

Life in the Post-Ascension Church
John 16:12-22
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 19, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I’ve had multiple occasions in the past 10 days or so to mention to some of you individually or in group setting the well-known words of Jesus, “In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.” Those words are not randomly chosen wishful words of encouragement; they reside in a historical context... that context of the Upper Room on the night Jesus was betrayed, a context *including* the words of our gospel reading in which Jesus speaks of his pending departure, the sorrow and lamentation life in this broken world will soon heap upon the Church, and the Church’s comfort to be found in the promised Holy Spirit. In brief, our text is a foreshadowing of two important truths: (1) the Day of Pentecost, of which you and I historically were **not** primary audience and beneficiaries, and (2) the authority of the Scriptures, of which you and I, and every generation, have been and **are** immediate beneficiaries.

Now, if we read this text as Jesus speaks to his immediate audience, we *might* consider the end of the text in light of Jesus' crucifixion and death – that the world will rejoice at Jesus' death and the disciples will lament, but that their sorrow will turn to an Easter joy that no one could ever take from them, even in their own martyrdom. And yet, the context also talks of Jesus going to the Father and sending the Spirit, and that reminds us he here is also speaking of his ascension and of the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost and the visible 'birth' of the Church. And, if such is the case, then one can almost group every generation into a single generation (so to speak) of the post-ascension Church awaiting Christ's glorious return.

In fact, we can even – in a sense – see our own share in the day of Pentecost, can't we, for Jesus did not promise the Holy Spirit to come once, then leave... but to come and *remain* our Comforter. If you ever want the comfort of the promised day of Pentecost, look to your baptism and to the authority of Scripture. As you daily need the comfort of the promised Holy Spirit, make the sign of the cross and say, "God's own child I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ!..." and then, look to that book on your shelf, in your hands, studied with your congregation, the center of the Divine Service, and know that that binding and those pages are important because on those pages you are gifted with Christ's Word and promise to you, to carry you through all sorrows and tribulation.

In times of tribulation and sorrow, we often lose sight of our foundation, lose our moorings, drift from our anchor which is Christ and His Word. In the frustration of living life in a fallen world, we often take matters into our own hands and simply make matters worse. Think of how your sins against loved ones (and I don't mean to excuse *their* sins against *you*) so easily tear apart pathways of trust and build in their place walls of isolation. Think of how defining life according to our societal standards only fosters societal rot and decay and, with it, anger, distrust, and even hatred of one another. And yet, a lack of brotherly love (which is most truly not a reference to society, but especially a reminder to reflect upon our own lack of love toward one another as fellow Christians) is only symptomatic of a lack of faith in God, and our problems one with another also expose our need to repent before God in heaven.

Of course, we can have tribulation of other sorts, as our own bodies fail us, the sinful Old Man within wars against God's will for us, the prince of this world tempts us and preys on our sinful proclivities. And, in the face of it all, we begin to **forget** that Christ – even in the Upper Room and before his death, resurrection, and ascension, he already had planned and promised to sustain us by His Holy Spirit working through the authority of His Word.

It's an age-old problem... this forgetfulness of ours, this sorrow turning into despair of the Word's trustworthiness. Even in the first generation of the Church, St Paul had to admonish the

Galatians, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!” Likewise, consider how often the writer to the Hebrews included exhortation to ‘hold fast’ to the word of truth and to “see that you do not refuse to hear Him”... that ‘Him’ being Christ, the Word made flesh, as brought to your remembrance by the Holy Spirit working through the Holy Word proclaimed in the Divine Service!

Indeed these words of Jesus in our text were words just as much needed in the first century as they are today – again, as if we are part of one big post-ascension generation. But that means, they are also words just as much to cherish today as they were in the first century.

As we wait for deliverance from these tribulations of life in this world, we hold fast to the Scriptures not because we deem them our hope, but because Christ told us – before He ascended, even before He was crucified – that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, would give to us Christ’s Word, that Word which focuses us on the cross, while also pointing us to our future hope on account of that cross. To abandon that gospel, to lose sight of that future reward, to think little of and disregard that Word... leads not just to despair, but leads to condemnation.

The Gentiles (which, of course, is a term meaning “all the nations *not* of Abraham’s line”)... the gentiles of Jesus’ own generation and countless preceding generations knew a thing or two

about not having God's Word... lost without it. In error's maze without it. No hope without it. But, our first reading's overarching theme is that the Word of God is not just for Abraham's line; it's for even the Gentiles ... that includes us! Our first reading says, "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received *the word of God*." Yes, when Jesus says in our text that the Spirit will come and declare all that is Christ's, He will do so for the benefit of *all* – from Jew and Gentile alike – and that includes you; Christ promised it to you.

