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Larry DeLong

Frederick and the Major General – John 14:15-21

It was a very dark night in the area about twenty miles south of the DMZ in South Korea. My battalion was taking part in a “military exercise” – what we used to call war games – and while most of us were camp, one company of Marines was still out on a patrol, and not due to return to their emplacement until nearly midnight.

When something like this happens, the supply guys go out of their way to try and provide something “hot and wet” – like thick soup – so those men could rest and recharge overnight.

So, even though their camp was several miles away from where I was set up, I decided to be a one-man welcoming committee and hitch a ride with the soup truck.

The problem was, a couple of the guys wanted to talk, and so the truck was long gone by the time I was ready to head home. We were still in the middle of the exercise, so we were practicing light discipline, which meant no flashlights allowed. Instead, we were issued light sticks: plastic tubes with thin glass vials of chemicals inside, which

when you bent them, broke the glass, mixed the chemicals, and made enough light to be seen, but not really enough to see.

Luckily, there was a paved road to follow, and I held the light stick up my sleeve. It wouldn't really light my path, but it would be great if a car came down the road – I could pull it out and hold it behind my back so they could see me (I hoped).

It was about an hour and a half before I could dimly make out the landmarks of our camp, so I started walking to the left, headed for the side road we'd used to get there. There wasn't a sound except my boots on the pavement, and then – I was falling.

Like most people do, I stuck my arms out in front of me, and messed up my hands and left wrist as I fell into a six-foot-deep ditch right next to the road I was aiming for. A little patch of darkness a tiny bit blacker than everything else, I never even guessed it was there.

I crawled up the side and sat down. Right then, I knew I'd missed splitting my head open, breaking a limb, or worse.

I stumbled over to the medical tent, where one of the guys was having a tough night after slipping and having the bottom of a sapling go through his hand. Doc Harrison was there, dressed up my cuts from the broken glass and rock in the ditch, and sent me off to my tent.

It all sounds so stupid now: a walk alone in the dark in a place I'd never seen in daylight nor ever would.

But I was not alone. The company commander had radioed back that I was coming, and even though I didn't know it until the next day, the whole thing was reported to the colonel within minutes.

Jesus is about to leave his disciples. Their whole world – the whole world – was about to change over the next few days, and he couldn't tell them exactly how, because the words just didn't exist. And right now, all he wants them to know is that he will not leave them to their own wits – he will be with them, even though he is not. Still hard to find the words, isn't it?

Back in the day, orphans were pretty common. My father was orphaned at about seven years, packed off to live with one of the various bits of family in the region, but away from his brothers and sister. My grandfather on my mother's side was given to a family who needed another farm hand. Orphanages were the charity of choice in Europe and Great Britain, and some of you may well have grown up near one – or perhaps in one.

The idea of being without family, at least without parents, was and is invoked as a tragedy of the first magnitude and it is. But in the sentimental times of the Victorian age, it was especially poignant, and,

like comedians of every age, Gilbert and Sullivan had to write it into one of their story lines – in “The Pirates of Penzance.”

For those of you unfamiliar with the story line, the hero, young Frederick, is, as the subtitle says, “The Slave of Duty.” Having served his apprenticeship as a pirate, duly honoring his obligation, he leaves the band and falls in love with one of the many daughters of Major General Stanley.

The pirates decide to capture the daughters and marry them (really). But, the pirates themselves all being orphans, when the Major General lies and tells them he is himself an orphan and pleads with the pirates not to leave him alone without family, they relent and do just that.

Frederic, however, discovers the lie; and being a rigorously honest man, tells the pirates the truth in one of my favorite lines in theater: “The Major General is no orphan!” “What?” “ More than that, he never was one!”

I’ll admit, it’s better in the original, but the point is the same as the one Jesus makes to us right here in John 14: “I won’t leave you orphans.”

Sooner or later, most of us will be orphans, in the strict sense of not having a human parent left alive. But the truth of our faith is quite different: none of us are orphans, nor were we ever, nor will we ever be.

Jesus, our friend and brother, our great High Priest, has made us all children of God – and we can never be separated from God’s love.

Not ever.