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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/27/2012, Pentecost Sunday
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
The Holy Spirit: Our Great Advantage

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Pentecost Sunday sermon is about the voice of Jesus within you. Treasure that voice. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit within you, but magnify that Spirit in your lives. The rest of this sermon is exposition of Holy Scripture along these lines, but this is my theme: cherish the voice of Jesus within you. Nurture it, like someone lost in the wintertime northern woods nurturing kindling into a roaring campfire that can save his life, save her life. Nurture the voice of Jesus in your heart with the goal that someday your voice will join that of St. Paul who was able to give this good testimony:

...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me... (Galatians 2:20, RSV)

You have breath in your lungs. It is never too late to seek the very Spirit of God in your life.

THEIR HEARTS ARE HEAVY

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus, who knows the hearts of all humanity, knows that his farewell discourse with his disciples has made them sad. Their hearts are heavy -- so heavy they can hardly think straight. The setting is the Last Supper. Jesus has told his disciples that he is soon to leave them. He is referring to his coming passion and death, his resurrection and his ascension. After these holy events, his disciples will no longer see him as they did before. They will look for him, but not see him as they were used to seeing him. They will listen for his voice, but not hear it in the plain, sweet way they were accustomed to hearing. He says that he is leaving them, and so they naturally imagine that they will be left bereft, with memories of him, to be sure, but who cares for a memory compared to the real person? Oh! They are sad. But in this morning's text, Jesus tells them something new, something they probably cannot even grasp -- at least, not at first. He speaks of an "advantage." He tells his sorrowing disciples that it is an advantage for them that he is going away:

⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is *to your advantage* that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16:6-7, RSV)

A PUZZLE

A few Sundays ago, in the Gospel Lesson for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Jesus taught his disciples to “abide in him.” He likened himself to a vine and his disciples to branches. It is needful for the branches to remain connected to the vine, else they dry and wither and prove useless. So, Jesus said this:

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”
(John 15:5, RSV)

This teaching about the vine and the branches occurred in that same evening conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It is called our Lord’s “Farewell Discourse,” and it stretches from Chapters 13-17 in St. John. We have a puzzle, then, do we not? In one part of the conversation, Jesus bids his disciples to abide in him. Apart from him, they can do nothing. Yet one chapter later he tells them that he is going to be leaving them, and acknowledges that they are filled with sorrow to hear this. How, then, are they to abide in him? If they can do nothing *apart* from him, what is to become of them when he *departs* from them?

I think this question brings us close to the “advantage” of which Jesus speaks in this morning’s reading. Adding it all up, I think the answer to the puzzle goes like this: the disciples can and ought to abide in Jesus, even when he departs, because he does not intend to depart from them! He is going to leave them, and yet he is *not* going to leave them. The glorious thing is to interpret this saying in the strongest way possible.

WEAK WAYS OF UNITY

I mean, there are weak ways in which it could be said that someone departs from us, and yet does not depart. We could be speaking of memories, for example. At the graveside, the preacher could say, “Do not grieve overmuch, for you still have your loved one in your memories, and no one can take those away from you.”

Or, stronger, we could be speaking of the contribution of the departed one to your character. Again, the preacher could stand at the dock of the bay and watch with you as someone dear to you sails away, “Do not grieve overmuch. Your loved one lives on in you. Indeed part of *who you are* will forever be determined by the fact that you have known this person.”

Or, also strong, we could be speaking of the ways and ideals and teachings of the departed one. Take Socrates, for example. In a way, Socrates remains alive in the world to the degree that people preserve his teachings. It is the same with honoring any one: Mohammed or St. Francis or Martin Luther King Jr. or anyone. So, the preacher could comfort you by saying, “Your loved one lives on in the good things you will accomplish because you learned those good things from your beloved.”

