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## Easter 5 Series C 2017

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## **Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14**

In this Easter season we have been asking questions about the presence of Christ. Having risen from the dead, it is reasonable to ask “where is he?” Please don’t think that this is a flippant or irreverent sort of question for folks to ask. It is not. Genuine faith that takes seriously the Gospel witness will ask this sort of a question. I find that it is the faith which has accommodated itself to the Enlightenment’s assumptions which finds such a question is irreverent or inappropriate.

As we get closer to the Festival of Pentecost, the work of the Spirit in all this starts to be highlighted in the answers we hear to our questions. Christ’s presence in our lives is mediated through the Holy Spirit. In the economy of salvation we discover the Trinity. The Father sends the Son to die and redeem the world. The Son obeys the Father, he takes up human nature in the incarnation, suffers, dies, and rises again. In so doing he gathers up the fallen world to himself and restores that which was lost. The Spirit’s role in all this is in application. By his work he “connects” us to the work of the Son. I rather like to think of the Spirit as a great extension cord. He does not produce the salvation I need. That is the work of the Son, but he is also necessary. Like a radio some distance from the outlet, unless I am plugged into the power, I have no music. Being two thousand years distant, I need someone to plug me into the cross and the empty tomb. That work is the work of the Spirit. Yes, Jesus is active in my life today, but He is active in my life because through the Spirit He is present. Without the Spirit’s work, I do not have the presence of Christ. Without the Spirit connecting me to Christ, Jesus is only an historical figure that lived a long time ago and whose effects can only be felt as a series of cause and effects which have continued to ripple through the centuries. I do not have the living, breathing, and comforting presence of Christ the Good Shepherd to whom we sang last week except the Spirit is bringing him to me.

The next three weeks of the Eastertide will continue to focus our attention on the great work of Jesus which followed the resurrection. Just as essential as his great rescue which he accomplished on the cross, Jesus’ other great salvation event is that he pours out the Holy Spirit. These weeks which lead up to the event of Pentecost will still be Easter weeks, this work is the work of the resurrected Christ, but it will also be preparation for Pentecost. The focus, just as in Advent and Lent, will be on the great need we have for the Spirit. This is not really penitential, but rather an acknowledgement of dependency. Jesus will note that we are alone and orphaned without him, but with the Spirit we are no longer alone, we are no longer orphans.

What is perhaps strange to our ears is the fact that Jesus speaks of the Spirit’s presence, which we now enjoy, as being a better sort of presence than that which the disciples enjoyed by the shores of Galilee while Jesus taught them. This sounds odd to us because we are conditioned to believe that they were living in the best of times. Jesus was right there, teaching and performing miracles which amazed them, but we are living in some Jesus deficit, awaiting his “return.” But a quick scan of the disciples before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit does not suggest that their condition was actually better. Today we hear Jesus tell them that this post-Pentecost time, this

moment in which we now live, is in fact more blessed, better than those days he spent teaching and healing prior to his death and resurrection.

If you find that hard to swallow, don't believe me, believe Jesus: In John 20 we have already heard him tell Thomas that those who believe without seeing are blessed. In John 14 Jesus will say that it is better for the disciples that he leaves so that the comforter will come. Jesus will tell his disciples that the miracles will be greater after he departs than while he is there. (We have talked about this before but just consider the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand – on this day how many thousands are fed in Christian ministries around the world? Far more than five thousand! Jesus on a good day probably preached to thousands, perhaps even ten thousand, but every day 100,000 people join the Christian movement around the world, and that is simply replacements for those who are dying. Growth, and the church is growing rapidly in many parts of the world, growth suggests that it is more than 100,000/day. Jesus is still very active and through his disciples he is doing greater miracles right now.)

