

“A Family Thing”

I.

I love my parents, very much, but I may never forgive them for the week I spent at Bible camp. It was the summer of 1986 and I was ten years old when my parents decided it would be great fun to drag me and my little sister 90 miles north of Albany for a week at Word of Life Bible Camp. These people put the “fun” in fundamentalism. Imagine a week of traditional summer camp activities—archery, arts and crafts, swimming at the lake, horseback riding—paired with Bible memorization, obscenely long church services, and biblically-based puppet theatre. Welcome to Word of Life!¹

It was weird—but I had expected it to be weird. What I did not expect—what really caught me by surprise—was my own deep loneliness. Even at the age of ten—maybe especially at the age of ten—I liked to think of myself as sophisticated and mature and oh so weary of the world. But, to tell the truth, I was a pretty sheltered kid. And my week at Word of Life was the first I ever spent apart from my parents. So on about the second day of camp, to my own great shock, I discovered that I missed them. Badly. And all at once, everything was wrong. The camp activities seemed painfully stupid, the food abysmal, the camp staff borderline criminals. I hated everyone and everything, fiercely. I felt alone, helpless, orphaned.

I wish I could say that was the last time I ever felt that way, but I think you and I both know that is not the case. I have had that feeling over and over again: Watching that same set of parents drive off and leave me behind for my first night of college. Departing the safe confines of seminary life for my first real job, in a savage foreign land called Long Island. Taking my newborn baby home from the hospital and realizing that we can’t just page the nurse whenever we have a question.

Alone? Helpless? Been there, done that. And so have you. We may not have much in common, but we have all been there. To be human is to feel, at least from time to time, like an orphan.

II.

Jesus’ disciples know that feeling all too well. Today’s text comes out of a time when they must feel terribly alone, as their whole world comes crashing down. It is Jesus’ final night with his closest followers. In just a few short hours he will be betrayed, arrested on trumped-up charges, subject to a sham trial and executed for no good reason. Tonight, they know the end is near.

For now, they sit together at table –the rabbi and his disciples, a condemned man having his final meal. This is Jesus’ last chance to tell the disciples the things they will need to know; his last chance to prepare them for life without him. And, at least in John’s Gospel, Jesus takes full advantage –his Farewell Discourse fills three entire chapters. Today’s text offers us just a little snippet of Jesus’ Last Will and Testament.

Jesus says a lot of things to his followers, but that one line really grabs me: *‘I will not leave you orphaned.’* Isn’t that exactly how they must feel? Like orphans?² For years now they have followed Jesus –they went where he went, they did what he did, he spoke and they listened. But now what? What will happen when Jesus is gone? When they have to stand on their own two feet, try to keep this thing going on their own? Abandoned, alone, helpless. How can they ever carry on without him?

Well, Jesus says, you may not have me, but you will not be alone. *‘I will not leave you orphaned. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.’* This is the promise of Pentecost. Another one is coming –the Advocate, the Counselor, God present in the power of the Holy Spirit. They may not have Jesus, but they will not be alone. God will be with them. God will dwell among them. And they will be astonished at the things that God will do. They *will* keep Christ’s commandments. They *will* love one another.³ The Spirit will shape them into a people who *can* keep this thing going; who *will* be able to carry on the work of Christ. And that same Spirit will drive them out –out into a world yearning for a word from God, out across the dividing lines of race and color and creed, out to spread the good news of God’s love to every last person. They will not be left to their own devices. They will not be thrown back on their own resources. They will not have to feel abandoned, helpless, alone.

God will be with them, and God will give them the good gift of each other. *‘I will not leave you orphaned.’*

III.

So, if we are not orphans, what are we? Family. That is why we are here. That is what church is all about. It is a family thing. I didn’t choose you and you did not choose me, but guess what? God chose us for each other. Our lives are bound together, intertwined in ways we cannot begin to understand. We may not always agree with each other. We may not even like each other. But in the strange providence of God, we are stuck with each other. If I want to get to God, I have to go through you. It’s a family thing.

I learned this lesson in the last place I would have expected –the church I grew up in, the Christian and Missionary Alliance church of Williamsburg, Pennsylvania. It is a church utterly unlike Plymouth Church: a conservative, evangelical congregation, committed to converting the heathen, defending the

literal interpretation of the Bible and upholding so-called family values. I have come a long long way from there. I went off to seminary and discovered all these incredibly rich and profound theological debates about the divinity of Christ. The divinity of Christ? Back in my home church they are still debating the humanity of women.⁴ Clearly, I have come a long way from there.

I used to worry what they thought about me. Going back for a visit would really stress me out. I wondered what they would make of me, my crazy liberal church and my ordained minister wife. (They don't ordain women). I used to feel sick about it. But I don't worry about that anymore. I know better. Because every time that I have gone back to see them—every single time—they have welcomed me and my family with open arms. They pray for us. They ask God to bless us and our ministry —*both* of our ministries. They have even asked Mary Beth to lead worship.

My old church and I don't agree about...well, anything. But they still love me. They love me anyway.

I guess it's just a family thing.

IV.

"I will not leave you orphaned." That is what Jesus said. And he has been as good as his word. I often feel lonely, anxious and afraid. I don't always know where to turn or what I am supposed to do. But I am so glad that I don't have to feel like an orphan this morning. God loves me enough to give me the church. God gives me the good gift of you. Whenever I show up here, you have to take me in. Whenever I mess up, you have to forgive me. Whenever I feel discouraged and down, you lift my spirits and get me back on track. Whenever I forget that I am a beloved and precious child of God, when I can't seem to remember who I am and to whom I belong, you are here to remind me, over and over again.

You're the village that is helping to raise my child, the school where I have learned everything in life that truly matters, the hospital where I have been made well and the hospice where I have been able to let my loved ones go.

I haven't been left as an orphan. I have a family today. I don't know what I would do without you. Thank God I will never have to find out.

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Notes

¹For a more scholarly account of life at Word of Life, see Randall Balmer's account of his summers at the same camp ("Adirondack Fundamentalism") in *Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory: A Journey Into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.92-108.

² See the discussion of *orphanus* in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume V. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp.487-488.

³ Richard Burridge is quite right to read these verses, not as conditional imperatives but as future indicatives. The disciples will keep Christ's commandments because the Spirit will dwell among them. See his comments in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. Roger E. Van Harn, Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.555-559.

⁴ I stole this joke from the Rev. Dr. Donovan McAbee of Woodmont Christian Church in Nashville, TN. To the best of my recollection, he told a version of this joke in my hearing when we were both students at Princeton Theological Seminary, in late 2001 or early 2002. I can only hope I delivered it half as effectively as he did.