

NEVER ABANDONED

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 66:8–20

John 14:15-21

Many years ago, when I was still a preschooler, I got lost. Our family was shopping at a big department store—Korvette's I think it was—and I became separated from the group. When I realized I was alone, I was terrified, certain that my parents had forgotten me and that I would never see them again.

Have you ever felt abandoned or left behind? Life moves so quickly these days. We're bombarded with information and technological change. Who can keep up with it all? And invariably parents die, children grow up and friends move away. And in these strange new pandemic days, so much that we have taken for granted seems to have slipped away.

For some, the sense of abandonment reflects a kind of cosmic loneliness. It's not caused by the failure of any human relationship; it is not caused by lack of friends, nor is it alleviated by a host of them. It has nothing to do with anything and yet it touches everything, for it is part of the human condition.

This sense of cosmic loneliness has deepened in our time. It is not that we now know the universe to be bigger than the ancients thought; indeed, they grasped it *imaginatively* better than we do, for they slept under a desert sky. It is that we know the earth is not the center of the universe, and never was. This seems to tell us that we are not as important as we once thought we were. Pascal, the great French scientist of the 17th Century, confessed that the silence of space terrified him, and it terrifies us, for it speaks no word by which we might gain a sense of significance, of being acknowledged or cared for. And in a world where—Mr. Trump notwithstanding—scientific truth is supreme, it is hard to enjoy a sense of individual significance when the whole scheme of things of which we are part is said to be a matter of chance or accident. Then it is easy to believe we are nobody's child. A sense of cosmic loneliness makes us feel like orphans in the world.

In this morning's lesson from John's gospel, Jesus addresses our homelessness, not only in a general sense by assuring us of God's providential care, but in a quite precise and specific way. At the end of his earthly life, when the time came for him to leave his disciples, he strengthened their troubled hearts by telling them that he would not leave them orphaned. The word he used can also be translated "abandoned" or "comfortless." Jesus told his disciples that they would not be comfortless for he would not allow them to be orphaned. His answer to our loneliness is as focused as a sunbeam passed through a magnifying glass until it is not only a point of light, but of fire. They would never be orphans, because they were already children of God's heart. They did not need to be afraid, because he would come to them in the Holy Spirit and abide with them and would never leave them.

This is what sociologist Peter Berger calls “a face of reassuring love bending over our terror.”¹ Many a child wakes in the night afraid of the dark and the silence. But one glimpse of his mother’s face and all his fright is gone. He knows he is where he belongs, that he is safe at home.

How may we strengthen this sense of belonging, of being at home in a friendly universe, of being children of a loving God in our Father’s world?

First, by noticing that *love makes the center*. That is another way of saying that bigger is not always better; size and value are not directly related; one does not depend on the other. Tall people are not of more value than short people or people of average height. Why, then, should the size of the universe make us feel insignificant? Maybe the universe is enormous because only a limitless universe is great enough for our limitless imagination. If the dimensions of it were smaller it would smother us. If the choice is between being dwarfed and being smothered, then I would prefer to feel dwarfed.

And in the ways count most, we *are* the center of the universe, for the love of God that we experience and share with others makes the center however big it is, and however tiny we are. I discovered the truth of this when my daughter Ellie was just a toddler. We lived in New York City then, and the playground across the street from our apartment building in Brooklyn Heights overlooked the vast expanse of New York harbor and the towering skyline of Manhattan. Ellie would run from slide to swing to sandbox and wherever she went, I watched her. Just a tiny girl in that immense and breath-taking place, but she was the center of it. My love made her so. The whole world revolved around her. This enormous world was for that small child to breathe and see and explore. Love makes the center.

The Psalmist, you remember, knew about the size of the universe, and was elevated, not diminished, by the thought. His response to it was not fear and inferiority but reverence and adoration. He did not turn in on himself with a deepening sense of insignificance. He turned to God and was lost in wonder, love and praise:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than [the angels],
and crowned them with glory and honor.²...

Indeed, the scriptures discovered the divine goodness not only in a vast universe, but in a crystal of snow. The world is charged with the grandeur of God, and the snow crystal reveals God’s infinite care for detail. Have you noticed, indeed, that the language of faith owes everything to the greatness of the natural world? How could we think of the majesty of God if we had never seen the mountains; and how could we speak of the eternal if we never had sight of sea or sky? Love makes the center, and when it does, the center knows that Love made the whole thing.

¹ Peter I. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 70.

² Psalm 8:3-5.

