

ORPHANS

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE
SUNDAY, MAY 25, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

JOHN 14:15-21

Not too far from the manse where Polly and I lived for 26 years in Arcadia, Florida, there is a campus of old buildings. They are big, two and three story stone buildings, with broad, high, front porches. Most of them have been converted into apartments. A few of them are private homes. Until about fifty years ago, those buildings housed the Florida Baptist Children's Home. Somehow, in the politics of the Southern Baptist Church, or the Florida Baptist Convention, a decision was made to abandon those old buildings, with no central heating and no air conditioning, and move to a new campus in Lakeland, where the Florida Baptist Children's Home is to this day.

People in Arcadia don't refer to those buildings as the Florida Baptist Children's Home. They call them "the old orphan's home."

Every time I heard that expression, an image came to my mind, of "old orphans", people in their nineties, sitting in rocking chairs on those broad old porches, waiting for someone to come and adopt them.

We dropped the term "orphanage" sometime around the time the Baptists moved their children's home from Arcadia to Lakeland. Orphanages became children's homes.

Our church has supported Thornwell Home for Children for many years. And Thornwell has evolved and changed from an orphanage to a place where children from broken homes, or children whose parents are in military service, or children whose parents are in prison, children whose parents are in drug rehab, find a Christian home, a loving environment. There are still orphans, children whose parents are both deceased, but they are fewer and fewer.

In other parts of the world, the number of orphans has increased dramatically over the last couple of decades. Christian orphanages that had been closed are now re-opening in Africa, for two reasons: first, the violence of wars; and second and perhaps most important, the world-wide AIDS epidemic. Many of the children in Africa have lost both parents to AIDS, and are themselves HIV positive, or suffering from AIDS.

Many of the orphans of years gone by were children who had been abandoned by their parents, and that still happens in the world in which we live.

My friend Ted Lewis has helped establish a children's home in Thailand for girls who would otherwise have been sold into sexual slavery. Missionaries go out into the villages and take unwanted girl children into those children's homes, and in many cases, they literally buy children from parents who would otherwise sell them into the sex trade. The first of the children who came to that home are now graduating from high school, and are continuing their education as nurses and teachers.

It is sad enough for a child to lose both parents to an automobile accident, or to cancer. I remember one of my classmates in grades 1 through 3, Johnny Dederick. Johnny's father had been wounded in World War II, came home, fathered Johnny, and then died as a result of his wounds. When Johnny's mother died when he was in third grade, he lived for a while with a

relative who taught at our school, and then at the end of the school year moved away to live with his grandparents. We felt sorry for Johnny, because he was an orphan.

How much sadder is it for a child to be abandoned by parents? How much sadder is it for children to know that its parents are in prison, or are too drug dependent to care for them? And how much sadder would it be to know that your parents had sold you?

I suspect that in some ways, being orphaned is the greatest sadness in the world.

Yet when Jesus told His disciples that He was leaving them, the word He used to describe how He would not leave them was "orphaned", ορφανος , which older versions translated "desolate".

Jesus was saying, "I am not going to abandon you. I am not going to leave you alone, all by yourself in a cold, cruel world. I am going to make sure that you are taken care of. You can never be an orphan, for you have a parent who cares for you, a heavenly Father, who loves you more than life itself. A heavenly father who loves you enough to sacrifice the only begotten son of the Father for you. You will never be orphans. You will always be children of God."

This passage is another that I have read many times at funerals, and heard read many times. Several years ago, I heard someone take offense at another pastor, who had pointed out to two brothers (in their forties or fifties) that now that both their parents were gone, they were orphans, and that Jesus had promised that He would not leave us orphaned.

Well, that preacher was telling the truth. He may not have done it as tactfully as he could have, but it was true. When we lose our parents, we are in a real way orphaned.

We've lost a number of saints of this church this year. Most of them were widows. They left adult children behind. And in a real sense, those children, though many of them are old enough to get the Senior Citizen discount, have become orphans. I became an orphan six years ago when my mother died. I thought seriously about retiring that same year. Probably should have. I guess, in a way, I became one of those old orphans. All I needed was a broad front porch and a rocking chair.

But years before, when my father died, I heard my mother explain to my little brother, Jeff, who was eleven at the time, that now we had two fathers in heaven, God who had created us and loved us and who had blessed us with our earthly father, and that even though Theodore Land wasn't around to look after his boys any more, God the Father Almighty was still with us and would still take care of us.

I think my mother captured the meaning of this portion of John 14 about as well as any preacher I've ever heard. God's children can never be orphans. We can never be abandoned. We have a Father who is faithful, and loving, and merciful, and kind, and just. We may be orphans in the sight of the world, but in the sight of the Almighty, we are beloved children of a heavenly father.

We live in a world where there are many people who are desolate. Abandoned. Orphaned. Our task, as children of our Heavenly Father, is to tell the desolate, the abandoned, the orphaned that they are not alone. That they have brothers and sisters. And more important than that, they have a Father who loves them and who will never forsake them.

Let us pray.

Lord, help us to believe what Jesus told His disciples so long ago, and to share the good news that we can never be orphans to all the rest of your children. Amen.