

The Sunday after The Ascension
St. John 15:26-16:4: "We Do Not Contend Alone."
June 1/2, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, we give thanks to You, that through Your Holy Spirit You have appointed us to bear witness of Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: We beseech You, inasmuch as the world cannot endure such testimony and persecutes us in every way, grant us courage and comfort, that we may not be offended because of the cross, but continue steadfastly in Your testimony, and be always found among those who know You and Your Son, until we obtain eternal salvation through the same, Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 157)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "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. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning. / "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor Me. / "But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who never made a promise He didn't keep, dear fellow redeemed:

The disciples had gone through the anguish of Good Friday and Holy Saturday when Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. They had experienced the euphoria of Easter Sunday when Jesus appeared to them alive again. And now after forty days, they watched Him rise up in the sky until a cloud hid Him from their sight. What would you be thinking in that moment?

The disciples looked intently skyward hoping that Jesus might perhaps come right back again. Instead two men appeared by them in white robes and told them there was no need to stare toward the clouds. Jesus had been "taken up" into heaven, they said, but He would come back again (Act. 1:11).

So it was true. The visible presence of Jesus, which had brought the disciples such comfort, was no longer. They must go forward alone. And yet they wouldn't be alone. Jesus had promised them, "behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mat. 28:20). Jesus would be invisibly present with them and work among them through His Word and Sacraments. "For where two or three are gathered in my name," He said, "there am I among them" (18:20).

He also promised that when He went away to His Father, He would send them the Helper, the Spirit of truth. When would the Holy Spirit come? Jesus told them: *“you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”* (Act. 1:5). He told them to return to Jerusalem and wait for this to happen. They did not know how long to wait or what to look for, but they did what Jesus said.

How do you suppose they passed the time? They didn't have smartphones or Facebook, no TV to watch, no podcasts or music to listen to. The Book of Acts tells us that *“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers”* (Act. 1:14). This is what they did when Jesus left them. They prayed in His name to the Father.

Their actions in this difficult time are instructive. This was a time that they had many more questions than answers. They still feared what the Jewish or Roman leaders might do to them. They felt utterly outnumbered and weak. They did not know what to do next. All they could do was wait and pray.

I'm sure you can relate. You have faced situations like this, times when you had more questions than answers. You have felt afraid and weak. You have been unsure how to move forward. All you could do was wait and pray. But that is not a bad position to be in! It is in such times that we realize we are not in control, that we cannot fix everything. There is nothing we can do but commend our life and our future into the hands of the merciful Lord and pray that His will be done.

One of those times that we come before God in prayer is when we are criticized or attacked for believing and doing what the Bible says. This sort of opposition can come at us in school, in the workplace, in the public square of our local or online community, or even in our own homes. We can also face this trouble from within the church, from those who do not want to hear the truth of God's Word.

Jesus told the disciples that this would happen. He said, *“They will put you out of the synagogues,”* the Jewish places of worship. Because they preached the truth about Jesus, that He is the true Son of God who came to save the world through His death and resurrection, they would be excommunicated by the Jewish leaders. They would be kicked out of the synagogues. They would be told that their doctrine has no place in the holy church.

The persecution of the truth would not stop there. Jesus said, *“Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”* This is what Saul did. He approved of the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Act. 8:1). Then he continued to ravage the church by dragging Christian men and women off to prison and death (v. 3). Jesus said that some like Saul would do this, *“because they have not known the Father, nor Me.”*

But didn't Saul worship the Lord? He described himself as *“a Hebrew of Hebrews,” “a Pharisee,”* and *“under the law, blameless”* (Phi. 3:5,6). He may have been a devout follower of Old Testament law, but he denied the promises of God. By rejecting God's Son in the flesh, he showed that he

had no love for the Father. Jesus stated it clearly, *“No one comes to the Father except through me”* (Joh. 14:6).

So there are some who think they are acting in line with the Father but are actually opposed to Him. This includes those who change what the Bible says or ignore certain parts of it because it does not fit the thinking of society. A large section of the visible church today has compromised the Bible in order to fit in with the world. We see this in the way many church bodies, congregations, and individual Christians deny what the Bible says about creation, the sanctity of human life, and the restricting of sexual activity between one man and one woman in marriage.

We can understand why so many have caved in these areas. It is difficult to swim against the current, to push back against popular trends in society. Contending against the world has consequences. It often means the loss of respect and honor. It means trouble and pain. A few verses before today’s text, Jesus said, *“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you”* (Joh. 15:19).

How are we to respond? Should we hate others as much as they hate us? No, Jesus tells us to love them (Mat. 5:44). And how should we love them? We love them by praying for them and by speaking the truth. Telling the truth of God’s Word is always loving, even if it is not always welcome. Nowhere in the Bible does God tell us to lie. To lie is to join the devil, *“for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (Joh. 8:44).

Believers in Jesus tell the truth about Him, and the Holy Spirit empowers them to do this. In today’s text, Jesus says the Holy Spirit *“will bear witness about Me”* – He will testify about what Jesus did and remind us what Jesus said (Joh. 14:26). In this way, the Holy Spirit equips us to bear witness, to testify in the world. We may feel as though we stand alone, but we do not.

Jesus told His disciples that they would be delivered up to the synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors for His name’s sake. *“This will be your opportunity to bear witness,”* He said. *“Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict”* (Luk. 21:14-16).

The Lord promises to guide us in speaking His Word, because He wants more to have the hope that we have. The message of salvation in Christ is not just for us, it is for everybody. All sinners need this equally. There is no reason why we should have this salvation while others do not. We are not better than they are. We don’t deserve it more.

But just as God has granted us forgiveness by His grace, by His undeserved love, so we pray that He grants it to all others. We want them to have the peace we have when we hear how Jesus purchased and won us lost and condemned sinners through His innocent suffering and death. We want them to experience the joy of knowing our death is only temporary because of the resurrection of Christ. And we want them to taste the holy food and drink we do when we join together at the Communion rail and consume Jesus’ own body and blood.

Holding to what the Bible teaches can make us feel like a target is on our backs, that we are alone in the world. But of all the things that may be said about believers in Christ, they are most certainly not alone. Jesus gives us brothers and sisters in the faith to encourage us by pointing us to the promises of God. These promises are sure and powerful. Through these promises, Jesus Himself comes to us and sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and keep us in the faith and to strengthen us as we contend for the truth.

There is no more beautiful and edifying thing we can possess than the truth of God's Word. It is a bright light shining in a dark world. It is a solid rock to stand on. It is our very life. We would rather lose everything else that we currently have than to lose the saving Word of Christ. This is what Saul concluded after he was converted and became a great testifier of the truth. *"But whatever gain I had," he said, "I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phi. 3:7-8).*

This is why we contend, albeit inconsistently and weakly and timidly. We still have fears and doubts because of our sin. But we cling to Jesus by faith, knowing that *"there is salvation in no one else" (Act. 4:12)*. This salvation must be proclaimed *"to the whole creation" (Mar. 16:15)*, so that more sinners like the disciples and you and me will learn that no amount of trouble in this world could *"separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39)*.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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