

## MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

<sup>18</sup>“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.  
<sup>19</sup>In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.  
<sup>20</sup>On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup>They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” <sup>22</sup>Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.  
<sup>24</sup>Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. (John 14:18-24, NRSV)

Matters of life and death permeate chapters 13-16 in the Gospel of John. Jesus spoke these words in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, the night before he died. Earlier that evening, the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, a rented room in Jerusalem, to share the Passover meal. Maybe they sensed something somber and solemn in Christ’s mood that night. Certainly they knew something was up when Jesus took the bread, broke it, and said it symbolized his body broken for them. Perhaps they anticipated the horrors of the next 24 hours when Jesus took the cup and said it symbolized his blood that would be shed for them. Their worst fears were realized when Jesus said, “Little children, I am with you only a little while longer; you will look for me [but]...Where I am going, you cannot come” (John 13:33).

Was he abandoning them? Didn't he care? Wasn't the messiah going to reestablish David's kingdom in Israel? How could he do this if he was dead? How could he do this to them? They had given up everything to follow him. Right on cue, Jesus speaks powerful words of reassurance saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-4).

Jesus encourages his disciples who had lost all hope upon hearing that their master was going away. He spoke the most reassuring words he could find—words about God, words about Heaven, words about reunion, words about hope. He was leaving because it was to their benefit. After all, without Christ's death on Good Friday, God could never have provided the miracle of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. I believe in this passage that Jesus was looking not only at his imminent death and resurrection, but also beyond Easter to the Ascension, 40 days after Easter when he returned to God in heaven. After his return to God, he could keep his promise to prepare a place for his followers in heaven.

Later in this chapter, Jesus continues to reassure the disciples that he was not abandoning them, quite the contrary. In your pew Bibles (RSV), Jesus says, "I will not leave you desolate," in verse 18. I prefer the NRSV translation, which says, "I will not leave you orphaned." Up until a couple of years ago I would have only understood these words on an intellectual level. But having visited orphanages in Eastern Europe, and having adopted our daughter, Alina, from a Ukrainian orphanage, I have a deeper understanding of the word orphan.

Before visiting these orphanages, I assumed the children would be sullen and withdrawn. On the contrary, these children, all under the age of 3, appeared happy. How could they be happy growing up in an institution with few toys, no crayons or books, and very little individual attention? Then it occurred to me that they were too young to know what they were missing. Many were like our Alina, who entered the orphanage when she was just 4 months old. Institutional life was all she had known and thus had no idea what it would be like to have a loving family who faithfully attended to her every need, a room of her own, and more toys, books, and crayons than she could ever imagine.

What about those children for whom the situation is reversed? What about those children who had loving families who, for any number of reasons, left them orphaned—children who knew what it was like to be read to and tucked in at night? These children would likely have life-long emotional scars from feeling abandoned. This is the type of situation that Jesus addressed in verse 18. He promised not to leave the disciples orphaned. They knew what it was like to live with Jesus 24-hours a day, to talk and listen to him, to laugh and cry with him. Jesus knew it would not be easy for these dear friends to see him die and he wanted them to know that they were not being abandoned, not being deserted, not being forgotten, and neither are we. On the contrary, the hope of Easter was just around the corner and the intimate presence of God’s Spirit in their hearts, the Pentecost miracle, was just weeks away.

Jesus tells his puzzled disciples, “‘Because I live, you also will live’” (John 14:19b). Sure things were going to get bad before they got better, but in the end death did not win, life did. Since God brought Jesus back to life on Easter, we all have the same promise, the assurance of eternal life.

So what of the interim period until our time comes to leave this earth? Jesus had high expectations of his followers. He expected them to imitate his life and follow his teachings all of which can be summed up in one word, love. In today's passage Jesus told his disciples, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them...Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our *home* with them" (John 14:21, 23).

Orphans, when they are old enough to understand that their institutional life is not the norm, long for a loving family and a home. In these verses Jesus promises that as we follow his way of love, we will be at home with God and God will be at home with us. We do not have to wait until heaven to be at home with God. We can be at home with God right here and now as God's Spirit fills our hearts with love that overflows into the lives of others. In like manner, God's grace and love can flow through other people into our lives.

When our hearts are filled with sorrow following the loss of a loved one, we need love and grace. Sometimes in our grief we want to throw in the towel and give up on life, but Jesus calls us to continue loving life and loving others that we might be at home with God and God at home with us. We also need the grace and love of other people. When someone we love dies we often want to withdraw from other people and check out of life's everyday activities. For a period of time this is normal and helpful, however, we must be careful that withdrawal does not turn into isolation and alienation. God intends that we be in relationship with other people and participants in a family of faith. We need to be vulnerable enough to let others help us when we feel helpless. We need a loving community, like a church, to

wrap its arms around us and walk through the valley of the shadow of death. These are God's gifts to those who grieve.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, former pastor of London's Congregational City Temple, wrote, "We need never think of death as gloomy and forbidding. It may seem natural to do so. But if we had been able to anticipate this present life in the period before birth, we should have felt the same foreboding. Yet in fact there was nothing to fear. Love and care were waiting for us. We can rest assured that God who provided for us when we began this life will do no less as we pass from it. The place prepared for us, of which Jesus spoke, will surely include happy reunions...One day it will be our turn to move on to a new plane of life. Away with our fears! Think of it as like leaving for a holiday in a country we have never visited before. Let us only make sure we have time to pack the things we shall need, and get ready" (*Life Begins at Death*, p. 80).

On this Memorial Sunday, I pray that all who grieve may find hope in the belief that when the time came for their loved one to leave this earth, that God simply stretched out the divine hand, and lovingly led our dearly beloved home. As the old hymn says:

*Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light:  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

(Lyrics and music by Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932.)

AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you understand those of us whose hearts are broken this day because your heart broke when Jesus died. You show your compassion even as we feel the darkness of death and the anguish of abandonment. You have heard our prayers on happier days. Hear our prayers this day. Speak your word of resurrection and life that our sunken spirits might be lifted up. May we see the light of faith through our tears. We thank you for the time we had with our loved ones. And we thank you that even now they rest secure, in joy and in peace, in your heavenly presence. On this Memorial Day, we remember all of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for the love of their country. Comfort their families. We remember too all of those separated from their families due to military service or other work that involves travel. May the miles never quell the love they share.

Through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life we pray.  
AMEN.

Parts of this prayer were inspired by Samuel John Schmiechen's book, *Pastoral Prayers for the Church Year*, p. 120.