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*This prayer is familiar, phrases within this show up elsewhere, but it also has some unique things as well.*

*God makes the minds of his faithful to be of one will. Tell that to the thousands of denominations which dot the Christian landscape, or perhaps even just tell it to the delegates to a Synodical convention! This seems to fly in the face of what we experience. What does the prayer confess?*

*Yet, is this prayer not noticing a profound and great truth? The faithful, those who follow the great good Shepherd and know his voice, perhaps not all who are labeled a Christian by the world, that body of faithful people is in fact united. It may not always express that unity very well, but it is united in the worship and love of that same Jesus. Whether it is Thomas Aquinas Catholic, St. Paul Lutheran, or Community Church of Praise, therein are all sorts of people gathered to worship the same Jesus. Asians, Africans, Europeans and Americans all render praise to this Jesus on a regular basis. As one marvelous hymn notes, Christian Matins services perpetually follow the rising sun as the earth spins. It is always morning somewhere and Christians are praising God at the break of day.*

*In the actual request of the prayer, we pray this strange petition that has shown up elsewhere. That we may love what God has commanded and desire what he has promised. There are two ways to take this. Do we love those things which he has commanded us to love? Or do we ask that we may simply love his commands, much like the Psalmist expresses his love and delight in the commands of the Lord? Either of them is possible and both them involve a serious re-*

*ordering of our life from our natural sinful state. God loves sinners and commands us to love our enemies. His expectations in this regard are significant. God's commands can be difficult to love as well, at least from the human perspective. God commands us to lose ourselves, and love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. God commands us to love neighbor as we love our self. God commands a complete obedience of the person. We can see that, but can we love it?*

*The second part of this petition is also an interesting prayer. That we may desire what he promises. At first, when I read this, I thought, "what else would we desire?" Further reflection, however, suggests that this also is a serious re-ordering of our hearts and minds from our natural state. It is nothing less than a shattering of the self-idolatry which infects us all. God, for instance promises to do great things among us in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, the people, water, bread, and wine which make up the ministry of God's Church. How much of religious expression does not go seeking after him in other places, the miracles of the Pentecostal movement, the burning of the bosom of the LDS, the magisterium of Catholicism, or the idolatry of doctrinal rectitude which occasionally pops up in Lutheran circles. All are attempts to find God speaking in places or ways that he has not promised to speak. They would put God's voice in a place which we control. He, of course, could speak there, but the promise is not found there. He promises to speak in the preaching of the Word, he promises to touch us in Baptism, He promises to enter us in Lord's Supper, and He promises to be present in the community of faithful people as they forgiven and love one another. Yet, we often hunger for something more and look for a certainty of our own making. We pray in this prayer to desire that which he has promised us, not something which we might deem more exciting.*

*The upshot of all this is that we might have our hearts fixed where true joys are to be found. Are there false joys? What are they? Is that simply the joy that does not have the permanence to last in heaven's timeless state? What does that true joy look like? What does it mean to have one's heart fixed there? We all would obviously want that, but what does it mean to be there? Can anyone articulate that?*

*This whole prayer is asking us to rethink what we believe is normal, and what we think is miracle. The stakes are high. True joy is on the line.*

## **Readings**

*Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60 We get one week on the Stephen story, but the two chapters dedicated to Stephen make for a reading too long for Sunday mornings. The editors have been hard at work. I have included some of the material, but please read the section omitted from chapter 7.*

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.  
<sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from

among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

<sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.* <sup>11</sup> *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”* <sup>12</sup> *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,* <sup>13</sup> *and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* <sup>14</sup> *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”* <sup>15</sup> *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

*And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”* <sup>2</sup> And Stephen said:

“Brothers and fathers, hear me... <sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

<sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

*The ellipsis includes a recasting of Jewish history which is, to put it mildly, not terribly flattering. We pick it up again at the point where Stephen drops the hammer on them.*

*This account of the witness and martyrdom of Stephen should be an important passage for us, and justifiably could be a time when we want to talk about the diaconal ministry. If you elect to do so, there are some pretty interesting things in this, but exercise a little caution, remember how Stephen ended up, we don't want to see that happen again!*

*But it would seem that we could at least mention that diaconal ministry has ancient roots. We could highlight the fact that Stephen was not only a servant of the poor in the community, as a helper of those who were in an apostolic office, but he also was a preacher. What is more, the very next chapter of Acts records for us that the Philip mentioned here was engaged in sacramental ministry. Don't make too much of this. Acts sometimes is a record of what happened, not necessarily of what is supposed to happen, but at the same time, you are on solid ground to talk about the diaconal office as an ancient office, and which is demonstrably engaged in preaching and sacramental ministry.*

