

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
4 May 2005
The Chapel of the Cross
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Acts 17:22-31/1 Peter 3:13-22/John 14:15-21/Psalm 66:7-18

O God, from whom all good things come: Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to think those things which are right, and by your goodness help us to do them; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When I was growing up, our family moved a lot. In fact, we once moved three times in just two years! This was because my dad worked for Northwest Airlines and was always being transferred to a new position in a different city. These moves were promotions for my dad, and so they were supposed to be good news -- more salary, more meaningful work, more job security with the company. But all that moving was difficult for our family too. I remember hating all the changes that moving meant -- new neighborhood, new house, new room, new school, new friends. And of course, having to say goodbye to my friends was the worst part for me. It seemed that just as I was finally making friends somewhere, it was time to leave again. The first couple of times we moved, I made promises to the friends I was leaving behind. I promised to write letters [no email back then] and even to try to get my parents to let me come back to visit. My friends and I promised that we'd always be friends no matter where we lived. After our third move, however, I knew better than to make promises like these. You see, it never worked out the way I thought it would. My old friends and I would write a couple of times, but we always lost touch. Our lives went in different directions, so, rather than making promises I knew we wouldn't keep, I just said goodbye and got in the car.

No matter how old we are, or how many times we do it, saying goodbye to friends and loved ones never gets any easier. Indeed, today's worship service marks the beginning of a series of "goodbyes" to many whom we love in this community. Today we wish farewell and Godspeed to graduates and those who have joined us to complete a Lutheran year; to those beginning internship, CPE, and other pursuits over the summer; to faculty who are retiring or beginning a time of sabbatical; and to staff members who leave us to join other communities of work and service. In just a couple of weeks, the PLTS community will look and feel very different. Those who stay and those who go will miss one another very much. In very real ways, our community will not be the same again.

In today's Gospel text, we find Jesus in the midst of saying goodbye to his friends and loved ones too. Luther, in his commentary on this text, suggests that it is as though Jesus were saying,

I must now go from your sight. Therefore I tell you this as My farewell and Godspeed. ... I will not leave you without comfort and help.... And though I depart from you physically, I shall send you another Comforter from the Father. ... Until now I, through My bodily presence, have been your Comforter. You have taken delight in Me and have felt secure and fearless, and you would like to remain with Me. But now that you hear that you are about to lose this comfort, you are cast down and troubled. Yet My departure shall not harm you. ... For I myself will ask the Father to grant you the Comforter, who will stay with you forever.... He will strengthen you and make you courageous and bold, far better than I can now do by My physical presence. ... Therefore you will not lack for comfort, strength, courage and wisdom.¹

Don't be sad or afraid because I am leaving you, Jesus says to his friends. My physical departure will not harm you. In fact, it will be **better** for you than if I stayed. Wait a minute! That can't be right! How can it be **better** for them to lose Jesus' physical presence among them? I will not leave you orphaned, he promises, but neither can I remain with you physically. The Father will send another Advocate. How does that work, exactly?

Luther explains it this way. He suggests that the Advocate that the Father will send will remain with the disciples "not only for a time, as Jesus is doing, but will stay with them forever and will comfort them far more effectively than Jesus has done by His physical presence."² Luther's use of the word "effectively" gives a clue, I think, about just how it is that Jesus will remain truly present in the world after his death, his resurrection and his ascension. Jesus' presence -- a matter of his physical location up to this point in the Gospel account -- will now become with the gift of another Advocate -- his **effective and everlasting** presence and availability to the whole community of faith and to its individual members as well. The Father's gift of the Spirit means that Jesus' presence in and to the community of faith will no longer be dependent upon his physical location on planet Earth. Rather, Jesus' presence in the community of faith will be dependent upon God's gift of the Spirit. In order for Jesus' saving presence to remain in the world and to be **effective** in the world, it must from now on be present everywhere -- that is, his presence must no longer be limited to the place where Jesus himself is physically located. This Advocate, Jesus promises,

¹ Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 14-16," *Luther's Works*, vol. 24 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 101.

