

“Orphaned”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Genesis 9:8-15 and John 2:1-12*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

There’s an episode of the satirical show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where Larry David (creator of *Seinfeld*) is talking with a man, Marty Funkhouser, whose mother has just died. Larry observes how he had called Marty’s house and left a condolence message but never got a return call. Marty says, “Well, I had a few things on my mind.” Larry responds, all while eating an ice cream cone, mind you, “Ehh... still... it’s a little discourteous.” Marty says, “Let me explain something to you. I lost my dad a year ago; my mother just died. I’m an orphan.” Larry says, “You’re what? An orphan? You’re a little too old to be an orphan.” Marty answers, “No, if you don’t have parents, you’re an orphan.” Larry says, “So what, you can be 70 and be an orphan?” Marty shouts, “You can be a hundred and be an orphan.” Larry says, “You can’t be a hundred and be an orphan!” He then tells Marty how one of the things that really bothers him in life is when ice cream drips down the side of the cone.

There is so much that is brilliant in this scene, but what caught my attention was this debate about whether you can ever be too old to be an orphan. Because we tend to think like Larry: only children can be orphans. Little Orphan Annie. *Oliver Twist*. In fact, the death of a parent, as an adult, is generally trivialized in our society.

Psychologist Alexander Levy and author of *The Orphaned Adult* says that he was inspired to write his book after the death of his own parents, because when he looked for articles and books about parental death and grief, he found very little. When it was talked about, it almost always focused on children losing their parents. Why? The implication is that we’re adults; we’re not supposed to need our parents anymore. If we grieve *too much*, there’s something weird about us. All this, despite the fact that “parental death is the single most common cause of bereavement in this country. Nearly 12 million adults, or 5 percent of the population, lose a parent each year” (Levy). It’s the one grief we all go through; it’s the one part of aging we all experience; and sadly, most of us go through it alone.

Levy writes that after his mom’s death, he thought he was fine. But eight months later, that began to change. He suddenly felt sad all the time and withdrawn. He lost weight; he had a hard time concentrating. He felt like he was “unraveling.” He had no idea why. Did he have a brain tumor, diabetes? Was he going crazy? So he went to see a doctor. When the elevator doors opened with a ding, and three old women walked out, he was whisked back to being in this new grocery store with automatic doors—ding, ding—when he was a child and couldn’t find his mom. He remembered how scared he felt. And standing there, by the elevator, for the first time since his mother’s death, Levy cried. Because he realized what was wrong: he couldn’t find his mom.

It didn't matter that he had long been on his own, or that his parents had in fact for years been dependent on him. He still felt scared.

I remember this feeling when my mom died. And I've got to admit: it surprised me. I was a differentiated, independent adult. But when I lost my mother—the person I knew every second of my existence, the person from whom life and love originated—I felt lost, unmoored. Like a string had been cut, and I was floating away. Like the ground beneath my feet had been stolen.

For that's what our parents are: our ground, our safety, our home, our knowledge that we belong to someone and have an identity. It's right there in our names. Every time we introduce ourselves, we're saying, "I am someone's child. I'm real" (Levy).

This is true regardless of how old we are. This is true even for those with absent or hurtful parents. They grieve too, for they grieve the parent they wanted and needed but never had. They grieve that there's no longer a chance to change and reconcile.

Everything shifts when our parents die: relationships, family roles among siblings, holidays, how we think, how we spend our time, our sense of mortality, even our identity. Some say that we never really grow up until our parents die.

This Lent, we're walking with Jesus as he grows up. Though he is still a young man, he's going to do a lot of growing up over the next days and weeks as he faces his death. In his dying, he's also losing her. His mom. She's not going to be able to protect him; he's got to do this on his own. He's going to have to say goodbye to her. To Mary, the first person to believe in him, support him, love him. In the Gospels, he's often referred to as "the son of Mary." And she's there—we read it this morning—at the beginning of it all, at the wedding where Jesus performs his very first miracle, the moment his glory is revealed. It's because of her. He wasn't ready yet. But in typical mom fashion, she ignores what he says, gives him a wink, and tells the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." And Jesus is like: "Fine, Mom. I'll do it." He turns the water into wine. And when he's done, he walks off, with his mom.

And later, when he's up on that cross, and she can't hold him, she can't sing to him like she used to, he's all alone up there. He shouts, "My God, my God—or maybe, my Father, my Father, or even my Mother, My mother—why have you abandoned me?"

"There is the sudden awareness," writes Levy, "of no longer being someone's child."

But this is the whole point of the cross, of Easter. Jesus' love becomes the bridge. If death—or betrayal or absence—is what separates us from our parents, from God, eventually even from ourselves, then it's Christ who stretches his arms across that chasm, connecting us, until we are someone's child again. Isn't that how the Gospel of John begins? Christ came to make us children of God. Not orphans at all, but a people who can say with conviction: "I am someone's child. I am real."

It's there at Jesus' baptism, when God says to Jesus, "You are my Son, my Beloved." And it's what Jesus says to his disciples before he dies: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (John 14:18).

This doesn't mean that God replaces our parents. Human relationships are still important. In one of the most touching moments of the Gospel, Jesus, on the cross, sees his mother and his disciple, probably John, and they're standing there in God only knows what kind of pain, and he sees this, and he asks them to take care of each other. He says to Mary, "Here is your son," and to his disciple, "Here is your mother." That's one of the last things Jesus says.

God doesn't replace our parents; rather, it's God's love that brings us back to our parents.

When God makes God's covenant with Noah, God directs God's promise to both Noah and his descendants; God binds parent and child together. God promises that never again will death get the last word; there will always be a ground to stand on, after the waters recede. God throws a rainbow into the sky to remind us that God is with us—our ancestors, our parents, are with us.

We grow up. We grieve. We become our own. This is necessary. But we do not leave them behind. We take them with us.

Levy recounts in his book this one client named Rachel. She's a sculptor, but ever since her dad died, she's had this creative block. One day, in a counseling session, she reported a burst of energy; she was working again. She laughed; Levy had never seen her laugh before. She told him how last Friday was her birthday, and how if her dad were alive, he'd call her, and they'd go for a walk, and they'd talk. So she decided to go to a nature trail he and she had often hiked, and she'd pretend he was with her. When she pulled her car into the empty parking lot, she got out and noticed something odd. There were four roses lying on the ground, right next to her car door. She said, "As soon as I saw them, I began to sob. You know, my dad used to buy me four roses for every birthday. It felt like he was saying, 'Okay, I'm here. I didn't forget.' "

They are with us, because God is with us.

Jesus says to his disciples, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me" (John 14:19).

I see my mom. I see her when I talk to my dad or my sister. I see her in me when I love and parent Emerson. I sometimes see her in church with me, smiling back at me. I feel her arms around me. I discern her in all that I am. And I realize: my ground is not gone; it's just no longer below me; it's in me. And maybe that's what our parents ultimately give us: the knowledge that the cord can be cut and we can float and it's OK, because we take our ground with us. We're not orphans; we are the children of love. **Amen.**