*The role that Stephen plays in the Acts account is most interesting. He is the first recorded martyr of the Christian Church. His feast is celebrated a few days after Christmas every year. The earliest chapters of Luke seem to have a significant subtext running through them which stems from the ascension account. You can imagine that anyone who heard the story of the resurrection might be tempted to wonder where they might see Jesus, especially in that first generation of Christians.*

*Luke's answer to that request seems to be embedded in the first ten chapters of Acts. After Jesus' ascension the disciples and Christians are seen healing the sick and lame, opposed by the Sanhedrin, arrested and unfairly tried. They raise the dead and cast out demons. Like Jesus cursing the fig tree, when they speak words of judgment they are potent, just witness the Ananias and Saphira story. Here in Acts 7 we see that they also are hauled outside the city walls and executed by the same rabid mob that called for Jesus death. When they die, they have the same words as Jesus upon their lips "Father forgive them..." and "Into your hands I commend my Spirit." In case you did not catch it, Stephen even has an epiphany of Jesus as he dies.*

*It would seem that the answer to the "Where's Jesus?" question now is not to point upward into heaven or inward to the heart, but to the words and deeds, the ministry and death of his people. Luke deliberately portrays them looking much like the crucified and now risen Savior. The location of Christ is as near as the Christian who loves you with Jesus' love, who speaks to you with Jesus' words, who is dying with and like Jesus.*

*Of course this has enormous implications for today. We can go looking for Jesus in some pretty odd places once in a while. But he is not far from us, nor is he hard to see. Like Jacob when Esau forgives him, we can look into the eyes of the Christian who says those precious words and see the very face of God, we can see the smile of our Lord, we can hear his voice in that conversation. (See Gen 33:1-10)*

*The world will yawn and tell us that there has to be something demonstrable and different and miraculous in order for us to say that God is there. But faith does not seek that sort of “proof.” Faith listens to what God says and works off of that Word. God said that when a Christian forgives, it is heaven’s forgiveness that he speaks (John 20, Mt 18, etc). So, when a Christian forgives me, that is the voice of God in my life. It doesn’t thunder from a cloud, it doesn’t rattle the foundations of the house, but it shakes my life and grabs hold of my heart.*

*The text we have is a much condensed form of Stephen’s actual words. I would encourage you to read his sermon. It is a potent retelling of Old Testament history. Deacons can teach too! One of the significant factors of the early church was their strong re-reading of the Old Testament. They did not see their faith as a break with the Old Testament or authentic Judaism. In truth, they understood that they were far more authentically Jewish in their faith than the members of the Sanhedrin. It is a Marcionite mistake for us to think that Jesus was creating a new religion or that Paul broke with his Jewish past. He broke with the interpretation of the Torah which dominated Jewish synagogues of the day, but he understood himself to be firmly rooted in the faith of Abraham.*

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

<sup>2</sup> I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

<sup>3</sup> Put not your trust in princes,  
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

<sup>4</sup> When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;  
on that very day his plans perish.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD his God,

<sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

<sup>7</sup> who executes justice for the oppressed,  
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

<sup>8</sup> the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the sojourners;

he upholds the widow and the fatherless,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

<sup>10</sup>The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, to all generations.  
Praise the LORD!

*Once again, I think the best way to read this psalm is that it is the rejoicing and praise of the person who gets the Gospel reading today. The wise preacher will shoot for a goal in the hearer that looks a little like this psalm in some way.*

I Peter 2:2-10 *We get the section of chapter 2 we missed last week.*

*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.* <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>4</sup> As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, <sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

<sup>7</sup> So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

<sup>8</sup> and

“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

<sup>11</sup> *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.* <sup>12</sup> *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*



*This text has, in the past, occasioned a spirited conversation among us. Where have we let the world define us? How has that shaped our witness and life? The early church understood itself to be a body in which individual members often were supported by the other members. The early Christian communities at some points almost look like a fraternal order or mutual support group. The Roman Empire actually had many of these groups. One of the more interesting was a category of groups in which the members promised to make sure that an appropriate funeral was conducted for other members. If they happened to die away from home, they would even pay members to go and retrieve the body and bring it home. You can read more about this in Robert Wilken's "The Christians as the Romans Saw Them" published by Yale University Press.*

