

Exaudi Sunday [Easter 7] – John 15:26-16:4

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

At the end of Luke's Gospel, the Crucified and Resurrected Lord said to His disciples: "'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. At this point in time, the disciples know more about Jesus than any other people have ever known. If Christianity was simply a matter of knowing the teaching of Jesus and living by it, then those disciples could have begun to preach about their Lord and Savior immediately. They knew the Scriptures; they walked with the God man during His lifetime. Fresh memories of His words and miracles remained vibrantly ripe in their minds. Their eloquence and organizational skills were peaked to prime to undertake the task before them. The disciples' zeal and fervor were a roaring fire blazing with excitement to declare salvation to every nation.

But they didn't go. They didn't preach. Not right away. At this same time the Lord said to them: "Stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high." They heeded Christ's words. The disciples were missing something. What were they lacking?

The disciples could not rely upon themselves. It is no coincidence that memories fade with time. And when fierce persecution is unleashed, man's eloquence is reduced to mere stuttering and stammering. When unexpected chaos wreaks havoc, organization scatters to nothing. Zeal and fervor are quickly reduced to embers in the face of hardship and testing. Think about what was awaiting the disciples: they were given the responsibility to witness about Jesus. And who was more qualified? The disciples had been along since the beginning. They had seen it all and been instructed by the Lord. Above all else, they were witnesses to the resurrection.

Except here's where the real problem begins. The Man whom they were to bear witness about had been labeled by the Jews as a blasphemer and by the Romans as a troublemaker, and the end result of these charges was execution by crucifixion. His witnesses must expect to be met with the same violent resistance. The disciple cannot be above his teacher.

So the Lord predicted to His disciples, "... you also will bear witness, because you will be with me from the beginning. I have said 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." You will be put out of the synagogues. "Synagogue" is a Greek word that means "a gathering together [of people]," perhaps like-minded people. The disciples would be forced out of those houses of worship, away from the like-minded people of their community.

And is it not the plight of the Christian to be forced out of the synagogues of this world? The synagogues of this world would tell us that cruel words are supposed to be spoken about another person, especially if they're true. The synagogues of this world say it's okay to fantasize about a man or woman whom God has not given us in marriage. But the Lord says that slander is just as bad as murder. The Lord says lustful thoughts are equal to abandoning your spouse. So Repent! Come out of the synagogues of this world!

It's not easy to separate ourselves from the like-minded synagogue dwellers of this world. Our friends will despise and forsake us. The world will continue to throw hardships at us. But all this is teaching us to leave the synagogues of this world. They are not our home. Our citizenship is not here. It's in heaven. Our lives are hidden with God in Christ. Each hardship reminds us not to get too comfortable here.

And while God's calloused hand of the Law holds in this world with all hardships, His gentle and comforting hand of the Gospel carries us through all trials. And much like the disciples, we can't rely on ourselves. We can't rely on our memories or our pious thinking about God and following Him. Instead, we rely on the means of grace which God has given us.

"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about Me." Christianity is found only where God is at work in the presence and person of the Holy Spirit.

But who is this Holy Spirit? How does He give comfort to me? One great way to define the Holy Spirit and a catechetical way, I might mention, is by these two simple words: "I cannot." "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." "I cannot call myself by the Gospel." "I cannot enlighten myself with Christ's gifts." "I cannot sanctify and keep myself in the true faith." But the Holy Spirit can and does and continually will do this work. He "has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Where? In the Lord's House, the place where "He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all sins." The disciples knew it and today His disciples know it.

When we see Christ's gifts being given in His Church, the Holy Spirit is at work. Through the Spirit, Jesus fulfills His promised presence with His church through water and word, bread and wine, body and blood. Christ has not left us comfortless, and though He has gone away, He will come again and our hearts will rejoice. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