

“Orphan Trains”

St. Ann's

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“I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you (John 14: 15-21).” These are Jesus' words at the Last Supper, in what is called his farewell address. Jesus has just washed the feet of the disciples as a sign of intimate friendship. He is closer to them than ever before. And now he promises not to leave them alone.

To be orphaned means to be without one's parents or without one's life companion. Spouses are orphaned when they lose their life companion, to become a widow or widower. The number of children worldwide who have lost parents is estimated at 133 million. In sub-Saharan Africa, some 15 million children have lost their parents to the AIDS epidemic. We wonder how many children have been orphaned in war-torn Syria and Central Africa.

Some years ago, I enjoyed reading a book entitled ORPHAN TRAINS, by Stephen O'Connor. It is the story of mid-nineteenth-century New York City, where vagrant youth, both orphans and runaways, filled the streets. For years, the city had been sweeping these children into prisons or almshouses. A bright young minister by the name of Charles Loring Brace proposed a radical solution: send orphaned children to other parts of the country; let prospective foster parents adopt these lonely children. Hence arose the “Orphan Trains” transporting children out of New York City. The sadness and heartbreak of this venture was multiplied at every step along the way when the children would be taken off and displayed before prospective adoptive parents. To be orphaned meant to be alone.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8) speaks of being orphaned in a different way. Samaritans were completely disfranchised from the Jewish people, though they were of the same origin. They were left out, excluded, isolated, to be avoided. Jesus rejected this segregation by meeting with a Samaritan woman at the well, staying with her townspeople for several days, and rejoicing that these outcasts became his friends and disciples. Orphans no longer! Unlike his countrymen who despised Samaritans, Jesus praised them by telling a parable in which a Samaritan was the hero and a priest and Levite were moral failures. Thus, in our reading today, we have Philip following in Jesus' footsteps by preaching to Samaritans, celebrating their conversion, and joining with Peter and John in laying hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit. Orphans no longer!

Like the Samaritans, the community to whom John's gospel is addressed knew the experience of being pushed out, excommunicated from the synagogue for believing that Jesus was the Messiah, cast adrift and cut off from their Jewish heritage, to fend for themselves. There were no orphan trains to take them to other parts of the world. They had to make their way alone.

Today, as Christians, we are believers who accept two things simultaneously: that Jesus definitively went away (the bleak side making them orphans), and that he emphatically remains (the bright side.) While the orphan trains removed oppressed children from the streets and prisons and almshouses of New York City, as a result, many came to have for the first time a home with foster parents (the bright side.)

In ways, the church is our foster home. While definitely gone, Jesus emphatically remains. So where is he? How are we not orphaned? For those who believe without seeing, Jesus remains with us in ten ways.

Count them if you will. Jesus said he would be with his church always, to the end of time. So that's one good place to seek and find him, within the community of faith. Jesus also said he would send his Spirit, the Advocate, to be with us and to dwell within us. That's a second way, Jesus present in the indwelling of the Spirit in God in each person. Thirdly, we profess that Jesus is truly present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist. Jesus is present to us as our spiritual nourishment.

A fourth way Jesus is present is when we treat the least of our brothers and sisters with compassion. Jesus says what we do to them, we do to him. Jesus is the divine Word spoken into the world; when we hear that Word proclaimed, we know it is the voice of Jesus himself.

The church has long called the priest "alter Christus," another Christ. Through baptism, all share in the priesthood of Christ. He is present to us in one another, each as an "alter Christus." Theologians have termed Jesus as the sacrament of the Father, that is, that God acts in the world through the presence and action of Jesus. We speak of seven sacramental actions that reveal the living sacrament of God. So, if you are looking for Jesus, look to sacramental signs, with the Eucharist as predominant: signs of welcome (baptism), of mature growth (confirmation), of healing (anointing of the sick), of reconciliation (penance), of fidelity (marriage), of service (ordination.) The seven sacraments point appropriately to the seventh way to find him.

Three more places to find Jesus. Seek the Holy One in those who are holy, in the lives of the saints, both living and gone before us. Then look for Jesus in the suffering of humanity. The crucified Lord is the most familiar image of Jesus. One more place to find Jesus? I leave that to you! Where do you most reliably discover him?

Spiritual writers often speak of "practicing the presence of God," that is, becoming conscious of, awake to, the One who stands by us. The presence is described as a feeling of warmth when you are cold, as a sense of light when you are in the dark, as a feeling of the touch of a loving hand when emptiness is in our grasp, as the sound of inner harmony when the world outside is dissonance, as a feeling of quiet amid noise, as having a sense of purpose when things seem aimless. I believe that in ten and many more ways Jesus fulfills his promise to us "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you." When you feel like an abandoned orphan transported elsewhere, where do you most reliably discover him?