



May 10, 2026

~ *John 14:15-21* ~

Bishop Trish Schmermund

Synod of Alberta and the Territories

Grace and peace to you from Jesus who loves us.

When I became a bishop I received a lot of cards of congratulations. What a great church I am part of to receive such care! But one card stood out – and I haven't even opened it! On the envelope it says, "Trish, for a day when you need encouragement."

It's not that there hasn't been difficult days, but I haven't opened it yet. When a hard day comes I wonder, *maybe I should save it, a harder day might be on its way!* And I've come to realize – maybe it's enough to know that it's there! It's right there for when I will need it and I know someone cared enough to make it for me. I am not alone in this ministry.

Maybe this is why one line stood out for me from John's Gospel today, *"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."* (John 14:18)

It's planted within what we call Jesus' "farewell discourse," because Jesus knows what is coming. He is already in Jerusalem and Good Friday is approaching. It's a tender passage of love and encouragement for his followers. When Jesus leaves, he will not leave his followers alone, the Holy Spirit will be with them!

Already we sense (as they did too!) something is shifting, something that cannot yet be named.

Abandonment, being orphaned is a heart-wrenching thought. Maybe some of us have experienced this in our lives. A loved one walks away. Your last parent dies. You wonder why you were adopted. A good friend betrays. Such things sting us deeply. Lots of people have wondered if God has abandoned the church too! Jesus knew we would wonder such questions. He knew his disciples would struggle in the upcoming days. So he says, *I will not leave you orphaned.*"

Jesus chooses this word carefully. He does not say, "I will not leave you alone," though that would have been true. He says, "I will not leave you orphaned." He names a relationship. He names belonging. He names the kind of loss that reshapes identity itself.

And then he promises: that kind of loss will not define you.

To understand the depth of this promise, it helps to remember what the disciples are about to face. Everything familiar is about to unravel. Their teacher, their center, their daily companion will be arrested, crucified, and gone from their sight. The one who called them, who fed them, who calmed storms and raised hope in them again and again, will no longer walk beside them in the same way.

If ever there were a moment to feel orphaned, it would be that.

And yet Jesus insists: even then, even in that bewildering, grief-soaked reality, you will not be left as orphans.

This is not a denial of grief. It is not a spiritual bypass that says, "Don't worry, everything will feel fine." The cross is still the cross. Loss is still loss. But Jesus is drawing their eyes beyond what they can see, toward a deeper truth: that the love of God does not depend on physical proximity, and the presence of Christ is not limited to what can be held or touched.

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth..."

The word "Advocate" carries layers of meaning. Comforter. Counselor. One who stands alongside. The Spirit is not a distant force or a vague feeling. The Spirit is God-with-us in a new way, a steady companion who breathes life into weary hearts, who reminds us of what we have forgotten, who nudges and stirs and sometimes unsettles us into deeper faith.

And here is where the promise begins to glow with a particular warmth: "I will not leave you orphaned" is not only about preventing loneliness. It is about preserving relationship. It is about ensuring that the bond between Jesus and his followers is not severed by death, distance, or time.

If we dare to listen closely, there is a resonance here with something deeply human, something many of us know through experience: the love of a mother.

A mother's love has a way of lingering. It is not confined to the moments when she is physically present. It shows up in remembered words, in habits formed over years, in the quiet instinct to care for others because we were first cared for. It is there in the meals we cook, the songs we hum, the ways we show kindness or resilience without even realizing where we learned it.

For some, that love has been steady and nurturing. For others, it has been complicated, incomplete, or even painful. And for many, it is a love remembered now in absence, because death has changed the way that relationship is experienced.

But even in its most beautiful form, a mother's love has limits. It cannot ultimately shield from every harm. It cannot remain in the same form forever. There comes a time when children must walk paths their mothers cannot physically accompany.

And yet, even then, something of that love abides.

Jesus' promise reaches into that space and goes further. It is as though he is saying: what you have known, even in its most faithful and enduring human expression, is only a glimpse of the love that holds you in God.

"I will not leave you orphaned."

In this promise, Jesus gathers up every tender, fierce, protective, nurturing image of love we know, including the love of a mother, and says: this is the shape of God's heart toward you, and it will not be taken away.

But there is more. Jesus connects this promise directly to love and obedience:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments...They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me..."

