

The late comedian Carol Burnett was always one of my favorite entertainers, and like many of my generation, I grew up laughing at her characters, from the sketch comedy on her variety show to her appearances both on stage and on film. In the movie “Annie” Burnett plays Miss Hannigan, who runs an orphanage for young girls and is both a drunkard and a tyrant. The part is perfect for Burnett, who owns every scene by the way in which she delivers her lines. My favorite line from the film is when, after an angry encounter with the children in her charge, Miss Hannigan drunkenly asks a question in a moment of self-reflection, “Why any kid would want to be an orphan is beyond me.”

The line itself is hilarious both in its sad irony and in the way those words reveal the idiocy of Burnett’s character – of course no one would ever want to be an orphan, and to assume that any child would or could make such a choice is beyond absurdity. In the history of human culture, children who have been orphaned, either through parental death or abandonment, have always been more at risk than any other segment of the population. Even to this day, orphans remain a primary source of supply for slave labor, human trafficking, and child pornography.

Humanity has not been kind to the orphan, although there have been numerous and successful attempts to provide loving and compassionate care for parentless children. In the history of our country, what immediately comes to mind when we think about the successful care of orphans are philanthropists such as Milton Hershey, founder of the Hershey Candy Company. Hershey and his spouse, Catherine, were not able to have children, so they decided to help as many parentless children as possible through the establishment of the Hershey Industrial School, which still exists today as the Milton Hershey School.

But for every Milton Hershey School there have been countless private and state-run orphanages, workhouses, and slave mills that profited off the abuse of its vulnerable residents. Thanks to socially conscious writers such as Charles Dickens in the past and JK Rowling in the present, the issue of orphan abuse continues to be placed at the forefront of social consciousness, but at the heart of curing this ancient cultural disease is a redefining of the word “family” – a new meaning that transforms the idea of the kinship of blood into a kinship of love.

In the time of Christ, orphans were generally ignored by Roman society. The Greek philosopher Plato had written that, at a minimum, society was obligated to care for its orphans, particularly the children of dead soldiers who had died fighting for their country. While Rome was greatly influenced by Hellenistic culture, it made little or no accommodation for parentless children, even the children of Roman soldiers, until 400 AD. In the empire orphans were either cared for by their extended family, sold into slavery, or they died by neglect.

First century Israel, on the other hand, had a completely different view of both the orphan and the widow, fueled by a moral obligation inherent in the religious law of Judaism. Not long after the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus we read these words: “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.”

The strong element of judgment in Exodus 22 for those who abuse orphans echoes the legalism of Leviticus 24: “Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return; fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” Just as Jesus of Nazareth

redefined the Leviticus command under the rubric of God's grace and love, so did he create a new, spiritual understanding of the orphan's dilemma by redefining the meaning of family. Jesus was the only one of his time who spoke of God as his Father, not in the formal sense of a paternalistic and authoritative relationship or ownership, but in the deeply personal terms of spiritual love. When Christ spoke of God as his Father, he used the Aramaic word "Abba," which literally means "Daddy." To speak of God this way shocked the religious sensibilities of the religious leaders in Israel, but it created a new way of understanding and approaching God for Christ's followers.

We hear the culmination of all that Jesus has taught his disciples in John 14. Jesus' words take place the night before his crucifixion during the Seder, which Christ transforms into the Eucharist. Christ begins the celebration of the Passover by washing the feet of his disciples, an intimate act of service and humility that astonishes his followers. Jesus also acts as the host of the meal, a role traditionally filled by the head of the family. Jesus then speaks to his followers about his death and declares for them a new commandment, addressing them as "little children": "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The depth of Christ's emotion in the face of his crucifixion reflects the agony of a dying parent knowing he or she is leaving their children and, like children, the response of the disciples is bewilderment, fear, and confusion. But unlike a dying parent, Jesus announces that in the spiritual family of God there are no orphans: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it

neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned.”

Author and adventurer Jacob Norby reflects upon the spiritual nature of the orphan in each of us in his book “Blessed Are the Weird”: “Every pain, addiction, anguish, longing, depression, anger or fear is an orphaned part of us seeking joy, some disowned shadow wanting to return to the light and home of ourselves.” What Norby writes is true, but it is also true that we cannot set aside the orphaned nature of our lives without a family – a family not of flesh and bone, but a family of spirit and love.

In announcing the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Messiah promises his children a spiritual family that cannot be orphaned by death, despair, or sin: “On that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” That is the day in which we are now, the day of a spiritual family connected to God and to each other through the presence of Christ’s never-ending voice. Christ’s voice speaks to us in our times of grief with the promise that a time is coming when all tears will end. Christ speaks to us in our times of sin and disobedience with a reminder that we are wrong and in need of repentance and reconciliation with those we have hurt. Christ speaks to us in our times of strength and prosperity, reminding us that all that we have are gifts to be used for the sake of others. Christ speaks to us in our times of fear, reminding us that, whatever we face, we do not face it alone – we are surrounded by a loving family, with God as our Father and Mother.

Christ speaks to us the loving words of our eternal parent, but do we listen? Bruce Feiler is the writer and host of the PBS miniseries *Walking the Bible*. He is also the author of the book, “Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths.” In reflecting upon the future of Abraham’s children he writes these words: “Abraham achieves in death what he

could never achieve in life: a moment of reconciliation between his two sons, a peaceful, communal, side-by-side flicker of possibility in which they are not rivals, scions, warriors, adversaries, children, Jews, Christians, or Muslims. They are brothers. They are mourners. In a sense they are us, forever weeping for the loss of our common father, shuffling through our bitter memories, reclaiming our childlike expectations, laughing, sobbing, furious and full of dreams, wondering about our orphaned future, and demanding the answers we all crave to hear: What did you want from me, Father?

What did you leave me with, Father? And what do I do now?"

For we who follow Christ, there is an answer to Feiler's question. We know what to do now. We are simply to live in the family that Christ has given us. We know to stop being spiritual orphans and start caring for the physical orphans, and all of their desperate peers who are suffering in this world. When Jesus tells us that we are orphans no more, he intends us to create a world where there are no more orphans – where all are loved; where all are safe; where all are provisioned, comforted, and taught. That is our family obligation, and the church of Jesus Christ is the means by which we live out that obligation.

While it might have been beyond Miss Hannigan to understand why any kid would want to be an orphan, it is not beyond us to provide every orphan, every widow, every suffering heart with the family for which they yearn – Christ's family, a family of believers who welcome God's children to a place where they belong, where every child has a parent, and where every parent is a child of God.