

I Will Not Leave You Orphaned

By: Meagan McLaughlin

May 17, 2020. What does it look like to embody the unity of the Spirit in this time of physical separation? What does the commandment of love, for God and one another, look like in this time of COVID-19? Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on these questions, and Jesus' promise not to leave us orphaned, in this time of uncertainty.

Readings: [John 14:15-21](#), [1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

*** Transcript ***

By now, you probably know that I have a thing for cats. Over the last few weeks, I've had the joy of watching over Facebook as a colleague who lives in Virginia has been raising five tiny kittens whose mother disappeared and has not been found. Weighing in at less than a pound when they were rescued, they needed help with absolutely everything. Their eyes still closed, and their little legs still too weak to support even their bitty weight, they started their time in foster care in a box just big enough for them. They were fed with eyedroppers at first, as they couldn't even handle even a bottle yet. They needed to be cleaned from head to tail, as their mother would have done frequently. As they have gained strength, their space has been expanded to include room to play, a designated litter box, and an increasing number of toys. In the last week, there have been pictures and video of these fur babies, now all over a pound, eyes wide open, exploring not just a box but a whole room, hungrily inhaling solid wet food, pulling on strings and leaping back when the string responds, and pouncing on toys, and one another, and their parents' hands and feet. They still wobble as they navigate their new surroundings, and they return frequently to the safety of their protected habitat to rest and regroup, guided by the nurturing hands and hearts of their caregivers. Their mother may have disappeared, but they have not been abandoned.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus told his disciples. And although we are now in the Easter season, this promise came before that — before Jesus had even been arrested, before his crucifixion and death, before the disciples discovered the empty tomb. Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples for what was to come, letting them know that everything was about to change, that he was going to be arrested and die, that their whole world as they knew it was about to fall apart, that they would in fact betray him — and yet, they would not be alone.

"I will not leave you orphaned." In our own time of uncertainty, this is so comforting to hear! And there is so much in Jesus' counsel that can guide us as we navigate our new world, a world changed by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

"I will not leave you orphaned." Jesus promises that the Spirit of truth will be with us, that God will be present around and before and within us, bringing us together. And, Jesus says that the world will not see the truth, but that the disciples will. I hear this and can't help but echo Pilate's question to Jesus: "What is truth?" How, in the chaos of this broken world, can we see where we are to go, what we are to do, how we are to be church in the midst of it all?

Our eyes are being opened, Christ Lutheran family, in this time when everything we have been used to has been altered. Our routines have been disrupted, the easy sense of inherent safety as we navigate the world undermined. Any illusion that "church" means the building in which we worship has been exposed. Because right in this moment, we're separated from our building, and physically separated

from one another. And yet the truth of what it means to be the church is perhaps more accessible to us than ever. Jesus talks about keeping the commandment of love, for God and one another, as a mark of God's people. It is the greatest commandment, one by which we will be known as the church. What does that look like, in this time of COVID-19? How can we be the church, by embodying love — for one another, for God, and for the world around us?

Jesus says the Spirit brings us together, with one another and with God. Jesus abides in us; we abide in God. No matter what forces may try to pull us apart, we are all human, children of God, and in our humanity we are connected. The systems of this world are designed to separate us, put us into categories based on so many things: race and ethnicity, gender and orientation, socio-economic status, language, the list goes on. This pandemic experience can widen the gap, and all we have to do is look at a map of cases of COVID-19 in the St. Louis area to know that the Delmar Divide is real — this virus, while devastating to all of us, is particularly damaging to people of color, and people living in poverty, many of whom do not have adequate sick leave and access to health care.

What does it look like to embody the unity of the Spirit in this time of physical separation? Especially in times like this, being the church means noticing when people are left out, oppressed, and excluded, and claiming the love of God that surrounds and embraces and fills everything that is, speaking the truth that we are all one and working actively for a world where all people have what they need. With eyes that are opened, we can see our neighbors living this out every day. Webster-Rock Hill Ministries is there each day, providing food and other necessities for those who need them. Our schools are continuing to provide meals for their students, so no one will go hungry while the buildings are closed. Room at the Inn continues to provide shelter for families without housing, in new ways to keep everyone safe and healthy. Advocates around the city are calling attention to the injustices that exist in our prisons, housing, and health care, and immigration systems, injustices that are particularly poignant as we all navigate a public health crisis like none we have ever lived through.

Our reading from 1 Peter today tells us to be ready. Be ready to walk into the world as it is, and embody something different. Stand face to face with separation, and fear, and anxiety, and violence, and be the church — in our families, our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods — to witness the love of God, and see God's creation and our fellow humans, and ourselves, in the light of God's love.

“I will not leave you orphaned.” Just as those tiny kittens have so much yet to learn about the world around them, for us, too, much is yet unknown. And, the Spirit of love, of truth, of hope, is with us, and will be, guiding us as we find our way forward. In our weariness, anxiety, fear, grief, and yes, excitement and joy as we discover new ways of doing ministry together, we can rest assured that we have not been abandoned. God is with us, and we are in this together.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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