

April 24, 2016
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 16:12–22
I.N.I.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert at Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Theme: “God gives us the Spirit of Truth”

In the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

When Jesus spoke to Pontius Pilate about truth, Pilate uttered those famous words, “What is truth?” This is a question that we might at times be tempted to ask. As we look around at current events in the world, we see truth seeming to be in short supply, truth appearing to be simply the beliefs of one set of people pitted against the beliefs of another set of people. Perhaps a more pertinent question is, “Where is truth?” Or, even more simply, “What in the world is going on?”

Let me mention just three situations out of a multitude that I could take. First, in the Near East and other parts of the world, we have ISIS, as well as similarly minded radical Islamic groups, murdering Christians (or any one else who does not agree with them). Second, in the United States, we have big business as well as major entertainers—now also the President of the United States—protesting against religious freedom legislation and the so-called bathroom law. And, third, still in the United States, we have the free-for-all in the current political primaries, a free-for-all that shows no signs of diminishing.

“What is truth?” “Is there still truth?” Or, “What in the world is going on?” Our Gospel reading today assures us that there *is* truth, and that God makes certain that we will know the truth. We consider our Gospel reading with the theme, “God gives us the Spirit of Truth.”

The short section of the Gospel of John that we have in our reading today is a part of a fairly long discourse that John records. This is a discourse that Jesus had with His disciples after the Last Supper. It is certainly not the typical after-dinner speech, however. We could most readily compare it to a commencement address.

The disciples have been with and listened to Jesus for three years. Their education has reached the point where Jesus will no longer be teaching them. Except for a few short contacts with His disciples between His resurrection and ascension, this is the last chance that Jesus has to give last words to His students.

The second portion of our reading shows Jesus preparing the disciples for His crucifixion. Jesus had prepared the disciples during His entire earthly ministry, telling them that He was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. Here Jesus reminds them once again about what would happen shortly after his talk here with the disciples, when Jesus would go the Garden of Gethsemane and the events of Good Friday would unfold. Jesus tells His disciples, “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you

will see me” (John 16:16).

We, who have already trod the path to the cross and are currently celebrating the season of Easter, understand this easily in retrospect. The disciples, however, were questioning each other about the meaning of Jesus’ statement. So Jesus Himself clarifies, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice” (John 16:20).

The disciples would weep and lament when they saw their Lord crucified and dead. Yet Jesus’ death was a necessity. He, the second person of the Trinity, had become man, so that He could die in man’s place for the sins of the world. God sent His only-begotten Son to earth, so that mankind could be freed from their sin.

We have inherited this sinful condition from Adam, and have added our own sins to it. None of us can free ourselves from the morass of sin in which we find ourselves. Perhaps a better analogy would be that we find ourselves in a quicksand of sin. For, just as with quicksand, the more we try to pull ourselves free, the more we find that we are stuck.

Sin is like that. We cannot free ourselves. We can only acknowledge our sinfulness to God our Father, repent of those sins, and turn to God for forgiveness and rescue from sin. And we indeed need rescuing.

We can see how deep that sinfulness runs when we look at our own attitudes. Christians can be quite Pharisaical when it comes to sin. We know that Luther tells us the Fifth Commandment calls for us to help and support others in physical needs, but it is so easy to think “but at least I haven’t hurt anyone, let alone murdered anyone.”

We know that Luther tells us the Sixth Commandment calls for us to lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do—and I will add think—but it is so easy to think “but at least I haven’t actually *done* anything like commit adultery.”

I could go through the other commandments, but I won’t. “. . . but at least I didn’t . . .” There our sinful nature rears its ugly head, attempting to justify itself. But sin cannot justify itself. All our actions, whether in thought, word, or deed, that go against God’s commandments are sin, are wrong. We acknowledge that, and turn in repentance to our Father.

Our heavenly Father forgives us because of the innocent suffering and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because Jesus died, your sins are forgiven. Because Jesus died, you will not die in eternity. Because Jesus died, you live.

Jesus’ death was necessary. The disciples would be sorrowful. But Jesus reassured them that their sorrow would not be permanent. “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. . . . So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:20, 22).

The disciples would weep and lament when they saw their Lord crucified and dead. But their sorrow would turn to joy, because Christ rose again from the dead. Just as the disciples rejoiced, so we rejoice this Easter season. Christ is risen! Alleluia! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

One phrase I have already mentioned I need to mention again: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice” (John 16:20). Christians weep and lament, the world rejoices; and, although not said here, when Christians rejoice, the world is in sorrow.

