live again. For all who believe me to be Lord, they too will live. That folks, is a difference and a promise the world cannot offer!

Jesus has been long gone now. In a changing world, how do keep reaching out? We reach into the words and actions of Jesus, witnessed in holy scripture that do not change! We love the Lord, our God fully and faithfully, and we love each other, not only as we love ourselves, but most importantly, we love as Jesus loves! “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

In Greek grammar, this is not a conditional imperative statement; it is fact. Jesus is saying, keeping my command is love. This is how one commentary explained it: a casual reading of the verse may lead one to think that the promise of an Advocate, a helper, is conditional on a life of obedience. That would be like a mother saying to her young child, “Child, if you stop crying in the middle of the night, if you eat all your food without spilling any on the floor, if you keep your hands off my exquisite figurines and if you pick up all your clothes and toys, then I will give you my love and take care of you.”

Now as we all know mothers are not above doing certain things to get their children’s attention, but not at the expense of using love as a bargaining chip!

Jesus is not warning his disciples that the gift of the Spirit is conditional but rather describing the relationship of the disciples to their Master. Keeping the commandments of God is a natural expression of our love for him. Obedience is the natural response to a loving relationship. For Jesus, loving God fully, faithfully and each other as we have been loved, that is love in its purest form.

This pandemic has given time for self-reflection and I keep saying to myself, the world is upside down right now, as Jesus said it would be in his Sermon on the Mount. So I ask, if Christ’s love does not come out on top when all is said and done, what has changed? What have we learned? What lessons will I learn? What, in me, will change? Will I finally live fully the truth I “say” I embrace, that loving the way Jesus loves is the only way to bring us back into partnership with God and one another. Will I live “that” kind of love?

A little girl came running into the house to her mother, exclaiming: “Mamma, I love you!” The mother replied: “I am so glad you love me. I have had a hard day, and I am so tired. Can we change things up a bit tonight? If you love me so much, will you wash the dishes for me?” The little girl replied: “I do love you, mamma, but not in that way!”

The Greek word used here for love is agape, a kind of radical love that extends to all peoples. So important to Jesus that it is repeated 4 times in verse 21 alone! For Jesus, agape is the highest form of love, and Paul continues to give it feet when he says since God lives in us, live love. Move in love. Be love. Be the love that puts God's good for the whole above good for self.

That is a loaded order that we cannot do alone, not orphaned. Jesus knew it, too. So, on our behalf, we offers these words of presence: I will ask the Father to give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. Forever.

That news is good in a world that is always changing; and yet a world in which the Good News of God's love in Jesus never changes. It is the kind of love that comes with a life-long assignment: reach out to God and others with the kind of love Jesus tells us is pure!

Jesus knew the worries of the disciples and he knows ours. To feel that we are all alone in the world makes us fearful and vulnerable. It causes us, otherwise reasonable and rational humans, to turn away from all that we know to be good and true. If we are not grounded in our faith, the woes of the world can cause us to run away from the very One we are called to run to.

We are living proof of this right now. The fear. Vulnerability. Despair. Reckless decisions. Playing into the hands of the ugliness of the world. Oh how well Jesus knew and knows us. And Paul knew himself.

So for Paul, this is bottom line: Because we believers have an intimate relationship with Jesus, it is up to us to show him to a world that does not know. And that is why this promise of never being orphaned is so very important for us.

Jesus knows that it is so easy to get bogged down in the life of the world around and forget to live fully and faithfully, especially in the face of adversity. In one of life's most painful moments, his death, Jesus speaks not fear, he speaks hope.

Whatever the season of our life, he promises not to run from us, but, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, run to us and with us. Surround us. Before. Beneath. And behind us, especially in those times of fear, panic, grief, when we may not see his presence, but experience the strength of his love and protection for us.

The lions of the world will keep coming at us, and we may want to cower, but if that happens, may we remember the age old promise, in our present and for the future, that we are God's kids, adopted, not orphaned and by the presence of Lord's Spirit within us, we have the power of God, far greater than anything we can produce on our own.

We are not and never will be alone! Amen!