*Christians it seems never checked into a hotel, but relied on the freely offered hospitality of fellow Christians. Likewise, Christians were engaged in many issues which we tend to think of as not being very spiritual and which dealt with money: care for the sick, hospitals, schools, and so many of the institutions which have been claimed by the secular world. Have we allowed the society to define us as organizations which only has relevance for spiritual matters? Are we compartmentalized into an organization which helps folks feel good, prepares them to face death, and encourages good morals?*

*Are we complicit in this? Have we been too quick in allowing the world to take from us these ministries of substantive care? And thus have we lost our ability to bear witness through the love of feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, ministering to the whole range of human problems. Of course this is somewhat overstated. Lutheran World Relief and the local food pantry are examples of Christians caring over and above paying taxes to the government which operates disaster relief and Food Stamps programs.*

*At the same time, in Peter's words, we are a royal nation, a holy people, a kingdom of priests – God has put us here because this world is hurting, because this planet needs his Love and we are the vessels of that love. What shall we do with this? Standing on the corner and shouting our faith and handing our Bibles is just another way to walk in the compartmentalized path the world has set out for us. We are officially the religious nuts. How do we take seriously this description which God has given to us?*

*Can we find places where we can point to the Church still caring about the people? Almost all the hospitals in Portland where I live have religious names: Good Samaritan, St. Vincent's, Adventist, Emanuel, etc. But they are mostly owned and operated by massive corporations which are there to make a profit. The Roman Catholics and Adventists alone have retained their institutions of health ministry in my city. Perhaps even more problematic is the mutual care which has always marked Christians. The Romans marveled that they "loved one another" according to Pliny's letter to Trajan in the first part of the second century. They took up offerings to alleviate the suffering of the poor in their midst, they fed one another, they cared. What are we known for? Look at the Acts passage above. Stephen was elected deacon to make*

*sure that the widows in the congregation were not going hungry. Who would fulfill that office among us today?*

*If you go on to re-read the notes in your study Bible on the Acts passage which highlighted Stephen's use of the Old Testament and this section of I Peter, you might also notice that Stephen's sermon and Peter's material is really a stringing together of OT allusions and quotations.*

*Peter defines the Christian in this iconic passage. Christ has by his death and resurrection become a watershed event, a division based upon faith. For the believer he is the cornerstone, but for the unbeliever he is the stumbling block. There is no walking past this Jesus and remaining as we were before he came. That is simply not an option.*

*Now we who believe lay claim to the highest of honors, the heritage that belonged to the Jewish people of Old. We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. God has chosen us – we are no accident of birth, we are no randomly generated product of nature's whim. We are chosen, deliberately, intentionally, lovingly, chosen. We are a royal priesthood. Priests stand between God and the rest of the people, bringing their requests to God, returning with his blessings for the people. I am not sure that we really take that corporate ministry of intercession on behalf of our town, our neighbors, nation, and world as seriously as we ought. Too often the prayers I hear in church are for the sick and ailing among us, and merely a token for the world out there.*

*Too often we pray for ourselves, but do we pray for the whole community, by name? Does our prayer ministry really reflect what Peter says of us here, that we are priests on behalf of all the people who do not believe? They may not value it, but we are called upon to see their needs and pray for them. That reality lived out would completely change the way we do evangelism.*

*But this actually is a larger issue than just our prayers in worship on Sunday, as large as that really is. I have included the verse immediately prior and the verses which follow this text and create a single conceptual unit. These verses really create another question for this text than simply the reading of our reading. Does our community perceive of us as God's royal people, transformed and changed by Christ's abiding and holy presence in our lives? This might just give rise to a serious condemnation of the Church today.*

*We are a holy nation. The sacredness of God has been given to us, and that sacredness is something that changes the community in which we live. We have a tendency to think that the profanity of the community will corrupt the holiness of God, but it really works the other way. The holiness of God, experienced in forgiveness, tends to "infect" the world around us. Made holy, we now are empowered to be sanctifiers of the world. When we forgive, it is forgiven in heaven as well.*

*We are God's own possession. He delights in us. He holds us in His hand and we are His treasure. There is no one who can really harm us, there is no one who can divert his attention away from us. Yes, we suffer, but that also is purposeful and temporary.*

