

May 20, 2018: Pentecost Sunday (Year B)
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15: Better Than Jesus?

Our text for this morning, like our text from last week, is taken from the larger portion of Scripture known as the Upper Room Discourse. Jesus' final conversation with his disciples before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. As we saw last week, he and the disciples both have his departure in mind. The disciples are not taking the news well.

Read Text

I made my grandfather cry one time. Well twice if you count the time I got my ear pierced. That did not go over well. I'm talking about the time I made him cry when I told him that it was not likely that Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey. I was in college at the time, and I had recently been told by a professor that Mary probably could not have afforded a donkey, and that she most likely had to make the journey on foot. For as long as he could remember, my grandfather had been told that she did ride a donkey. He was not prepared to imagine the story any other way.

I know now that whether or not Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem is really not that important. It would have made a huge difference to her, but it makes no difference whatsoever in terms of the meaning of the story. Maybe she did ride a donkey. We have no way of knowing. I have always regretted that conversation. It was completely unnecessary. But I did learn some things from it. I learned that possessing knowledge is not the greatest thing in the world, and that knowledge and pride are not a good combination. It also made me more aware of our emotional attachment toward our beliefs about God, even beliefs that may be incorrect, and incorrect in a way that does matter.

There is a lot of bad theology out there. Bad theology that needs to be corrected. But doing so could result in some hurt feelings. Some of you may be offended, or upset, or maybe even shed a tear over what I am about to say. But it needs to be said. And if you are angry it will be much harder to go to sleep. Now that I have really got your attention, prepare to be disappointed. I stopped being controversial years ago. Here it is. You know those yellow signs that you see all over the place, maybe even in your own yard, that have the words "Thank You Jesus," printed on them? Bad theology. Very Bad. They need to go. If you do have one in your yard, bear with me. If you don't, but are thinking about getting one, I'm about to save you \$8.

There is this idea very prevalent among Christians that Jesus is the end all, be all. That being a Christian begins and ends with Jesus. The "Thank You Jesus" signs that I referred to reinforce this idea. But there is so much more. If you look through a hymnal you will find hymns like, "Jesus Is the Only One I Need," "Jesus is All the World to Me," and "Jesus Only." Or turn on your local Christian radio station or go to a contemporary worship service and you will be inundated with what someone has referred to as "Jesus is my boyfriend" songs. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. He is all some Christians ever talk about. Why is that a problem? Because Jesus seems to suggest here that there is something, or someone rather, that is of more benefit to us than he is, in terms of our journey toward salvation.

I mentioned earlier that Jesus' big concern here is his imminent departure from this world, but more specifically, from his disciples. And his disciples share that concern. They were distraught. They were beside themselves with grief as the reality of what Jesus was saying was beginning to sink in. They were speechless, unable even to ask Jesus where he was headed. As Jesus observed, their hearts were full of sorrow. And we can understand that.

Just think of all that Jesus was to them. These were men and women who had been brought up to believe in a God that demanded obedience to literally hundreds of rules and regulations. A record-keeping God who only forgave sins through a carefully regimented sacrificial system. A God who was only approachable through his priests, and spoke only through select religious leaders.

And Jesus shattered those misconceptions. He reduced the hundreds of laws to two, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. He taught them that God's love was unconditional, and that his forgiveness was given freely to those who were truly repentant. He explained that God knew each one of them personally, and intimately, and that they could go to him directly. This is really just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus had opened their eyes and hearts and minds to so many amazing truths. And now he was talking about leaving them? That was more than they could handle.

Jesus was clearly moved by their sadness. Throughout this entire conversation he tried to reassure them that while he was leaving them, he would not leave them orphaned. The Father would send another advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would remain with them forever. But the Holy Spirit could not be sent until Jesus had returned to his Father. It was for this reason that Jesus said it was to their advantage that he leaves them, which implies that the Holy Spirit was somehow better than he was. That must have been really hard for them to believe. So he went on to explain some of what the Holy Spirit would accomplish. (This is by no means an exhaustive list. This is the third time in the Upper Room Discourse that Jesus describes what the Holy Spirit will do).

In terms of the world, the Holy Spirit would do three things; prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment. Referring to the Holy Spirit as an advocate, and then using this term prove, points to a courtroom scene, where the Holy Spirit is acting as a prosecuting attorney, presenting evidence and making his case. The word translated prove can also be translated expose, which brings to mind what Jesus did. As the light of the world, he shined in the darkness, revealing the truth about these things.

In John's Gospel, sin is not defined as particular behaviors, but not believing in Jesus, because it is only through believing in him that a person can receive his forgiveness. After Jesus went to be with his Father, the Holy Spirit would continue to present him to the world through the testimony of the disciples. Each person who heard this testimony would have the same choice to make about Jesus, whether they believed in him, and would receive the forgiveness he offered, or not believe and so remain guilty of sin.

