

## No Longer Orphans

Acts 17:22-31 & John 14:15-21  
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church  
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616  
May 21, 2017 — 6th Sunday of Easter  
Pastor Tom Thews

### Acts 17:22-31 (NIV)

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

<sup>29</sup> “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

### John 14:15-21 (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will obey what I command. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — <sup>17</sup> the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.

<sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup> Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. <sup>21</sup> Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”

## No Longer Orphans

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Hayner was the president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. Dr. Hayner told a story about a young teacher he met several years ago in Uganda by the name of Christine Nakalema.

Christine grew up in a rural village in Bokeka. When she was five years old, and her sister Harriet was seven, and her little brother was four, their parents both died within three months of each other of AIDS. The three siblings lived for nearly two years on their own. They had no parents and only the food they could scavenge from the fertile Ugandan countryside. There was no one to care for them. Often they huddled in the corner of their mud hut because their roof couldn't hold out the rain.

Why wasn't there anyone to care for them? It was because most of the adults in their rural area had died of AIDS too. The lives of these three children reeked of a desperation that you and I cannot even imagine. But, eventually, they were found by a local priest who was helping World Vision, an international relief organization, to make a census of the orphaned children in that district.

About this same time, something quite dramatic happened, though at the time it seemed insignificant. Far away in Australia, a young teacher, named Julie Ann DeBattista, saw a World Vision ad on TV and decided that she would use a little of her salary each month to sponsor a child in need. It was a small step of faith by Julie Ann that would have large results. She was matched by World Vision with Christine Nakalema in Uganda.

With the help of donors like Julie Ann, World Vision built those three children a new home, ensured that there was enough food and clothes, and paid for their school fees. When Christine's brother got very sick, he received medical attention, though, tragically, later he died. The two surviving girls became part of a local church where some older children and another priest also helped them. And they began to take conscious steps toward faith.

Julie Ann in far off Australia continued to pray for, and to sponsor, Christine throughout her high school years. And then, when asked if she would continue to sponsor her, Julie Ann helped Christine to go to teacher's college because she was a very gifted young woman.

When Stephen Hayner met Christine, she and her sister, Harriet, had been teaching for several years in the school in Bokeka where she grew up. Christine was now educating a whole new generation of children. And she said, "If it were not for God's love, our church, and World Vision, you know I would be dead. If I had survived childhood, I would probably have been forced into prostitution as a teenager, only to die of AIDS before I was 20."

Instead, she is now changing history in her village — one step of faith at a time. Julie Ann DeBattista, the young teacher in Australia who could only give a small amount from her salary each month to help these girls could never have imagined what her very small steps of faith and trust would one day accomplish for hundreds and hundreds of children through Christina and Harriet.

This is not an advertisement for World Vision. There are many fine Christian relief organizations at work in our world. Even though I give through World Vision to sponsor a child in Haiti, my preferred way to help is through UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee On Relief. This illustration is simply a reminder that sometimes the smallest gift can be used by Christ in a magnificent way.

Our lesson for the day from John's Gospel is set at the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing the disciples for His betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus knows that the events that are coming will be traumatic for His disciples, but He wants them to know they will not be alone. "If you love me," Jesus says to them, "keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you."

Then Jesus makes a powerful promise to His followers, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."

What beautiful words of reassurance: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you...." When I think of orphans, I think of children like Christine and her young brother and sister, all under 8 years of age living in a mud hut with no one to care for them. But somebody did care — a young teacher in Australia named Julie Ann — and that made all the difference.

OUR LESSON FOR THE DAY SAYS TO US THAT WE NEED NOT LIVE AS ORPHANS.  
THERE IS SOMEONE WHO CARES ABOUT US.

Think about that for a moment. There are few things that can be more traumatic for human beings than to be orphaned at a young age. What can be more tragic than to be deprived of the love of a parent?

Of course, some very fine people have found themselves in this position. If you type into Google on your computer the search term "famous orphans," you will read the names of many outstanding people from many different fields who were able to accomplish much in life in spite of this misfortune.

You will read about such people as Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt's mother, Anna Rebecca Hall, died from diphtheria in 1892. The next year, when Roosevelt was 9 years old, her father Elliott died from the same disease. Eleanor was raised by her maternal grandmother. Maybe this is what gave Eleanor Roosevelt her great compassion for suffering people the world over when she became this country's First Lady, as well as in her service as a diplomat, author and writer.

Some other remarkable people were orphaned, not by the death of their parents, but because of a break-up of their families which resulted in them being put up for adoption. Notable among these are people like Steve Jobs, Nelson Mandela, musician John Lennon, President Andrew Jackson, and many others. Many great people have found themselves orphaned.

WHAT I WANT TO SAY TO YOU, HOWEVER, IS THAT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN ALL OF US FEEL LIKE ORPHANS.

