

HELP FROM ABOVE

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The Day of Pentecost (Series B)

Confirmation of Luke Dryburgh, Kayla Kuster,
Jasmine Sondrol, Jessica Stenehem, and Lillian Zabinski

May 20, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Day of Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to John*, beginning with chapter 15, verses 26 and 27, and then skipping down to chapter 16, verses 4b through 15. It is on page 765 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away and why that is actually good for them. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 26, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁶ "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

And now skipping down to chapter 16, we resume in the middle of verse 4.

^{16:4b} "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'

⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Dear Lillian, Jessi, Jasmine, Kayla, and Luke. You are weak.

Now I realize that might seem like an odd thing to say. It's probably not what your coaches say to you before a big game, especially after you've practiced all week. And when your teachers pass out the final exam, after you've worked hard all semester to learn the material, they probably don't say, "Here's the test. You'll probably fail, because you aren't very smart." That would not be a kind or wise thing to say.

So why is it that, after two years of memorization and study, and after I've seen you grow in your understanding of the Bible and the doctrine of the Christian Church, I tell you that you are weak? Because I'm not disappointed in you. You're a good class, you have done very well, and I am excited to watch you continue to grow and mature in the Christian faith. But I still call you weak. By the way, I also call myself weak, so you're not alone.

But maybe you thought it strange, during the confirmation service, when we prayed this prayer that has been handed down to us: "They are weak: strengthen them with your might." It doesn't sound very inspiring. But in the Christian Church we are concerned with speaking the truth. If you are weak, it's better for us to tell you so, instead of making you believe you are strong and sending you out into a dangerous world to be destroyed.

It's kind of like when soldiers finish basic training. They are much better equipped to go into battle than before their training, but their bodies are still fragile. They are strong compared to the rest of us, but they are weak compared to the enemy's weapons. So the army tells them to wear their helmet and their vest. And they teach them to be careful. It would be a very bad thing for the army to tell our soldiers that their skin is now bulletproof, because it's not true, and this false belief would lead to many deaths.

Likewise, it would be a very bad thing for us to tell you that you are now strong. You might be strong compared to what you were two years ago, and you might even be strong compared to other Christians. But that doesn't really matter, because no matter how strong you are, the devil, the world, and even your own sinful nature are always going to be stronger. Compared to your spiritual enemies, you are, and will continue to be, weak. This is the reality of the Christian life, and it will remain this way until the Last Day, when Jesus returns.

So we teach our children to sing,

"Little ones to Him belong,

They are weak but he is strong" ("Jesus Loves Me;" #369).

And we remind you on the day of your confirmation that you are weak. And this reality continues throughout our entire lives on this earth. In the face of our enemies—the devil, the world, and our sinful nature—we are and will continue to be weak.

Jasmine and Lillian, you both chose Philippians 4:13 as your confirmation verse: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." You realize this truth: that you are not strong in yourself, but your Jesus is strong, and you can do all things through him. And, by the way, it's not like Jesus grants you the strength to do whatever *you* want. This verse does not promise the ability to be the best volleyball player or the best figure skater in the whole world. That probably won't happen. But it does promise the strength to do what is according to God's will for your life. And those might not always be pleasant things. When the apostle Paul wrote these words, he was specifically talking about the ability to be content despite being poor and in prison (Phil. 1:19; 4:4-12). He was not, by all outward appearances, wildly successful or even remotely successful. Things were not going well for him, but Christ would grant him the strength to persevere through these trials. That's the kind of strength we should expect to receive from Jesus. You will face many trials and temptations in your life, and you are not strong enough to face them, but your Jesus is.

So how does Jesus help you with this? How does he give you strength? You have promised "to remain faithful to the teaching of the Christian Church, and in the use of the means of

grace.” “Means of grace” is Lutheran jargon for the Word of God and the Sacraments, which are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. You have already been baptized, and God preserves you in that covenant of Baptism through his Word and through the body and blood of Jesus. This is how Jesus will give you the strength to persevere in these trials and temptations.

And this is why we urge you to remember your confirmation vows. And as much as we are able as a congregation, we will hold you accountable to them, and we will pray for you. So we urge you to remember the teaching of the catechism. You have memorized it, so continue in it. Keep it by your bed with your Bible. Read through one part of it every day. This will help you remember what you have learned. And you can continue to build on this foundation by reading your Bible—this book which the catechism merely summarizes. Read a chapter or two every day—one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Use your instruction as a foundation for learning the Bible. And continue to be here, worshipping with God’s people and receiving forgiveness through the Word of God and the Lord’s Supper. Confirmation is not graduation. Rather, we see this as part of your transition from being a child in the congregation to a maturing adult in the congregation. Even we adults continue to live on the forgiveness of sins delivered here through the Word and Sacrament. So we urge you to remember your confirmation vows and treasure these three things: your catechism, your Bible, and the regular assembly of the congregation.