Righteousness refers to being in a right relationship with God, or you might say being on good terms with God. The world has many ideas about what righteous looks like, but Jesus showed a person who is in a right relationship with God is listening to his voice, obeying his commands, loving his fellow human beings. After Jesus went to be with his heavenly father, the example for the world to follow would be Jesus' disciples, who now filled with the Holy Spirit, would live as Jesus lived.

As far as judgment is concerned, the world's system of judgment is faulty. According to the world, Jesus deserved to die. Not according to God's judgment. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God raised Jesus from the dead, proving the world was wrong about him. And the world would be reminded of this whenever the disciples celebrated Jesus' resurrection.

The Holy Spirit would also play a role within the community of faith.

He would guide them into all truth, declaring to them the things that are to come. Jesus had a much clearer sense of what the future would hold for his disciples, but it was more than the disciples could handle all at once. The Holy Spirit would communicate these things to the disciples over time, as they were prepared to receive it. There were also new situations they would encounter, such as whether or not to allow gentiles to become followers of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit would guide them in those times.

Like us, the disciples were forgetful. They would not be able to remember all the things that Jesus taught them. So the Holy Spirit would remind them. There were probably many things Jesus said to them that didn't make any sense at the time, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, they would recall those things and realize what Jesus was saying. But the Holy Spirit would not add or take away from any of Jesus' teaching. Because the Holy Spirit was not distinct from Jesus or his Father, but one in the same.

These are some of the things that Holy Spirit would accomplish. You can't help but notice that Jesus did all these same things. So you still might be wondering, what can't we just say, "Thank You Jesus." Why do we even need the Holy Spirit? Better yet, how is the Holy Spirit an improvement over Jesus?

First of all, the Holy Spirit is not better than Jesus. But the Holy Spirit is every bit as necessary as Jesus to the completion of God's plan of salvation, and every bit as worthy of our thanks, our worship and our praise.

Jesus alone is not enough. Jesus was fully God, but he was also fully man, and as such, he had limitations. He lived in a certain time, over 2,000 years ago. In a certain place, many thousands of miles from here. He is too large to dwell within the human heart. He cannot be everywhere, and at all times, leading, guiding, convicting, inspiring and encouraging the millions of people who have called themselves Christians. By himself he could not have completely changed the course of human history the way he has. But working with, and in, and through the Holy Spirit, now that is a different story.

The people John was writing too were most likely the first generation of Christians who had no personal, first-hand knowledge of Jesus. They never saw him for themselves. They had only heard about him, and then probably only from people who had also never had a personal encounter with Jesus. The promise of the Holy Spirit could have meant even more to them than the original twelve disciples who heard it from the lips of Jesus himself. The Holy Spirit closed the gap created by the years and distance that stood between them and Jesus. It proved to them that Jesus was indeed still alive, still loving, still forgiving, still guiding, still directing, still saving.

How much more true should this be of us, so much further removed from the person of Jesus? How often do we thank God for the Holy Spirit? How often do we talk about all the Holy Spirit has done, and is doing, in our lives, even in this very moment?

You must have Jesus. Without Jesus, none of this would be possible. But you must have more than Jesus. You must also have the Holy Spirit. Without it, salvation would not be possible for any who have claimed to be followers of Jesus, including the original twelve disciples.

We must have the Holy Spirit in order to present Jesus to the world. Without the Holy Spirit we could not tell others the good news of the Gospel, as Jesus commanded us to do. Without the Holy Spirit we could not be the examples of righteousness that the world so desperately needs to see. Without the Holy Spirit raising Jesus from the dead, we could not challenge the rulers of this world with any hope of vindication.

We must have the Holy Spirit in order to experience Jesus living in us and in our church. Without the Holy Spirit we could not have any sense of a relationship with Jesus. We could not sense his presence, and the peace and comfort it brings us. Without the Holy Spirit, we could not remember the teachings of Jesus, or understand them, or know what it means to follow them in this time and in this place. Without the Holy Spirit, we would be led astray by so many who have attempted to add to or take away from Jesus' teachings.

I don't really have a problem with those "Thank You Jesus" signs. I just think there ought to be a "Thank You Holy Spirit" sign next to it. If we really want to be theologically correct, there ought to be one that says, "Thank you Heavenly Father" on the other side. Or just create one sign that says "Thank you Trinity." I would pay \$8 for that. Maybe we could make a bunch of them, and sell them to raise money for the new building. Then we would be known for our chicken pie, barbecue, and good theology.