

## **"I Will Not Leave You Orphaned"**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

Dedication Sunday

November 16, 2025

*<sup>15</sup>"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

*<sup>18</sup>"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup>In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup>On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup>They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."*  
(John 14:15-21)

For good reasons, this part of John's gospel is known as the "Farewell Discourse." The disciples do not know it, but that very night Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, and the next day he will be executed. The words we read this morning are the heart of Jesus' final message to his disciples. It is not only his Last Supper. It is also his last sermon... his last lesson... his last chance to gather with the people who have become his beloved family.

The scholar and preacher Fred Craddock describes the spirit of these moments with a very relatable metaphor. He compares the disciples hearing this message to children playing on the floor in the den. They look up to see their parents coming down the stairs. Dad is in a blazer and tie. Mom is in a pretty dress. When the parents go to the hall closet and start putting on coats and hats, the kids know exactly what is going on. Their parents are going out. The kids have three very pressing questions:

- Where are you going?
- Can we go?
- Who will stay here with us?<sup>1</sup>

Those are the questions that Jesus, as a loving divine parent, tries to answer. The answers he gives are lofty and difficult to grasp, but one thing is sure. Jesus wants his followers to understand that everything will be OK. Yes, he is leaving, but they will not be abandoned. They will not be alone. "*Do not let your hearts be troubled,*" Jesus says. "*I will not leave you orphaned... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*"

It is hard to imagine a person who is more vulnerable than an orphan. A child, unequipped to navigate the demands and dangers of the world, left to fend for themselves. This is why the Old Testament law set them apart for very special protection and care. The people of God were commanded to care for widows, orphans, and traveling aliens, because their circumstances left them essentially helpless, defenseless, without anyone to defend them. The plight of an orphan melts even the coldest heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 106.



One group in North Carolina has a special name for people whose hearts are moved to protect and defend the weakest of the weak. They call them “Hope Heroes.” The organization known as the Children’s Hope Alliance was born in 2014, but its roots in western North Carolina are much older. The Barium Springs Home for Children was founded in 1891 as a place where poor, orphaned children could go for food, shelter, and a safe place they could call home. Some years later, in 1914, another orphanage opened its doors in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain. It’s steady motto was to serve “The Child Now Before Us.” The children who came to their doorstep were “were often malnourished, [and] infested with lice. Some had never had a bath in their lives except for in the creek.” Both of these orphanages -- Barium Springs and the Grandfather Home -- were envisioned, funded, and lovingly sustained through the decades by faithful and generous Presbyterians. After more than a century of service, they came together in 2014 to form the Children’s Hope Alliance so they could provide even better service to the children in their care.

Back in the day, Richard McKenzie was one of those children. He was left at Barium Springs at the age of 10 by his aunts. His abusive father had abandoned the family. His mother, a severe alcoholic, committed suicide soon after. The story that brought him to the orphanage was a tragic one, but Richard looks back on his childhood at Barium Springs with genuine fondness. He is grateful for the education and encouragement he received there, for the values and work ethic instilled in him there, and for the steady comfort of routine and structure – something that every child needs -- and something he had never had before he arrived at his new home.

Today, Richard McKenzie is a professor in the Graduate School of Management at the University of California at Irvine. He credits much of his personal and professional success to two guiding principles that were ingrained in him at Barium Springs. Number one: “You, not your circumstances, will determine where you go.”

And number two: “You should leave this world a better place than you found it. This is your obligation. No excuses.”<sup>2</sup>

Max McIntosh, a children’s counselor and therapist for the Children’s Hope Alliance, is convinced that this kind of steady presence and consistent care makes all the difference in the life of a child. And it can come from any caring, responsible adult. She learned this lesson in a very personal way. As a child, she and her brother suffered from severe neglect and abuse by their parents. She recalls one very vivid memory. “[I was] sitting outside and crying,” she says, “because there was no one.”

“This is it,” she thought to herself. “I have nobody. There is no one who cares about me. There is no one who will help me. There is no one who will protect me. I’m not sure I’ll live through this.” And then she bent over and ate some dandelions and grass, because she hadn’t eaten that day.

Max says that there was one thing that saved her, one thing that made all the difference. A few neighbors began to notice what was going on. If she missed the bus, they made sure she had a ride to school. If she looked hungry, they would find a way to ask, without any judgment, “Hey, do you want a snack?”

Those simple acts of kindness helped Max realize that she was not really alone. “Having people who like you and approve of you and cheer you on and want you to do well made

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn Bonker, “An Orphan’s Life,” Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-07-28-ls-28747-story.html>, July 28, 1996.

me believe that life can be better,” she says. “I had these people who helped me. I had these positive experiences.

Today, as a counselor for orphaned and vulnerable children, her advice to others is simple. “You just have to pay attention... paying attention, and being kind, is what can help change things.”<sup>3</sup>

When I hear these farewell words of Christ, these are the kinds of fears and pains that come to my mind. Jesus was leaving, and that prospect was terrifying to the disciples. All of the sudden, they were facing the very real prospect of being truly alone in the world. And I do think that, deep down, this is something we all fear. It is the same fear that Max felt as a little girl. The fear that we have nobody, that there is no one who cares about us, no one to help us, no one to protect us.

But the promise of God is that we are never truly alone – that no matter what happens, we never will be truly alone. “*I will be with you, even to the end of the age,*” Jesus says. But we are also given the simple but powerful gift of people – kind people, thoughtful people, Hope Heroes who find small but important ways to remind us that we are not alone. This is the bedrock upon which we stand... the foundation that generations before have handed to us... the voice of the living God who says, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled... I will not leave you orphaned... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*”

***Amen.***

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<sup>3</sup> “Hope Heroes” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYUvb66nS74>