At first, this can sound like a condition. As if Jesus is saying, "Prove your love by doing the right things." But in the Gospel of John, commandments are not a checklist of moral achievements. They are distilled into one central call: to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

So, the connection is not transactional. It is relational. Love flows into love. To love Jesus is to be drawn into his way of living, his way of seeing, his way of giving ourselves for the sake of others. And as we live in that love, we discover something astonishing: we are not doing it alone.

The Spirit is at work in us.

"You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

Notice the movement: with you...in you.

The presence of God is not just beside us but within us, shaping us from the inside out. The Spirit is like a quiet fire in the hearth of the soul, warming, illuminating, sometimes refining. It reminds us who we are when we forget. It calls us back when we wander. It strengthens us when we feel we have nothing left to give.

And this is how the promise "I will not leave you orphaned" becomes something we not only hear but live.

Because being orphaned is not only about the absence of parents. It is about disconnection. It is about the feeling that we are on our own, that we must fend for ourselves, that no one sees us or claims us or stands with us.

And if we are honest, that feeling can creep in even in the midst of community, even in the life of the church. We can feel isolated in our struggles, uncertain in our faith, weary in our efforts to love a world that does not always love us back.

Into that reality, Jesus speaks again: You are not on your own.

Not in your doubts.

Not in your grief.

Not in your questions about the future of the church, or the challenges of ministry, or the shifting landscape of faith in our time.

You are not orphaned.

This word is especially important for us as a church. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, we are living through a season of change. Congregations are asking hard questions. Some are small and wondering how to continue. Others are trying to reimagine what it means to be the church in a world that no longer assumes its importance.

It can feel, at times, like we have lost something. Like the structures or certainties that once held us have shifted or disappeared. And in those moments, there is a temptation to think: perhaps we have been left behind.

But the promise of Jesus interrupts that story.

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

The life of the church has never depended on our size, our resources, or our ability to control outcomes. It has always depended on the presence of Christ through the Spirit, calling, gathering, enlightening, and sending.

The same Spirit who was promised to those first disciples is alive among us now. Not as a vague hope, but as a real, active presence. The Spirit is stirring in conversations over coffee, in prayers whispered in quiet rooms, in acts of service that go unnoticed by the world but are known to God.

The Spirit is at work when a congregation dares to try something new, even if it feels small or uncertain. The Spirit is present when we sit with someone in their grief and do not try to fix it, but simply accompany them. The Spirit is alive when we forgive, when we welcome, when we choose love over fear.

This is what it means to live as people who are not orphaned.

And then Jesus adds one more layer to the promise:

“Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

This is not just about comfort in the present. It is about life that cannot be undone by death. The resurrection is already shimmering beneath these words. Jesus is pointing toward a reality in which death does not have the final say, and separation is not the end of the story.

Because he lives, we live.

That includes the lives of those we have loved and lost. The love we have known in them, including the love of a mother, is not erased. It is gathered into the larger life of God. And while we still feel the ache of absence, we trust that in Christ, nothing good is ultimately lost.

So when Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned,” he is speaking into every layer of our existence:

Into our present fears: you are not alone.

Into our past wounds: you are still claimed.

Into our future uncertainties: you are held.

And he invites us to respond not with perfect understanding, but with trust. With love. With a willingness to live as those who belong to him and to one another.

Perhaps the question that lingers for us is not simply, “Do we believe this promise?” but “How might our lives look different if we trusted it more deeply?”

What would change if we truly believed that we are not abandoned, not forgotten, not left to figure everything out on our own?

Maybe we would risk loving more boldly, because we know we are held. Maybe we would face uncertainty with a little more courage, because we trust the Spirit is already there ahead of us. Maybe we would extend more grace to ourselves and to others, remembering that we are all learning to live into this promise together.

“I will not leave you orphaned.”

These words are not a whisper lost in time. They are a living promise, spoken still by the risen Christ to his church, to each of us.

They are a promise you can carry into the quiet moments of your day.

A promise you can lean on when the night feels long.

A promise you can share with someone who needs to hear that they are not alone.

And like the enduring echo of a mother’s love, they stay with us. They shape us. They remind us who we are.

We are not orphaned.

We are beloved.

We are accompanied.

We are alive in Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.