And, for what benefit? *Merely* psychological? Merely a promise that, though we are sad, temporal life will be happy and you know no tears or tribulation in this life? No! The great benefit Christ has promised you is a share in the Gospel... a gospel not promising perpetual good feelings, but promising eternal life! A gospel not of you turning over a new leaf, but of God turning you toward Himself by the leafless tree of the cross. Isn't that how the faithful rejoiced at the news of the gospel going to the gentiles: "And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

Isn't that amazing, that repentance is not your work, your decision for Jesus, something that comes from your own good will. Repentance is "granted" by God. It is God's gift, where he grants faith, faith that sees one's self for the sinner who we are... faith that hears and hopes in the good news of Christ crucified... thus, faith

that repents and cherishes the free forgiveness of God for Christ's sake.

And as he grants faith and grants repentance and free forgiveness, where is faith then pointed? To what gospel and what hope? Hear it again: "To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." Christ's gospel is a gospel not of methods of temporal happiness for this creation, but a gospel in which God says, "Behold, I make all things new!" A new creation we eagerly await in which "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore" – why not: because we have figured out how to be happy in this life? No, rather because (our second reading says) the former things have passed away." All those things that cause us tears will one day have passed away. The former has passed away, the new has come. *This* is the life **in** which we now have a share and **to** which God will bring in full those to whom he has granted repentance. This is the 'eternal life' which we confess, of which Jesus says "your sorrow will turn to joy", and for which Christ keeps us by His Spirit, that Spirit at work through the Holy Word... read from the lectern, spoken from the pulpit, presented in water and under bread and wine.

Christ keeps the focus of his 'one-generation Church' on the future reward, the finish line at the end of the race now being run, the fatherland at the end of our wilderness wandering. Yes, in this

life we may be foreigners in a strange land, but “our citizenship is in heaven,” St. Paul says, and our joy is hidden with Christ. His promise to the disciples of that Upper Room is, by extension, also a promise to us in *this* room... Our hearts will be turned from lamentation to joy, our eyes from weeping over our sins to beholding the face of God, our lives from a **march** to the grave to a **dwelling** in eternal life:

“Behold the *dwelling* place of God is with man. He will *dwell* with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

But as we look to the future, Jesus knows we live in the present, and we cannot be sustained in the present apart from the Spirit of truth whom Christ sends in his name. And this, perhaps, is the most difficult point to keep straight in daily life... that when Jesus speaks at the beginning of our text, he speaks of the Spirit of truth coming, not universally to tell each individual heart what he has for it, but he was sent by Christ to reveal to the apostles what to record in the Scriptures which glorify Christ by taking *His* Word, *His* ministry, *His* salvific mission and making it known to you. This is the ‘truth’ and the ‘authority’ of the Word we often ignore in daily life... that daily life depends upon Christ, the keeper of the Law and the heart of the Gospel, as pointed to by the Holy Spirit in the Holy Scriptures.

I had an interesting conversation with someone this week who believed the very term “objective truth” was theological and divisive, that we now must be sensitive to everyone having ‘his own truth.’ Notice how the world seeks joy in hijacking the promise that the coming Spirit will bring us (our text says) “into all the truth”?: The world wants the Spirit to come – separate from Christ – not into objective Scriptures, but into each subjective heart, so that each individual heart has his own truth, his own version of creation, his own set of rules and norms for conduct and life, his own gospel and comfort and, ultimately, even his own god.

But Jesus promised that the Spirit would come and make known to the apostles all that is Christ’s –and all that is the Father’s – and Christ and the Father are not divided, but are one – one will, one gospel, one Godhead. All that is truly of God and His promise to us, the Spirit would declare to the apostles, that they might record it for the benefit of every generation (that one great post-ascension generation that is the Church), and that all the Church’s offspring would look upon that authoritative Word and know that the words therein were Christ’s Word to them, just as He had promised in that Upper Room. Instead of our text being a proof that the Spirit will give us our own truths so that you can have *your* truth and I can have *my* truth, our text promises us that the Holy Spirit would be that “Spirit of truth” to guide us into all the truth by speaking of Christ, bringing all things to the disciples’ remembrance, even giving revelation of

the symbolic scenes of the true things to come... so that all might be recorded in the authoritative Word:

- to clean our guilty consciences,
- to comfort our sorrowing hearts,
- to calm our impatience,
- and to lift our eyes and our lives to eagerly anticipate Christ's glorious return, just as He promised... a joy which no one will be able to take from us.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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