² *Ibid.*, 110.

can and will always and everywhere be “for us” – for his disciples, for you, for me, and for all those in every time and every place who love him and keep his commandments.

To lose Jesus’ physical presence on Earth, then, is to gain another Advocate – the Spirit of Truth which the Father will send. Jesus physical departure, through death and into resurrection and ascension does not leave us all alone here in the world. Indeed, Jesus promises – “I will not leave you orphaned. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.” According to Luther, it is as if Jesus is saying, “Even after you can no longer see me physically, it will be possible for you to indeed see me. The Spirit, your Advocate, will make this possible for you. Even after I am no longer alive in the way I am now, I will live, and you will live as well. The Spirit, your Advocate will make this possible for you. Without the Spirit, it would not be possible to see me after I leave you, but because the Father will give the gift of the Spirit, I will indeed be truly present.” These are powerful promises Jesus is making. You will not be orphaned! You will see me! You will live! This will be true, although I am no longer with you physically, precisely because of the gift of the Spirit, your everlasting and ever-present Advocate.

But again, I want to ask, how does this work exactly? How does the gift of the Spirit help us to see Jesus whom we can no longer see physically? How does the gift of the Spirit help us to live as disciples of Jesus? Where should we look for this Advocate? How will we know when we are seeing the Spirit of Truth and when we are seeing another spirit? Let’s return to the Gospel text. In verse 17 we read that the Spirit of Truth cannot be seen or known by “the world.” Hmm... I guess that to see and to know the Spirit of Truth will not be simply a matter of looking around at what we see and know in the world. But verse 17 continues with these words, “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” Interestingly, the Greek word translated as “in” can just as easily be translated with the word “among.” Thus, Jesus seems to be saying that we can and will know the Spirit of Truth, not because we can see it with our eyes, but rather because it will be abiding with us and will be among us.

To put it another way, the Spirit of Truth will be known and discerned **in, with, and under the community of faith and its practices.** The gift of the Spirit is given to the whole community of faith, and discernment of the Spirit is a communal rather than a strictly personal interior experience. The gift of the Spirit is not “in us” as a personal possession or private pipeline to the divine. Rather it is in us and among us in Christian community. We **will** see Jesus present in the community of faith gathered together around Word and Sacrament. Indeed, it is the Spirit that makes communities of faith to be the very body of Christ in the world. And how will such

communities be recognizable? How will we know that the Spirit is present and at work among us? According to our text, this body of Christ in the world, which is created by the Spirit, and which we **can** see and experience is recognizable because it keeps Jesus' commandments. Several verses after our text today, the Gospel writer clearly identifies just what Jesus' commandment is. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." How is the Spirit of Truth known? How is the living body of Christ in the world recognizable? As the familiar song puts it, "They will know we are Christians by our love." That is, our practices of love – practices grounded in the love Jesus shows for us, practices nourished and strengthened through Word and Sacrament, practices undertaken in obedience of Jesus' own commandment to love one another – truly make of us a community in which the Spirit of Truth is known and Jesus himself is indeed present and visible. And just as Jesus' presence in the world is no longer dependent upon his physical location, so participation in the living body of Christ in the world – a community continually created by the Spirit and marked by love for one another – is therefore not finally dependent upon physical proximity for its existence either. Rather, it is dependent for its existence upon the gift of the Spirit, our everlasting Advocate. And so Jesus can promise that because of the gift of the Spirit, "You will **know** that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." And so, although in a couple of weeks the PLTS community will look very different to the naked eye, the gift of the Spirit that abides with us and is present among us truly does bind us together into the visible, recognizable body of Christ in the world no matter where we travel next. Yes, it is true – we will miss one another very much. But we can also give thanks for the gift of the Spirit, who will continue to abide with us, who is always and everywhere present among us, who binds us together into the visible body of Christ in the world, and in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Thanks be to God for the gift of this Spirit! Amen.