*The real meat of this passage is the next line. We are all these things so that we may proclaim the wonders and marvels and excellencies of him who called us out of Darkness and into His marvelous Light. This is the purpose statement of Christianity. We are a telling people. We don't tell another story other than the one we have experienced. He has called us out of darkness. That is the story. We are in a marvelous light, not a light of our own making, but his Light, the light that shines in the forgiving and loving people of God. Sometimes we die like Jesus, sometimes we act like Jesus, sometimes we speak like Jesus, but in all our words and deeds done in him, His light shines and we are in the telling business.*

*Peter's audience seems to have been encountering some sort of a persecution. We don't know what sort exactly. It might have been an official state sponsored persecution with soldiers and trials and executions. But more likely from reading it, it seems that the community had started to take notice of this new group and they were slandering the Christians, spreading malicious lies about them. We know that one of the early lies about Christians was that they were eating children in their secret Eucharistic feasts. This was reinforced by the knowledge that Christians would take in orphaned or abandoned children. We also know that many thought that Christian worship involved sexual orgies. We know this because within a generation or two of Peter writing this, we have several instances of Christians defending the movement against these calumnies.*

*The Epistle suggests a number of possible Sermon Themes, one of which we will develop below. But you might find worthy sermons in here about:*

- 1. The presence of Christ in our lives*
- 2. The sacramental nature of our existence as Christians*
- 3. The role we play as priests for the whole world, standing before God on behalf of our neighbors*
- 4. More?*

John 14:1-14

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you had

known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup> Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

<sup>12</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

*There are several excellent sermons in this text. You will find that the trick is to preach just one of them. This section of John falls right in the middle of the Book of Love that runs from chapter 12 up through the prayer of Jesus in chapter 17. John sets all this discourse in the day right before the passion. It is unlikely that Jesus could have physically said all these things that day, but John, who has already creatively rearranged material for us, wants us to associate these words with the passion narrative. The cross looms large over this, as does the empty tomb and the resurrection. You may want to keep that in mind here.*

*The first possible Sermon Theme I see in this revolves around an idea to which I am indebted to an old friend. Jesus takes us to heaven. I used to have a retired pastor in my congregation who only preached on this text for funerals. His message was rather simple. He did not like to talk about people going to heaven. He said that folks did not know how to go to heaven. He would speak of this in geographic terms. There is no map. What is more, they are rather incapacitated by death. To speak of a person going to heaven after they have died implies far too much activity on the part of the recently deceased.*

*His preferred way to speak about this was to say that Jesus brought you to heaven, and this was his text. His insistence that we were helpless in the grave, did not know the way, and it was cruel to speak of “going to heaven” really resonated with some people. They were honestly afraid that they simply were not up to the task and he told them that they were not and Jesus was. It might work for you too. The Gospel in this sermon is that Jesus takes you to heaven, (verse 3). My friend often used the image of a small child who fell asleep in the car and the next thing he knew he was waking up the next morning in his bed. The parents had picked him up from the car and brought him to bed. He did not know how he got there, he did not know the way he got there, but he was completely at ease about that because he knew the one who lifted him up and carried him to bed. This sermon will stress the monergistic element of salvation. God does all the work.*

*A second Sermon Theme is encased in Jesus own words here: Jesus is the way, to know Him is to know the Father and all that we need. Thomas wonders where Jesus is going and is wondering about how to get there, and Jesus says that he is the way, the access to the Father. The road leads through Him. There is not another way, only this way, at least this is the only way that has any promise from God. I suppose God can do whatever God wants, but if you want to count on his promise, this is where the promise is to be found. (Remember the collect and the prayer that we desire what God has promised, not something else?) This sermon could be about the exclusive claim that Jesus makes, but better it would be about the amazing promise that Jesus makes to us. To be in a relationship with Jesus is to know the most important things of life, the Way, the Truth, and Life Itself. Without him, we are lost, deceived, and dead.*

*Jesus is the exegesis of the Father (John 1:18). God has made himself known, he did it through his Son. In theological terms this is called the Scandal of Particularity and it causes many to stumble to this day. That God would choose to reveal himself through a Jewish man, born to a peasant, in a backwater part of the Roman Empire, that he would manifest himself most clearly in a brutal death, seems most odd to people. After all, isn't this the most important time of all? Every generation is afflicted with this arrogance. We all think we are at the center of the universe. The truth is that God has called us terribly important to him, but only in that cross, that Jewish carpenter's death, that peasant's suffering in a distant land, so many years ago. For many, this is too much to accept, but for those who believe, Jesus is the power of God and the Salvation of God.*