What's more, we know that we are not orphans because we are unconditionally loved. The love that saves us from the loneliness of being orphans is the unconditional love that others have for us. It is best when it comes to meet us in our parents' love, for then it comes soonest and can shape for ever the way we see the world. It enables us to take it in trust, not fear, believing the goodness that is at the heart of things. We may meet it later in husband or wife or dear friend; but by that time, if it has been lacking in childhood, our loneliness may be profound and our fears pervasive.

It is being unconditionally loved that makes us feel at home. When love is unconditional, we don't have to deserve it. It is freely given. It is ours at the beginning, not because we have earned it, but because we are loved. We sometimes find it difficult to believe that God loves us before we have done anything to deserve it; yet that is how we love our children. God's undeserved love may move us to marvel at it, but there is nothing mysterious about it. Our children don't have to earn our love, or deserve it; it isn't something they receive because they're good. They are the children of our heart, and we love them.

And unconditional love is not measured out in limited amounts in a "nicely calculated less or more." That is why, as the great preacher Maurice Boyd suggests, that we are mistaken when we say that God loves God's children equally, as though each received the same carefully measured amount, rather like receiving pieces of pie that are all the same size. Unconditional love has no limits. It means that each of God's children receives all the love God has to give, and that it is lavished upon them unreservedly. Once again, that is how we love our children. When we have one child, that child receives all the love we have. And when we have two, each of them receives all the love we have. All of it can be given to each of our children, however many we have. As the Irish say, "they bring their own love with them." Indeed they do. And in this, our love for them is like God's love for us. It has no limit. Each of us receives all God's love. God loves you as if you were the only person in the world.

And finally, let us observe that we know we are not orphans because we are loved eternally. Without this knowledge, none of the rest is much good. If we are not loved eternally, then even the deepest love fails us. What sort of love is it that loves us unconditionally, for a while? Notice that Jesus comforts and reassures his disciples by promising that his love will reach them from the other side. Anything else would have been useless, because his death was imminent. He would not allow them to be forlorn, for he would come to them. What he promised was continuing friendship with an achieved immortality. To know the love of Jesus, and to dwell in it, is to live already in a love that has shown itself stronger than death.

In this way God ends our loneliness, our sense of being orphans, for no human love, however strong, can make that promise. We love our dear ones so much that the thought of losing them is unendurable. But we do lose them, and we endure it, for while we desire their immortality, we cannot achieve it. We love them, but they die however much we love them, and with broken hearts we put them into the ground. God's love is better. To be loved by God is to be loved by the Eternal, and eternal love loves eternally. It not only wishes immortal life for the beloved, it bestows it. If God loves us eternally, then eternal life is ours.

That is why our belief in immortal life is as strong as our belief in God, and not stronger. It does not stand by itself in a statement of faith or creed; it is a consequence of all the rest. Belief in “the life everlasting” is the last statement in the Apostles’ Creed because it can be affirmed only if the earlier articles of faith are true, beginning with, “I believe in God, the Father almighty.” It does not stand by itself; we can believe in immortal life only because we believe in the love God has for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Christian hope is the love of God.

We are assured by this that we are loved eternally by those whom we “have loved long since and lost awhile.” Our love follows our dear ones into the Eternal world. And their love for us continues, but on another shore and in a greater light. And what an enormous comfort it is. The love of our parents who have died surrounds us still. We dwell in it, now that they are in Heaven, as once we dwelled in it when they were on earth. Indeed, even more so; and it is this “even more so” that can save us from the burdens of regret we sometimes carry long after our loved one are gone: regrets over things we said or did that we wish we hadn’t and regrets over things we might have said or done but never did. Our earthly relationships are human, and therefore always imperfect. But Heaven is the perfection of love. Our loved ones who wait for us there forgive us more completely than ever they could have here, for they know how much they themselves have been forgiven. They are *not* beyond our reach, and we are not beyond theirs. We shall never be strangers in Paradise, for Paradise means belonging, and we belong where we are deeply loved. That is why Christians have spoken so often of dying as “going home.” The love of our dear ones not only surrounds us on our earthly pilgrimage; it waits to receive us and will welcome us home.

We are not orphans! For those who loved us love us still. And if, unhappily, no such love ever reached us from another human being, it is Christ’s promise that he will not allow us to be orphaned, for he loves us like that. Don’t be afraid. You are God’s child in your Father’s world. He will uphold you with His power and keep you safe in His love. He will whisper in the deep night that all is well. He will bring you at last to the Land of Promise, to The Country of the Great King.

Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning,
is now,
and ever shall be,
world without end.
Amen.