

“What are you waiting for? Orphans.”
delivered Sunday, May 29, 2011
by Rev. David Jones, associate pastor for youth and their families
Shandon Presbyterian Church

John 14: 15-21

On May 21st, a little over a week ago, Robert Fitzpatrick was surrounded by belligerent and accusatory detractors because the rapture did not occur that day as he had proclaimed it would. According to the Internet news aggregator Huffington Post, Fitzpatrick had spent his entire life savings of about \$140,000 buying subway placards and billboards in New York City as he along with many others prepared for the end of world as we know it. Fitzpatrick seemed bewildered and confused about why his calculations and efforts to understand his God were inaccurate as he stood in the middle of a crowd and made an effort to answer questions from local news organizations, Internet bloggers and others who seemed to revel in his downfall.

What does it feel like to be orphaned?

It is easy to laugh off the rapture – especially since it did not happen. The day after the predicted rapture did not occur, reactionary billboards went up in Greensboro, N.C., that said simply “That was awkward along with a quote from Matthew 24 saying *no one knows the day nor the hour.*”

One of our own congregation members was out walking the River Walk with a friend the other morning when she came upon a pair of green bicycle shorts on the sidewalk. This kind of thing happens from time to time – people jump in to go swimming and forget to take all of their clothes with them when they go home. But about 45 minutes later, as they were heading back to their car to go home, they passed those same green shorts, and someone had come along with a piece of chalk and had written “raptured” with an arrow pointing to the shorts.

Considering the word “rapture” never appears in the book of Revelation, much less the entire Old and New Testament combined, it is easy to dismiss claims that it will come on a specific day and time. While I’m concerned about our tendency to make fun of someone who is misled by his understanding of scripture and our anger when we feel misled, I’m more concerned about how we, as Christians, should react to our neighbor.

In our scripture reading today, we hear a snippet from Jesus’ farewell discourse at the Last Supper – specifically a promise to the disciples that He is coming to them and will not leave them orphaned (John 14:18). Jesus tells His disciples that although He will soon pass from this world, they will not be abandoned. In fact, the father is sending them another advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit whom the world cannot receive. You will not be orphaned, for the spirit of the Lord, who is in me and whom I myself am in will dwell in you and dwell among you.

Often when people discuss this scripture they delve into the nuanced meaning of the word *parakletos* which is what Jesus calls the Holy Spirit. *Parakletos* comes from ancient Greek courts and is most often translated “advocate,” however it can mean other things such as counselor, comforter, nursemaid, etc. ...

Well, I’m not so interested in that word today. I’m much more interested in what Jesus means by the word “orphaned” in verse 18.

We are used to associating the word “orphan” with the first definition in the dictionary, which is “a child who has lost one or more commonly both parents.” A picture in our minds of *Oliver Twist* or *Little Orphan Annie* comes to mind. Begging for more gruel and singing about a “hard knock life” is what we conjure up. Often we make the leap from orphanages from our past to their current manifestation as group homes where children who are in need live and often receive donations and well wishes from us. These are appropriate images, but they are only a beginning. Our Bible talks about caring for the orphan throughout the Old Testament referring specifically to the Hebrew mandate to care for the widow and the orphan – those who have lost the one who provided for their earthly needs. Jesus uses this strong understanding of caring for the abandoned child in this particular section of John’s gospel. Jesus is making it very clear that although now – in the moments before His death – they are feeling abandoned by their Lord, He will not orphan them.

I think that Jesus made the orphan connection because it was easy for His disciples to grasp the need to help innocent and helpless children. But for us today, I want to look at the third meaning of orphan in our English dictionary. A person or thing that is without protective affiliation or sponsorship; as an adjective, the meaning is not authorized, supported or funded, not a part of a system, isolated.

What does an adult orphan look like?

Friends, in our passage from John, Jesus makes it very clear that for us to truly love Him, we must have His commands and keep them (John 14:21) and in John that means to do two things explicitly: love God and then to love our neighbor as ourselves. Now I do not believe that we can earn grace, I believe that God’s love is unearned and offered to all, not equally but unjustifiably. So I don’t think that Jesus is saying you have to earn His love. What I believe Jesus to be saying is that if you are truly a follower of His, if you truly know Him and wish to model your life after His, then you will follow His commandments. Basically, if you love Jesus, you better act like it.

So when Jesus says He will come to us, when He says He will not orphan us but He will send the Holy Spirit – the comforter and counselor – an advocate for us, He is letting us know that we ought to do the same for others. Jesus is letting the disciples know and He is letting us know that we have to walk the walk. He will not abandon us, and we must not abandon those who might otherwise be orphaned.

Being an orphan is losing your job, feeling like you have failed your family and being unsure how the mortgage will be paid. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Being an orphan is finding yourself in the midst of a divorce that will hurt your children as much or more than it has already hurt you. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Being an orphan is burying your child long before you ever expected. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Being an orphan is finding yourself in the midst of depression. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Being an orphan is wrecking your parents' car and being terrified of the consequences. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Being an orphan is being scared to death of becoming a new parent. But Jesus says He will not orphan you.