These are fine ways of abiding with someone you care about. But Jesus is speaking of something stronger still. Jesus is speaking of a unity between the disciple and himself -- a unity so strong that death cannot disrupt it, nor can distance -- not even the distance between heaven and earth. I am speaking of the presence of Jesus *in* you. I do not mean *memories* of Jesus in you, but of the *spirit* of the man himself. I speak of a blessed confusion, in which it becomes hard for us to sort out whether it is we ourselves who speak and act or rather Jesus *in us* who is speaking and acting.

A COMPARISON

Let me give a human comparison. If you have been blessed with good parents, then something of their disposition and character is probably within you. The old sayings are true: “Like father, like son.” “Like mother, like daughter.” “The apple never falls far from the tree.” Who we are and how we conduct ourselves reflects the good fact that we have had these particular parents.

Now, let’s press this idea in a heavenly direction, in a Pentecost direction. Imagine what it would be like if the disposition and character of *Jesus* were in our heart. Suppose we could approach some new person or problem with some part of us yearning to approach this new person or problem as Jesus would. Suppose that amidst the cacophony of voices trying to control us, there were the actual voice of Jesus trying to control us.

Sometimes we chuckle and try to explain the contrary directions in which we want to go by saying, “Well, an angel sits on one of my shoulders, but a devil sits on the other.” But the truth is often more complex than that. There are not simply two voices urging us on, but many voices. Covetousness and lust combine with the influence of our parents and the ideals of our educations and the pressure of popular culture. Pentecost is the miracle that among the voices available to every Christian is the living voice of Jesus himself. Will we listen? Will we train ourselves to listen more and more to the voice of our Good Shepherd? Will we strive to be inspired by Him, to be moved by his Holy Spirit? Will we let that Spirit grow within our hearts and our lives?

Think of the original twelve disciples. When Jesus was near, then things were good for the disciples. But the moment Jesus stepped around the corner, or went off to spend the night alone in prayer on top of some mountain, the disciples were left somewhat adrift. Think of that chaos at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus and the inner three disciples are up on the mountain enjoying that glorious sight, while the remaining nine disciples are stumbling along as best they can with the troubled boy and his father’s request that they should heal the lad. They do the best they can, but they seem unable to help. When Jesus comes down the mountain, the father tells him the story:

¹⁵Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. ¹⁶And I brought

him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him. (Matthew 17:15-16, KJV)

Well, Pentecost is not so much the promise that we can heal and do miracles like Jesus did, but rather that Jesus himself is willing to abide with us. He is ascended, yes! That is what Ascension Thursday was about. And yet he is not ascended in such a way as to have abandoned us.

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. (John 14:18, RSV)

The underlying Greek word speaks of “orphans.” In fact, that is how the New Revised Standard Version puts it:

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

I know it might sound corny, but Pentecost invites us to be happy about this old idea: that Jesus dwells in heaven, yes, but is willing to dwell in your heart too. And among all the voices rising up in our souls, if we will listen, we will hear the “still, small voice” of our Lord Jesus. The trick in the Christian life is to let that voice grow in us and to have evermore sway in our lives.

ANYTHING WORTHWHILE IN ME?

If you are discouraged you might ask yourself the question, “Is there anything worthwhile in me? Is there any wisdom in me, any goodness, any nobility?” The answer, dear ones, is yes. It is the great gift of Baptism that our resurrected and ascended Lord is willing and able to set up a dwelling place within our hearts, each of us. Let us take his Word into our hearts and then heed him. As the apostle urges, let us not “grieve” the Holy Spirit within us:

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:30-32, RSV)

Far from grieving the Holy Spirit, let us cherish Christ within us, permitting him to lead us into a holy life and to prove a true blessing for our neighbors. Let Christ within us being like water springing up to eternal life:

... whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:14, RSV)

Indeed, let us count the voice of Jesus and his Holy Spirit to be our greatest treasure and our most important advantage in this weary world:

...it is *to your advantage* that I go away, [says Jesus] for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16:7, RSV)

Point to yourself, my brothers and sisters. Jesus says, “I will send him to *you!*” even the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Son. Amen.