*A third Sermon Theme could be developed around the issue of Authority within these words. God the Father has invested Jesus with authority. This is really preaching on that line in the Creed which says that Jesus has ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. That is not a geographical description of where Jesus is, but it is a description of the power that Jesus wields. He is the Lord of heaven, all the divine omnipotence resides in his hands. This is really good news for us. Just look at how Jesus used his power in his earthly ministry. The poor, the sick, the dead, the demon possessed all found relief at the hands of Jesus. This is particularly important when Jesus speaks those wonderful promises to us. Just consider the promise he made earlier in the passage. He is going to prepare a place for us, and he will come and bring us to heaven. This is not some pious wish on Jesus part. He really has the authority to say that and mean it. He is the Son of the Father, His words are never empty. Many others will deceive us and disappoint us, but not this Jesus. His promises are sure.*

*There is much more in this text and you might consider a fourth Sermon Theme: The Son now invests that Authority in the people of God, the Church. We are given to do the same things that the Son has done, and to do even greater things. Stephen looks like Jesus in his death, the Apostles look like Jesus in their ministry and action. The early Christians look like Jesus in their suffering and their amazing ministry. Today the Church looks like Jesus in feeding the hungry, in operating the many hospitals that care for the sick, in the schools which teach the children and*

*the simple acts of love which mark the Christian community. Jesus walked the shores of Galilee and amazed the crowds with his miracles, today He walks the whole world and continues to do amazing work. Are we jaded by the fact that we have seen it all the time? Are we complacent because we have lived in a Christian time and place? I think of the places that the Church is growing, it is often growing in Africa and Asia and other places where folks have seen the simple dignity which Christianity brings to people, where children have no schools to go to or doctors to care for them unless the Christians open that school and hospital. Have we taken the gift for granted, or worse, set it aside so we can go looking for something that is “better” or “more exciting?”*

*A fifth Sermon Theme could simply be to listen to Jesus’ repeated exhortation in the text: Believe in me. Jesus repeats this phrase throughout the text. Of course we are always back to that same issue we have run into before. This actually says “faith in me” a phrase which is much stronger than simply “believe in me.” There is an exhortation to faith in several sections, including the last section which says that a prayer uttered in Jesus name is powerful, it has God’s attention. It cannot be denied. This is for the glorification of the Son who abides in us. This could be a prayer sermon, but I would probably run this more in terms of a person of Jesus sermon and the implications that has for us. If we really believe that Jesus is in us, what does that mean for the reordering of our life? How does his servant heart now beat within us? How does his blood which he shed for us now course through our veins? What does that look like? Yes, of course, that means we pray and praise and worship Jesus. When we pray, it is not just a miserable worm approaching the throne of God, but it is also the very Son of God, the very Lord of Heaven who speaks in our prayers. Does that change the way we pray or the frequency of our prayers? I would think so. But prayer is but one dimension of this. Believing in this Jesus also means that we forgive, we love, we care, we help, we serve, and much more. It totally reorients life. He is the way of our life, He is the truth of our life. He is simply our life.*

*More sermon themes? I bet you can think of some. Lets look at what we want to preach on Sunday and develop some law and gospel ideas off of that.*

Here is the Law and Gospel we developed three years ago – let’s amend on Tuesday

**Law** our call is to be child-like, not childish

1. Immaturity leads us to be self-centered, our prayers and our ministry really focuses on ourselves.
2. We are afraid of rejection and as a result we bury our blessings and our priestly office inside the walls of our church

3. Children fill their lives with silly games – play is good, but much of what we spend our energy on bears no fruit.
4. Children are often incapable – they suffer from weakness and lack of wisdom. They don't always make good decisions.
5. Children often want things only on their own terms. We would dictate to God what promises he should fulfill.