Children without parents are not the only orphans that we as Christians are called to love.

The love of Christ has this strange way of transforming people into conduits of grace and light to a world shrouded in pain and darkness. Jesus promises not to leave us orphaned, but to send the Holy Spirit to comfort and counsel us. Jesus died on the cross, and instead of a human who walks the earth, in His place is the transcendent spirit of the living god that is in all of us, crying out for us to achieve our potential and show the world just what it looks like to be loved.

I read an account of a 9-month-old Chinese orphan girl named Lili who was adopted by two American parents. The story is told by an adoptive medicine specialist out of New York City.

Lili's parents Jack and Sue took their newly adopted daughter in their arms less than a day after they arrived in China. She had traveled with eight other little girls and three orphanage workers through the countryside in a tiny van reeking of gasoline fumes for more than eight hours. It was mid-winter and the air was cold, damp and heavy with coal-burning dust. The babies had not been fed during the trip, but at least their many layers of colorful clothes had kept them warm. Their little red, chafed cheeks were the only tip off that they had been exposed to the cold winter air.

One by one the babies were brought into the hotel lobby, and the parents circulated tentatively amongst the orphanage workers looking for their daughters. Lili's father, Jack knew her immediately from the tiny picture he had carried with him for the past six weeks, and he pointed to her saying, "That one's mine!" Jack pried Lili free from her caretaker, and he pulled her close to his chest. He could not feel her body because of all the layers, but he could imagine what she would feel like. Lili's mom, Sue, came close to father and daughter and pressed her lips gently on

Lili's now dry, fiery red, eczematous cheeks. Her hair was glued wet to her shiny brow, and she obviously had a bad cold. Mucous oozed from her tiny nostrils and she was coughing in a ricochet pattern. Though her cheeks appeared plump, her tiny facial features occupied only a small part of her face. Her forehead appeared to take up her entire face, and her hairline was that of a balding middle-aged man. It looked like her head had been partially shaven. Her eyes were fixated on her fingers. She did not look at Jack or Sue at all. She moved her tiny hands like fans close to her face, staring at the fingers and moving them in a rhythmic fashion over and over again. The fingers were so close to her face that both parents thought that she might be have difficulty seeing.

Within minutes, all of the babies were distributed to their respective parents, and they all went to their hotel rooms to get acquainted with their new daughters. Jack and Sue took Lili upstairs, and they immediately undressed her and laid her on their bed. She was so tiny that they were shocked. Her legs were spindly and her ribs could be seen moving as she breathed. Her buttocks were wasted. She thrashed her head from side to side rapidly, and she continued to stare at her hands. She never once looked at her parents. Her belly appeared huge compared to the rest of her. The stomach extended beyond her emaciated body, and it was so distended that it made her pigmented belly button stick up about a half inch. Jack used a wet washcloth and some soap to clean her skin. He cleaned her crusty, mucousy nose and he removed some residual stool from her genital area. She tolerated the sponge bath with continued head thrashing and intense hand inspections.

When the officials told the parents, "These baby girls are yours now," Jack and Sue felt alone and frightened. They did not feel like parents. The other babies were screaming, feeding, and one child had even smiled once according to her parents. Jack and Sue began to get anxious. Lili was not like the rest.

She had malnutrition, rickets, bronchiolitis, an ear infection, and she was defended and depressed.

After two full days of intensive care administered by new parents with help from a phone call to a New York City doctor, Lili finally began to get better.

Three days later and she had smiled about an hour before they phoned me. She was no longer staring and looking through them. Jack was convinced that she had looked him straight in the eye when he fed her a few hours before. She was actually enjoying her baths and slapping the water in the tub. On the 10th day, they called from the White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou. She was taking 6-8 ounces of hot formula at a time and she was smiling regularly. She was sleeping through the night and taking one nap a day. Her cough was better, and her left ear wasn't draining anymore. The fever had broken after two days of antibiotics. They had not seen her arch her back for days; they couldn't remember when it had stopped. She still thrashed her head from side to side, especially when she appeared frustrated and certainly just before going off to sleep. They went home on the 14th day of the trip, and I called them the day after they arrived home. They were elated to be home, and Lili had smiled endlessly at the airport when she met both sets of grandparents.

Jesus says that He will come to us, He will not orphan us. Even when we are broken and have little chance of being made whole again, Jesus, like Lili's adopted parents, comes to us, showing us what it is to be loved for no other reason than we have been born. Like Jack and Sue, the Holy Spirit is sent to remind us that we are loved. Jesus sends the Spirit to wipe the gunk out of our eyes, check on our ear infections and hold us close when we cry.

Being an orphan is not about losing your parents, being an orphan is about feeling alone in the world. Feeling as if you have no one to turn to, no one to hug you, no one to comfort you in the midst of life's distress.

Let us not leave the Robert Fitzpatrick's or the jobless, or the homeless, or the divorced, or the estranged, or the terrified or the innocent of the world orphaned by their own mistakes. Let us remind others by our actions and by our hearts that we are not alone.

AMEN.