In the name of the Father and of the ✡ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus comforts his disciples by saying that he will not leave them as orphans.

18I will not leave you orphanned; I am coming to you. (John 14:18, NRSV)

They say that is how the disciples of Socrates felt when their master died: ¹ They felt orphaned, bereft of their teacher and guide. Jesus says that he will not do that to his disciples. He will not leave them orphaned.

My topic or image this morning, then, is orphans.

In the year 1865 – two years after the founding our congregation – Rev. William Passavant, a great father of Lutheran social ministry here in America, visited our town, New York City. He was answering the request to temporarily fill the pulpit at St. James English Lutheran Church, then on Fifteenth Street. So, he was with our Lutheran ancestors for only a little while. But it did not take him long to size up the situation and to set the Lutherans to work.

Passavant was troubled by the plight of orphans in our town. There were a lot of them. The Civil War had just ended. Many fathers had been lost. Many widowed young mothers were overwhelmed. Plus, our city was on the verge of another terrible cholera outbreak. New York City had been around for two centuries by then, but the Lutherans had no orphanage. The Lutherans had no methodical and compassionate way to take care of the children roaming the streets.

You do not need to be a parent to grieve at the thought of children left helpless in a hard world. Imagine a child you know and love or one of the children of our congregation trying to fend for himself, fend for herself, in the hard city.

So, Passavant urged the Lutherans of New York City to establish an orphanage. As always, he had little money of his own, and he was new in town, but he managed to do it. Passavant was the founder of The Wartburg Orphans Farm School in nearby Mount Vernon, New York – one of about forty

¹See, for example, Richard A. Burridge, in the Lectionary Commentary on our text, John 14:15-21.
institutions Passavant founded or helped to found here in America. Nowadays the Wartburg is a senior citizen care community, with cottages for independent living, assisted living, nursing home, rehab center, daycare, Alzheimer's unit, and so on. My wife, Carol, is Director of Pastoral Care there.

It all began with Passavant’s determination that New York City’s orphans should not be abandoned.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus likewise is determined that his disciples should not be left orphaned – not left bereft. He will not leave them comfortless or hopeless. In fact, he says that he will send them a Comforter or an Advocate to be with them.

Why did Passavant create so many hospitals, orphanages, deaconess communities, and congregations? Answer, he did these things because he believed that his faith in Jesus compelled him to do works of love in this world. Passavant had a saying – a saying about the living of the gospel:

The gospel must be *lived* as well as *told*, or men disregard it as an idle dream.

For him, the gospel was no idle dream. It filled him with energy and the desire to help others.

I will get to Jesus and his tender care for his disciples in a moment. But let me linger with Passavant a bit more. I have been reading about him and I want to lift him up for us some more.

In the year when our congregation began, 1863, Passavant founded a hospital in Milwaukee. It was a lowly thing, run on a shoestring budget, overseen by just one deaconess and a handful of believers. Twenty years later, they began to build a new hospital. They were thrilled by this, but an arsonist burned it to the ground. Passavant was not discouraged, but rather gave thanks to God because, as he put it, “there was no loss of life, and ... character was not destroyed and principle still lived.” The “principle” of which he spoke was the principle of love. In his appeal for funds to rebuild the hospital, Passavant wrote these words about the deaconesses and workers at the hospital:

... where sin and sickness abound on every side, a little company of Christians are toiling by night and by day in ministrations of mercy to the suffering. They neither ask nor receive an earthly reward. They only desire a proper shelter for their sick and the stranger within their gates, that they may receive them, minister to them, and heal them in the name of Christ, or prepare them to die in Christ and in peace. For themselves they ask nothing, but for these, the poor, the shattered, the afflicted, they ask
everything that love can give. They have but one motive—the love of God. They offer but one argument, the words of Christ: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these the least of my disciples, ye have done it unto Me.”

Isn’t it wonderful what we Christians have done and can do still in the name of Jesus Christ!

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” says Jesus. It is the opening verse in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. For Jesus, love is not simply an emotion or a good attitude toward him. It is more a matter of keeping his commandments. And you know his commandments. He has summarized them for us:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. 

This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

(Matthew 22:37-40, RSV)

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, Jesus is soon to leave his disciples. He is soon to be crucified, resurrected, and then ascended from them out of sight into heaven. As he leaves, Jesus speaks of love. He says to the Twelve and he says to us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments, which means that you will devote yourself to love henceforth. You will love God and you will love your neighbors. This is your life’s work.”

Now, we are ready to turn in some small measure to the great promise in this morning’s Gospel text. Jesus says that he will not leave his disciples “orphaned.” He will not leave them helpless and bewildered, like abandoned children wandering the streets of New York City. Instead, Jesus says, he will pray to his heavenly Father to send them help. The King James Version puts it this way:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; (John 14:16, KJV)

The underlying Greek word here - parakletos - is rich in meaning. It means “Comforter,” as the King James Version has it. But also it has legal and

guidance meanings, and so the word is sometimes translated “Counselor,” or “Advocate,” or “Intercessor,” or “Helper.”

Whatever the exact meaning, it worked! The disciples did not fall to pieces with the Ascension of Jesus. Rather, they conquered the world. These fishermen! They converted hearts all over the Roman Empire. They transformed the world for the good. And they did not do it alone. They could hardly have done it alone! They did it with the help of the parakletos Jesus promised them. They did it with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And so you can see that this Sunday we are tilting toward Pentecost Sunday. We are getting ready to celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on earth.

As I say Amen to this sermon, I will look ahead to Pentecost Sunday and say only this: If ever you should feel an impulse in your heart to do the Christ-like thing, cherish that impulse, for it is the work of the Holy Spirit Jesus has sent to you. You are not alone in this world. You are not orphaned in this world, thanks to the gifts of the Triune God to you, even Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.