## **Gospel**

1. God calls us to maturity, and his call has potency, His word accomplishes that which he speaks.
2. God has not neglected our infancy and our childhood. He delights in these things. He provides the pure spiritual milk we need to mature.
3. God the creator has also given and governs the maturation process. Just as our children amaze us as they grow before our eyes, we too are in a process of maturation which God has instilled and given. This transformation/growth is a life-long process of growth and maturation.
4. God has called us a holy people, a royal priesthood – that to which God calls us is a wonderful and beautiful thing with purpose, meaning and tremendous blessing – the one whose faith is in Christ will not be put to shame.
5. Jesus is intensely interested in our maturation
6. The disciples who were so immature in the Gospel lesson are wise in the Epistle and Acts text. They act wisely. The Spirit given has had a tremendous effect upon them.
7. Maturation often means we recognize the infancy – This is a gift of discernment from God, a feeding which we need.
8. The maturing child of God desires the things which God has promised.

## **Sermon Themes**

1. A Holy Priesthood (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would move the hearer to embrace his/her vocation as a vehicle for the gracious presence of God to this benighted world.)

This sermon really sees the self-centeredness of many congregations as a sort of denial of the resurrection. Jesus has risen, he is present in his people, and that means the same Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Galilee welcoming and forgiving sinners, caring for the helpless and lost, praying fervently for friend and foe alike, that Jesus is also among

us. He has risen from the dead, his living, real, active, presence is among us. To disengage from his priestly office, neglecting to pray, neglecting to care, neglecting to love, is simply a denial of his presence here.

That is heavy Law and will need strong Gospel to accompany it. Peter lays it on heavily for us in that regard. He reminds his people that God has always been a God of transformation and change in the lives of the people whom he calls. Many of the quotes Peter strings together come from the Psalms and Torah. The whole “not a people – now the people of God” is exactly how God described the Exodus event for an often frustrated Moses. Just track down all the reverences in this passage and you will find God often addressing these words to folks who don’t measure up. The Lutheran scholar Ernst Kaseman who lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century once said that “Sarah’s laughter constantly accompanies us.” He meant by this the reality that God’s love is often despite us, despite even our faithless response to his promises. He does not become faithless when we are faithless, but he remains faithful.

But God also does not simply declare his love and leave us in our sins. He does not say nice things about us to no effect. His word does change the folks who hear and believe it. Jesus really is risen and he really is among us and he really is empowering us to be the very priests of God for this world.

You will need to unpack that image for folks since we don’t see a priest in action very often. They function as ombudsmen, as ambassadors, as liaisons, as all sorts of things in our more common vocabulary and you may want to explore that with your folks.

God is calling you to be one of those because Jesus lives in you. In this place he has called you his own in baptism, he has taught you and fed you and united himself to you. His life and his office as the great high priest now shapes you and your life. You are being drawn into him and to be more and more like him, as he loves this world, prays for it, serves it, even gives his life for it.

2. Show us the Father (That the Spirit of God would open the eyes of the hearer to see the presence of God in the Body of Christ.)

This sermon has in mind the misbelief underwhich may people operate, a misbelief which cripples Christian and witness and service. This misbelief is a belief in the real absence of Christ. Many of us, while saying all the right words, are functionally deists in this regard. We will defend the inspiration of Scripture but only as a witness to what Jesus did long ago, we will not really confess that Jesus has promised to be with us right now. Thus Jesus cast out demons, long ago, but I really don’t think he is doing those things today. He healed folks long ago, but now I have to trudge to the hospital or doctor’s office when I am sick. Jesus isn’t doing that stuff anymore.



Most Christians imagine that he is up in heaven somewhere, watching us, rather like a kinder and gentler version of the NSA. He will come again, on the last day, but until then, he is safely at a considerable distance. Out of some fear of the judgment, we really ought to amend our sinful lives and shape up, but we also know that Jesus forgives all our naughtiness and so we really don't worry too much about that judgment either.

Jesus' disciple Philip today ask to see the Father and Jesus shakes his heads at his misunderstanding and misbelief. To see Jesus is to see God, the Father, all of him. Jesus and the Father are One. Jesus speaks with the Father's authority and does the Father's work. To see Jesus is to see the Father.

But Jesus doesn't just leave it there. He immediately speaks of his presence and ongoing work through the people whom he has gathered to himself. They also are doing the Father's work, they also are speaking in the authority of the Father. Sent by Jesus they have become the very embodiment of Jesus and thus the Father as well.

