

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 6A

PREACHED MAY 21, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: John 14.15-21; Acts 17.22-31/ Psalm 66.8-20; 1 Peter 3.13-22

Pentecost - the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church - does not come in our church calendar for another two weeks. And yet, in today's gospel reading we have a somewhat different perspective on the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church.

It is no accident that the fullest expression of Jesus' teaching about the third part of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit) in the gospel of John appears in what is referred to as the **Farewell Discourse**, Jesus' closing teaching to his disciples. At the same time Jesus is saying **goodbye**, he promises the presence of the **Holy Spirit**. At the same time Jesus anticipates his **arrest**, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, he assures his disciples that **his presence will still be known** in and by the Holy Spirit. At the same time the hearts of the disciples are **troubled**, they hear that **the Comforter will come and be present with them** always.

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.... I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." First, a word about the Advocate that Jesus promises. It's actually a bit **tricky** to translate this word from the Greek because it has several overlapping meanings. It can function in a **legal** sense, meaning literally one who **advocates** for you before a court of law. And it can function more **relationally**, by designating one who brings **help, consolation, comfort and encouragement** to another. All of these derive from the most **basic** meaning of the word, to "come along side another."

Note, first, that Jesus promises the disciples *"another Advocate"*. Jesus was, in fact, the **first** advocate. That is, Jesus came along side us in the **Incarnation** (as human flesh and blood) so that we might come to know and see the otherwise invisible God. To have seen Jesus at work is to know God and to anticipate the work of the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus promises the disciples that despite his absence, they will not be alone. *"I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."* Jesus didn't **deny** what was going to happen to him or what the world would be like afterwards. *"In a little while the world will no longer see me,"* Jesus says, *"but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."* The Spirit of God will **continue** to accompany them, even as Jesus' earthly life comes to an end. In fact, he promises that it will be **easier**, not harder, in this new mode. His people will be able to **do things they couldn't do** when he was physically present. So

even though they may feel that Jesus has **abandoned** them, the Spirit will continue Jesus' work of accompaniment and support to the disciples.

So as Jesus helps his disciples prepare for what will soon occur, he says, in a nutshell: "My departure will **distress** you. But **take heart**. I am sending the **Spirit** to help you continue my work." That Spirit is for **us** what the **earthly Jesus** was for his **disciples**: a helper, a counselor, an advocate, a comforter from God – one who **comes to our aid** and defense in time of trouble, one who **accompanies us** through good and bad times, and all the times in between.

But in his final words, Jesus also gives the disciples a **challenge**, to "*keep my commandments*." What are Jesus' commandments? Quite simply, they are to **love God** and to **love our neighbor**. And in John's gospel, love is always an **action** rather than an **emotion**. So, loving God and loving our neighbor sounds **easy** enough, right? Of course we know it's **not**. So Jesus was calling his disciples to live and love in ways that seemed – well, **impossible**. And it **would** have been – and **is** – **impossible**, were it not for the Holy Spirit, who continues to walk alongside us, strengthening us for the work that Christ has called us to do.

So how do we begin tackling Jesus' challenge to us? **First, we love Christ**. We love Jesus because he first loved us. He is the **perfect example** of love in human form. He came to us with patience and love, and he saved us.

Then, **we keep his commandments**. This doesn't mean we suddenly achieve a state of **moral perfection**, with an ability to check off all the ethical imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount. But it **does** mean we respond to Christ's love with a desire to live an orderly and obedient life - one that's organized around the new commandment of Jesus to "*love one another*." Loving and commandment-keeping come together when Jesus says to his disciples, "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*."

Such love isn't so much an **emotion** as it is a deep desire to **order our lives around the example that Jesus set**. It means championing the cause of the **underdog**, reaching out to the **downtrodden**, and working to **build up God's kingdom** on earth. It means **praying for our enemy** and praying for **ourselves** as we interact with people with whom we disagree or hold some prejudice against. It means being willing to **sacrifice for others**: putting aside **our** wants and desires for those in need. It means **loving** people even when - or **especially** when - we don't really **like** them.

Finally, our mission comes to its conclusion when we *receive the Spirit*. Thus, we can take comfort in the promise that we're not alone. By the Spirit Jesus is present with us as one who helps us help others and as comforter when we struggle and suffer. He is there by the Spirit encouraging us in bearing

witness to the good news. Jesus through the Spirit offers us counsel – wisdom for the road.

Let us pray: Loving and Mysterious God, thank you for loving us so much that you sent advocates to guide us throughout our lives. Thank you for sharing your Son with us, providing an example of the embodiment of love we seek to emulate. Help us to be obedient to your commandments and open to the guidance of the Spirit so that we may continue living Your legacy of love for generations to come. AMEN