

Sermon May 17, 2020

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Easter blessings to all of our online streaming participants, and may God bless you and your families in these challenging times. As Easter people, we look to the promise of Jesus' risen life, not only for our future, but also for our present, in which we are called to trust in God's promises and listen for the Holy Spirit working among us. May you all hear the message of the Holy Spirit, which testifies to Christ's victory over death, and which promises abundant life for all of God's children, now and in the age to come.

We are entering the last two weeks of the Easter season in the Church liturgical calendar, which means that Pentecost is coming. But before we get to Pentecost Sunday, which is May 31, we must not forget a feast day on the calendar that we rarely observe any more in the life of our Lutheran churches. This is Ascension Day. Ascension Day always occurs on the Thursday before the last week of the Easter Season. Thus, this coming Thursday, May 21, will be Ascension Day. For those of you who can join me, I will be posting a special Ascension Day video observance, with a reading from Scripture and a brief message, and then a prayer and a blessing. It will take about a half hour.

In the weeks at this end of the Easter season, the lessons from our schedule of Bible readings start to focus on the Holy Spirit. This time of transition from Easter to Pentecost gives us the opportunity to reflect on the significance of the end of Jesus physical ministry in the world, and the beginning of Christ's sending of the Holy Spirit's in the world.

On one level, it is a simple issue of the limits, or physical possibilities, of Jesus' earthly ministry. The Easter season celebrates the resurrection of Christ from the Dead, and the lessons through the Easter season focus our attention on the revelation of his risen presence with the disciples, and the promises and teachings of Jesus that point to his ongoing presence with his followers to this day.

However, if Jesus is raised, he is simply alive, and death has no power over him, and yet he can't be everywhere at the same time. Thus the physical Jesus must

give way to some kind of spiritual presence, a presence that is differentiated from the physical Jesus, yet one with the physical Jesus in mission and purpose. The Ascension of Jesus provides for this transition between bodily presence and spiritual presence, and thus also for the ongoing presence of God the Father, and Jesus the Son, through the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus ascends to be with the Father, we are not left alone. Rather, we are in a new place, a new situation, where the Spirit comes along side us in the physical absence of Jesus' body, and that same spirit creates the spiritual body of Jesus out of those who have been baptized and believe in his name.

Our Gospel lesson for today is from the Gospel of John, and this Gospel is keen to emphasize the unity between Father and Son, Son and Spirit, and thus Father and Spirit. But why do we need to move from Father to Son to Spirit? Why do we need this progression at all?

In practical terms, the three persons of the trinity have different jobs. The Father is the divine essence, existing everywhere at once. Yet, it is impersonal to a certain extent. This part of the Trinity fits well with the idea of a deity that all beings look to, speak to, perform rituals to, yet it remains somewhat impersonal. In our first reading today, as he is wandering around cosmopolitan Athens, the apostle Paul comes to the Areopagus, a square in the city in which there are altars set up to different deities, and he notices the one altar that has an inscription, "to an unknown god." In a way, this altar represents a humble human admission, that God is surrounded in mystery, and left to our own devices, we neither know God or understand God. Without revelation, some kind of divine communication, we are left with altars to a God we can believe must exist, but whom we do not know.

For Christians, as for Jews, this God has been identified in self-revelation. In the history of the people of Israel, this divine being gets very personal, naming itself the God of Israel, the only God who is God, yet the God who decides to enter into a special relationship with a unique people, for the sake of the World. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then this God becomes the God of this people, the descendants of Abraham, and the covenant that they share is the bond between them, from now and for all eternity. If we are disciplined in our rejection of supersessionism, or the idea that Christianity makes Judaism obsolete, Christians will see no rupture in this covenant after the advent of the

ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. It is for us simply a matter of extending that covenant to include more people in the form of a new covenant, as Christ said at the last supper, “this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.”

What is most important for Christians is that God the Son makes God very “local”. As we just noted, this focus of God is not new, but was forecast in the mission and ministry of the People of Israel. Yet, the ministry of Jesus Christ makes this mission very specific, to a specific people in a specific time frame, in a specific place, with very specific consequences, all of which take on cosmic importance for understanding the way God the Father is choosing to act in the world. If the Father gets everything going, the Son comes to do very specific work.

Then, as the work of the Son in this historically limited and focused way comes to a conclusion, after the resurrection, there needs to be a new widening of the focus once again, and it is God the Spirit who makes this possible. The Spirit spreads the outcome and benefits of the Son’s work. The Spirit makes what the Father and Son have done available, and perpetuates it. The Spirit grows this work, nurtures this work, protects this work, and importantly for today’s lesson, advocates for it.

