

SPIRIT OF TRUTH

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

It is our tradition to celebrate the confirmation of students on this day in the Church Year. Pentecost is considered the church's birthday, and the confirmation of faith by young Christians is a fitting way to mark the day and remind us all of the way the church renews itself from year to year. By now you have noticed that we have no confirmation class this year. There were not enough students to make up a class, but students eligible this year will be combined with next year's students to make a larger class and, I hope, a richer confirmation experience for all of us.

I have re-designed and re-configured the course of study for confirmation many times, searching for a way to make the class more compelling. My goal is always to try to help students understand the faith they have received from their families and the church. The presumption is that they will complete the course and confirm their faith, but occasionally students will drop out and decide the whole thing is just not for them. The students that drop out don't know enough to make this decision. But then again, the students who complete the class and stand in front of the church to affirm their baptisms in the rite of confirmation don't know enough to do this either. Confirmation is but one moment in a life-long process of finding one's faith, a process that is not simply intellectual but involves all of our human faculties in light of our experience in the world. To appreciate the extent and complexity of this process, I call your attention to a passage from today's Gospel.

Jesus is taking leave of his disciples. (This seems to go on forever in the Gospel of John.) We read, “Nevertheless I [Jesus] tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you...” The Advocate is “the Spirit of truth who comes from God,” in other words, the Holy Spirit.

In this passage, John is trying to explain to his readers, who this morning include us, a sequence that reflects the early church’s understanding of God, who is first and foremost the God of Israel, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the Liberator of the exodus, the Source of the law of Moses, but who has for Christians taken on flesh in the person of Jesus who is crucified and raised. Jesus then hangs around for awhile as a mysterious presence, but ultimately Jesus departs and in his place leaves behind the Holy Spirit, which is the creative power of God and Jesus’ own Spirit, to sustain the church for the future. This Spirit is the Spirit of truth. So far, so good.

But does it not strike you as curious in John’s Gospel that Jesus says to his disciples, “...it is to your advantage that I go away”? At this point we should remind ourselves that by the time these words are written down Jesus has already been away for some 70 years. That’s how long it has been between the time of Jesus’ death and the writing of John’s Gospel. So, the fact is that by the time John writes his Gospel Jesus, the historical person who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, is long gone, and the church, his followers, have already been living by his Spirit alone for a couple of generations. John is therefore just describing the ways things are.

We should further remind ourselves that the great crisis in the early church arose when Jesus did not return to make all things new in a Second Coming. The first Christians thought that Jesus would be back again to transform the world before they

died. But this didn't happen, and you can see the anxiety about this in various places in the New Testament. Two thousand years later there still hasn't been a Second Coming, though it is still expected and even predicted by certain fervent Christians. By the time that John is writing the words that form our Lesson for today, the great bulk of Christians had in one way or another come to terms with the fact that Jesus hadn't returned and that the church was living by the power of the Holy Spirit. That's not, however, the same thing as Jesus saying, "...it is to your advantage that I go away". Why is it to the disciples' (which would include us) *advantage* that Jesus go away? Why wouldn't it be to our advantage for him to have stuck around? It's one thing if he has to go, but it's another thing to say that it is *better* that he goes.

One more reminder: Jesus was not, of course, a Christian. Jesus was Jewish, and so far as we can see had no intention or interest in starting a new religion. It seems he became the focus of a movement to liberalize Judaism, a movement that would extend the benefits of Judaism to non-Jews—Gentiles—and in so doing would reform the religion in a way that would emphasize the grace of God over the righteousness of God as the basis for our relationship to God. Thus, in the beginning the movement centered on Jesus was a kind of cult that made *him* the object of worship rather than God, or more accurately, made him God. In light of this, I want to suggest to you that when we read the words ascribed to Jesus that say, "...it is to your advantage that I go away...", what we are reading is a rejection of the impulse that would make Jesus the object of a cult. Instead we see here a shift of the location of the power and influence of Jesus to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, which is the object of Jesus' worship and devotion. In saying this I am not backing away from the Christian understanding of Jesus

as *revelation* in the flesh of the way to God, the truth about God, and the life lived in God, but I am taking seriously the advantage of *not* having Jesus as the object of our faith, of not having Jesus as God. What is this advantage? Try this.

If we emphasize Jesus as the object of our faith, we emphasize the separateness of Christian faith from faiths that do not have Jesus as their object of worship, and in this way we Christians remain a kind of cult, however huge this cult may have become. If instead we emphasize the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, as the object of our faith, we emphasize what is common to all the great spiritual traditions in the world and we make possible conversation with others who look to a great Spirit but who do not invoke the name of Jesus.

Now before someone sends me to the stake for heresy, I am not saying that Christians give up on Jesus, that we cease to see in the story of his life and teachings what the Spirit of truth looks like in the flesh of a person, albeit a male person living in first century Palestine, who is himself devoted to the Spirit of truth. In his story we encounter the revelation by which, as Christians, we will meet and evaluate all other revelations claimed by other religions and faith traditions. We will maintain Jesus as representing the Spirit of truth in the flesh, but we will not claim that there is no other way for the Spirit of truth to be known and appreciated.

Perhaps the greatest challenge today facing Christians, newly-confirmed or long in the church, is to come to terms with the question of the truth of our faith relative to the claims of other faiths. Christianity is surely not the only way to salvation, and yet, there would be no point in practicing the Christian faith if we did not believe it to be true. What I have been suggesting is that we might better meet this challenge if we confessed

Jesus *less* and revered the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, more—less “Hooray for our side!”, more “Thank God for truth in all of its manifestations!”; less Christian evangelicalism and more good news; less religious huffing and puffing and more faithful modesty. In the face of all the religious noise in the world these days, the need is for faith that is truth-seeking, that is not merely the repeating of the old confessions and the old slogans. This will require effort on the part of the faithful. There is much that must be learned and much that needs to be un-learned, and completing a course for confirmation is hardly enough to do the job. Indeed, this is the work of a lifetime and the reason to return here often to meditate and explore so that we may live our lives in the Spirit of truth! Amen.

Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2009

Emanuel Lutheran Church