This has real implications for the work we do. We are not simply trying to avoid some unpleasantness on the last day when we face the judge. We are currently the very active, living, resurrected, and authoritative presence of Christ in this world. Jesus is doing things through us right now. That rather changes the way I look at all of life. My kindness shown to a neighbor, the care of my children, the prayers I pray, and the hymns I sing, they are not done for a distant Jesus but are an expression of the present Jesus. Just as the Bible records Jesus doing all those things and more, when I find that I am doing them too, I am noting the presence of Christ.

That empowers my witness and my service. Recast as the very embodiment of Jesus, my preaching and teaching, my service and love, my love for the sinner and my giving of gifts, these are all things I am eager to do because when I do them I see Jesus. And other folks see Jesus in me too.

This sermon will want to shake up that very firmly entrenched idea that Jesus is far away. You will want to have a potent illustration of this. But my guess is that you may have one already right in front of you. I really believe that the moribund nature of many parishes is because they worship a distant Jesus and not the Jesus who is right there that day.

3. Because he goes to the Father, I do greater works (Gospel - That the Spirit of God would first open the eyes of the hearer to see Christ at work in and around him/her, and secondly to embolden the hearer to participate in that great work.)

This sermon wants to confront the notion that we are just a little person, a little community, and we are essentially powerless before the big bad forces of this world. The temptation is to believe that in order to do something meaningful about the really big problems you need the government or lots and lots of money. Quite to the contrary, the

child who needs a drink is the presence of Christ, the mustard seed will grow to a huge shrub, and the disciples to whom Jesus spoke these words long ago will become the agents of a movement which will overthrow the Roman Empire. Jesus is right here with us and that automatically makes us a force to contend with.

Of course you will want to be straight up with these folks. Stephen's powerful witness will come while he dies of stoning. Peter's audience were likewise persecuted and Peter himself would die a martyr's death. This is not a recipe for success by the measure of the world, but it is a promise that even when our lives are spent, when our deeds seem at their weakest and most ineffectual, Jesus is still at work in them and thus we hope. The Christian who has Jesus simply cannot be beaten down by the problems s/he faces. We always know that in our pocket, in our hearts, in our lives and words and deeds, resides the very creator of the universe who holds all the answers and solutions to every problem.

Jesus words today are that we will do greater things than he does. That is hard for us to fathom as we read about the miracles that he accomplished, the feeding of the multitudes and the opening of the eyes and ears of the blind and deaf. But Jesus gathered about himself a few hundred folks in his ministry. Today the disciples of Christ number in the billions and thousands more join the Christian movement every day. That miracle happens because people like you and me open our mouths and say the wrong things, look foolish, and generally botch it, yet through those things Jesus and the Holy Spirit continue to work. It is not we who get it right, but Jesus does.

Today, because some regular every day Christians are working in Kyrgyzstan a village is getting eye glasses, many of them for the first time. You can look this up through LCMS World Mission. How many of us would not be blind without some sort of eye correction. Through this ministry the blind can see. No, it is not a miracle in the sense of Jesus putting mud on the man's eyes and he can see, but in truth, more men and women will see today because of the work of Christians in the world than all the blind men Jesus ever healed in his ministry. Jesus doesn't put mud on the eyes, he puts love and service, his love and his service, into the hearts of Christians. He is still using "mud" in the sense that we are all dust, and to dust we shall return. God formed Adam out of the clay. The mud he puts on the eyes of the blind is me. That is just as much a miracle as what happened at the pool of Siloam. God will take care of the results here. It is not my job to turn my life into a miracle – he is quite accomplished at that.

You cannot judge the effectiveness of your life by the measures of the world. To them, you and I look foolish, weak, and powerless. But today Jesus promises you and me that He and His Spirit are at work in our hands, our words, our presence. And that makes us far more important to the real benefit of those folks out there than any government program, any foundation's billions which are poured into a cause. While God loves the

good work that happens in the lives of his creatures, I firmly believe that billions of dollars won't solve the real problems, it will take the far greater gifts of love and lives.

Look for some sort of local thing that Christians are doing that is good, encourage your folks to pitch in. Build a house for Habitat for Humanity, volunteer at a food bank, teach a child to read in the public school, do something good. Jesus will multiply your work far beyond what you can even imagine. Own your role as a priest for the world. (Epistle)