Now, when we hear Jesus refer to the Spirit as the advocate, we understand that the Spirit represents the mission and ministry of the Son and of the Father. The Spirit advocates for the intentions and desires of the Father and son as ideas that the spirit inspires in the church. But in another way, we ARE already the intention of the Father and son. We are the church, the outcome of the work of Father and son, the result that they were shooting for all along. We are a new people, a holy priesthood, as Peter’s first letter revealed to us in our second reading last week: “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4-5)

So we can say that not only does the Spirit advocate for the mission of the Father and Son, but the spirit also advocates for us, for the church. The spirit comes along side us, stands with us in our challenges, abides with us in our struggles,

and gives us a place to abide with the Father and Son, until we are finally joined together in fullness of the trinity, at the end of time.

That the spirit's work is one with Jesus' work, can be seen by the way Jesus refers to the spirit as "another advocate". For the disciples, and for the earliest Christians who experienced the risen Christ, Jesus has been their advocate all along. He has walked alongside them, he has stood with them, he has abided with them in their struggles. Now that he is going to the Father, the Spirit continues this advocacy, and in fact, the spirit extends this advocacy through time and over distance.

But my favorite part of the Spirit's work, and what I want you to meditate on today, has to do with this need for us to have a place to abide in. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says of this other advocate, "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." The Greek verb for remain, translated here as abide, is *meno*. This word is used in John's Gospel 40 times, compared to twelve times in all of the other three Gospels. John the Gospel writer REALLY likes this word. From the many times and ways he uses the word, we know that the word refers to a very special theological concept in John's idea of the church.

John uses the word to signify a disciple's loyalty or deep attachment to Jesus, as well as Jesus' deep loyalty to his disciples. It provides a spatial image for what it means to keep following Jesus in all circumstances. Later, in this same speech that our Gospel lesson is taken from, in which Jesus is giving his disciples his final discourse before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus will say, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (John 15:9-10)

In order to abide, you need to be in a place, you need to be somewhere. Thus we can see the other meanings of abide have this spatial reference. To remain, to stay, each presume a place to remain in, to stay in. And that place is hopefully one of physical safety and refuge. In our own experience, the term "shelter-in-place" carries all of this meaning. When disaster strikes, shelter in place means that it is dangerous to go out, to move about, to try to escape. It is safer to stay where you are, trust your shelter, and wait for the storm to blow over.

In John's use of the term abide, we understand that when Jesus commanded his disciples to abide in his love, he meant this figuratively. Wherever you find yourself, abide in Christ's love. It doesn't depend on the physical place you are in. It is a call to stick with Jesus' love. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is calling on us to be loyal. No matter where you are, no matter where you wind up, stick with Jesus' love. Likewise, when Jesus promises another advocate to be with us, who will abide with us, we know that this spirit stays with us. It never leaves our side. Wherever we may go, wherever we may roam, whatever situation we may find ourselves in, this spirit sticks with us, it never leaves us, it never abandons us.

This spirit helps us by staying or abiding with us. The church I grew up in was called Abiding Peace Lutheran Church. What better promise from God than that Christ's presence with us, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, would bring us peace, and that that peace would stay with us, stick with us, through all the twists and turns of our lives. There is a hymn that always comes to my mind when I think of abiding, and that is Abide With Me; Many of you know it.

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me

So, dear brothers and sisters, as we move through our present affliction, as we walk through this valley of the shadow of death, let us call on God through the power of the Holy Spirit, to abide with us. May we feel the presence of God's holy spirit resting with us, remaining with us, and comforting us, even as we face such great uncertainty about the future. May we come to discover that the spirit that Jesus promises us, which we believe comes to abide with us after Jesus' physical presence leaves us, is the same Spirit of God that has acted in the world since the beginning, and which has been an abiding presence with the world and in the world through every single rotation of these spinning spheres.

Take refuge in this Holy spirit, let this spirit advocate for you in life and in death. When you have nothing to say, when you are out of ideas, when your successes and accomplishments start to pale, and your sins and faults continue to nag you, remember God's abiding Spirit. When your doubts and fears leave you dry-mouthed and mute, let this Spirit pray for you, even in sighs too deep for words. Let the abiding peace of the Holy spirit rest with you, and may you find rest in this Holy Spirit. And may the abiding peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Prayers:

For Jim Firehock, brother of Alice DeSantis,
for Ed Stengel, Jan and Gary Greten,
for Shawn Sweeney
for Anna Greimel
for Kim Daehnke
for John Conti
for all who are facing financial hardship
for all students who are worried about their future

Offering: for the many members of our church who made over one hundred masks for Nurse Megan Hanys and her fellow nurses at Good Samaritan Hospital in Suffern NY