That is, there are times when we all feel helpless, alone, forsaken. Someone close to us is taken from us. Or we are confronted with the reality of our own mortality. Or for some reason we experience intense physical or psychological pain. At such times we may feel that even God has forsaken us.

That is not a unique experience. Remember, even Christ called out on the cross: “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46, KJV)”. Even Christ felt orphaned at that moment in His life. Some people never recover from this experience of abandonment.

Some of you may remember the name Tom Sutherland, one of the men who was held hostage in Lebanon by terrorists for 6 1/2 years. According to one source, Sutherland was held in 26 different locations during his captivity. Some of his cells were cold, dark, underground holes only six by six in size.

After 18 months of captivity, Sutherland was put in solitary. That, too, was in an underground cell. He became so discouraged that he tried to commit suicide three different times by pulling a plastic bag over his head. Each time, however, he would think of his wife and three daughters and stop short of killing himself.

Tom Sutherland was a Christian when he was taken captive — he had even been an elder in his home church — but after his experience in Lebanon, he no longer believes in God. When asked why, Sutherland answered, “I prayed so many times, and so hard — and nothing happened.”

That is not a rare experience. And some people never quite recover from this dark night of the soul. Their sense of abandonment overwhelms them.

Bass Mitchell, a pastor in West Virginia, tells of working in his first job in a grocery store. He says that he started out as a bag boy, but soon he was promoted. He was given his own aisle to stock.

Trucks brought in hundreds of boxes of food every week and he and the other grocery workers had to unpack them and put the stock on the shelves. Almost every week, however, they would open a box and find that some of the cans or cartons had been damaged. Some of the cans had lost their labels, had dents, were crushed. Some were so badly damaged that some of the contents had come out.

Their manager told them not to put these damaged cans on the shelves because no one would buy them. So, they would place them in a large basket in the front of the store. And on the basket was a large sign that read, “Damaged Goods. Cheap.” But not very many people bought them, even then. Most just ignored them.

“It seems to me,” comments Mitchell on his experience, “that a lot of people, more than you might think, feel like this. Whatever the reason, things they’ve done, things life has done to them, things beyond their control, have made them feel like damaged goods, bent out of shape, crushed, of little value to themselves or anyone else.”

To use Jesus’ metaphor, they feel like orphans. They feel that no one cares for them. But someone does care! God cares! God doesn’t want any of His children to feel like orphans.

Some of you know the story of a man who allowed God to help him overcome his feeling of abandonment. His name was James Cash Penney, better known by his first initials. At one time J. C. Penney was one of this country's most successful entrepreneurs. He made more than one fortune in his lifetime. But Penney also experienced more than his share of failures and heartbreaks along the way.

In 1898, Penney went to work for Guy Johnson and Thomas Callahan, who operated some small dry goods stores called Golden Rule Stores. Because of his tireless work ethic and his high ethical and moral standards, Penney succeeded in his work to the point of eventually buying out Johnson and Callahan and renaming the chain of stores.

But then in 1910, Penney's wife died. It was a crushing blow to him. At a friend's suggestion, Penney turned to philanthropy as a way to deal with his pain. In 1916, he met his second wife, but eight years later she suddenly died as well. Penney married a third time, poured his life into his work, and by 1929 accumulated a net worth of \$40 million — that's back when \$40 million was a lot of money. Then the Great Depression wiped out all his wealth.

Devastated emotionally and physically, Penney entered a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. As he lay in a sanitarium bed one day, he heard a familiar hymn coming from the chapel. The hymn was an old Gospel favorite titled "God Will Take Care of You." That song contained the message that Penney needed to hear. At this low point in his life he didn't want to live like an orphan. He wanted to know that someone cared about him.

The doctors didn't expect him to live, but J. C. Penney decided he wasn't ready to give up. He cried out to God for help, and the Lord answered his request. His depression lifted, and soon he left the sanitarium.

Once again he built his fortune and further established the company we know today as J.C. Penney. For decades, he gave away millions of dollars and shared his faith in God with anyone who would listen. He died at age ninety-five still trusting that God would take care of him.

Just as a matter of interest, in 1940, during a visit to one of his stores in Des Moines, Iowa, Penney trained a young Penney's employee named Sam Walton on how to wrap packages with a minimal amount of paper and ribbon. That is the same Sam Walton who went on to found Wal-Mart, the world largest department store chain.

There is power in believing that you are not alone in this world. Though they could not see it at the time, what a powerful promise Christ made to His disciples.

They couldn't imagine that in a couple more days Jesus would be put to death. And they certainly couldn't imagine that He would be resurrected on the third day, or that He would send His Holy Spirit upon them fifty days later on the day of Pentecost. But everything Jesus foretold came true. And it is still true today.

If you are going through a difficult time right now, take Jesus at His word: “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.” What great good news that still is for us today.

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