Now there’s something very important to understand about these three things: you doing these things will not preserve you in the faith. Remembering your catechism will not preserve you in the faith. Reading your Bible will not preserve you in the faith. Coming to worship with the rest of these saints will not preserve you in the faith. You doing these things will not preserve you in the Christian faith, but the God you find in these things will. The true God who is taught in the catechism, revealed in the Scriptures, and delivered to you by Word and Sacrament in worship will preserve you in the Christian faith, and that is why these things are such great treasures. That is why we treasure these things. And that is why we as a congregation will hold you to your promise to treasure these things—because we want you to be preserved in the Christian faith. We want you to reach the eternal home promised to you. And we want you to bear fruit and have joy in this Christian life along the way.

Jessi, you chose Isaiah 40:31 as your confirmation verse:

“But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.”

So you know that this strength does not come from within you. It comes from the LORD. You wait for him, and he acts. He sends help from above.

In the gospel lesson Jesus speaks of help from above. He promises to send the “Helper,” that is, the Holy Spirit. And Jesus especially ties this promise to his going away.

Over the course of a few chapters here in John, Jesus keeps talking about going away. So we ask ourselves, just like the disciples were asking, *Where is he going?* Earlier Jesus talked about going to prepare a place for his disciples (14:3), and here he talks about returning to the Father so that he might send the Holy Spirit. Kayla, you chose John 3:31 for your confirmation verse. It

speaks of Jesus and tells us where he is from: “He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.” So Jesus came down from heaven, and now he speaks of returning there.

Now we probably tend to think of Jesus’ return to heaven as his ascension forty days after his resurrection. After all, Ascension Day was just ten days ago and today is Pentecost. So it kind of fits with what Jesus says here. He ascends into heaven, and ten days later the Holy Spirit comes in power on the disciples.

But we should read the Bible with the same method we use to read regular books. That is, we think about who is speaking, who they’re speaking to, and when they’re speaking. Not everything is a statement to us in our time. So we remember that Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. He would see them again, plenty of times, before his ascension. And Jesus actually breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples on the evening of his resurrection (20:22). He didn’t make them wait for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit revealed himself in *power* on Pentecost (Acts 1:8), but he came as the comforter and teacher fifty days before that. The Holy Spirit really came on Easter. So when Jesus talks about going away to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit, he’s not talking about his ascension and Pentecost. He’s talking about something else. He’s talking about something much more imminent and the great benefits that will come to all the world because of it. He’s talking about the cross.

Jesus goes to the Father by way of the cross. The beautiful clouds will come later to lift him up. But first he goes by the way of suffering and death. And this is what was necessary to prepare a place for us (14:3). Jesus goes to the Father to present his blood as an atonement for sin. As the letter to the Hebrews teaches, “He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). And Luke, you chose Romans 5:8 as your confirmation verse: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This is what Jesus did to accomplish our salvation. If not for the sacrifice of Christ in our place, we would have no home in heaven. But Jesus has prepared this place for us by his work on the cross.

And if not for the purification of sins that comes by his blood, we would not be able to endure the presence of the Holy Spirit. The most basic thing we know about the Holy Spirit is that he is holy. As a member of the Triune God, he is perfectly holy, and his presence within us is not possible—in fact it would be dangerous—without the purification that comes by Jesus’ blood.

This is why Jesus says, “If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7). Now it’s not as if the Holy Spirit can’t come unless Jesus is in heaven to tell him to come. God the Father is perfectly capable of sending the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is perfectly capable of coming on his own. The issue is that we must first be purified from sin in order to receive the Holy Spirit. So Jesus goes to the Father to present his blood as an atonement for our sins, and when he comes again to his disciples on the evening after his resurrection, he comes breathing the Holy Spirit on them.

There, for the first time, the Holy Spirit was given as a permanent gift for the entire Church. Prior to this, the Holy Spirit had come upon certain people for a temporary period in order to do something miraculous. But now the Holy Spirit is given personally and permanently to every believer. This is why, at the end of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, he says, “Repent and be

baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

This is how we know that the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised to his disciples on the evening before his death, is also promised and given to every believer. So we know that you—Luke, Kayla, Jasmine, Jessica, and Lillian—you have already received help from above, because you were baptized into Jesus Christ. And this is how we know that, as you continue in the use of the means of grace, the Holy Spirit will continue to sanctify and preserve you in the true faith.

You are weak. Remember, this is what you learned concerning the third article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” We admit that we are not strong enough to come to Jesus in the first place, nor are we strong enough to remain in him. “But”—as the meaning goes on—

the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith; in like manner as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in this Christian Church, He daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all believers, and at the Last Day will raise up me and all the dead and will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.

And this is your help from above. Jesus sent you his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to glorify Jesus Christ. He reminds you what Jesus has done to redeem you, “a lost and condemned creature.” He has “bought [you] and freed [you] from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death.” And the Holy Spirit will continue to preserve you in this glorious Christian faith. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.