The world—that which has been stained and corrupted by sin—is, by nature, opposed to God. Because of sin, it *cannot* want or desire the same thing as God. Because of sin, the world has been and remains opposed to God and Christians. I will return to this thought near the end of the sermon.

Our reading today began with these words of Jesus: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). That does sound like a lot like a commencement address, doesn’t it? “You’ve haven’t learned everything yet; you have just *begun*.”

However, Jesus doesn’t leave His disciples without a guide for the future: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Jesus promises to send His disciples the Spirit of truth. Jesus is not speaking here about some general ideas floating around, like the spirit of the times, or about some force or power or ethereal essence, *something* that might influence you. Jesus is speaking about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Listen to how closely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are related: “He [that is, the Spirit of truth] will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13–15).

All three persons of the Trinity are here. And the central person is Jesus. The Father gives to the Son; the Holy Spirit declares what is the Son’s. The proclamation of the Holy Spirit is always a proclamation of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ own words are “He will glorify me.” Jesus also gives us the assurance that the Holy Spirit doesn’t make things up. Whatever He hears, He will speak. And He doesn’t speak on His own authority, but on the authority of God the Father.

Since Jesus is speaking here to the disciples, He tells them that the Spirit of truth will guide *them* into all the truth. God has given the Spirit of truth also to all Christians. The Spirit of truth will guide also *us* into all the truth.

How does the Spirit guide us into the truth? You heard in the first reading about a vision that Peter had, hearing also a voice from heaven. Please do not derive general principles from this reading, however. This is an *extraordinary* way in which the Spirit worked *at that time*. There were also occasions in which the apostles healed people or spoke in other languages. These were also *extraordinary* works of the Holy Spirit.

The ordinary way in which the Holy Spirit worked then, as well as the ordinary way in which He works today, is through the Word of God. Remember that the disciples were all Jewish men, well trained in the Old Testament. They had spent three years listening to the words of Jesus. Those words are what the Holy Spirit used in guiding them into the truth.

The Holy Spirit also used the words of the Old Testament in guiding St. Paul into the truth. Paul was even more learned in the Scriptures than the disciples. When he wanted to prove a point in his epistles, he didn’t say, “The Holy Spirit has spoken to me such and such”; he *did* say, “as it is written,” after which he quoted the Old Testament.

How does the Spirit guide us into the truth? Through the Word of God. *You* received the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, in Holy Baptism, where the words of God, “I baptize

you in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit,” spoke the truth to you, and made you a child of God’s kingdom. Wherever you hear the Word of God proclaimed, there you hear the Spirit of truth continuing to guide you into the truth. As you hear the Word proclaimed from this pulpit, you hear the Spirit of truth. As you recite the liturgy or sing hymns, you hear the Spirit of truth.

Jesus does, of course, give you in these verses a way of judging what you hear. If what you hear does not proclaim and glorify Jesus Christ, then what you hear is *not* the Spirit of truth. Jesus told His disciples (and us): “[The Spirit of truth] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13–15). The Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, cannot contradict these words of Jesus.

In this day and age, when truth seems to be a commodity that changes depending on who is speaking, or who has the loudest voice, it is comforting for us to know that the Spirit of truth is with us as Christians. The Spirit of truth provides us with a context even for events of the day.

Let us return briefly to our scenarios at the beginning. ISIS is butchering Christians in the name of truth. What does the Spirit of truth say? The Spirit of truth speaks the Holy Gospel—here from the Old Testament—concerning Jesus Christ: “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5).

Radical Islamists—in fact, the entire world—may oppose the Gospel, but it is still the truth. According to Islam, God is great. According to the Holy Spirit, Jesus is greater.

Loud voices of big business and major entertainers oppose what have been called the bathroom law passed in North Carolina, believing that allowing people to use the bathroom of their gender identity is simply the truth. What does the Spirit of truth say? The Spirit of truth speaks the Holy Law—here from the New Testament—as St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans. . . . And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?” (1 Cor. 5:1–2).

Some in the world think that they can judge the law. The law of God is, however, still holy, and the truth, since it tells us how God made His creation, and how His children live their lives.

And, finally, the political process. The Spirit of truth tells us that God uses the kingdom of the left, that is, the civil authorities, to govern the world. (You can read this in Romans 13.) A specific instance of this might be messy, but God is at work there. He is at work for the sake of the kingdom of the right, that is, the kingdom of the righteous, believers in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit tells us that God preserves His church on earth. Civil realms may rise or fall, become stronger or weaker, but the church goes on and on. Believers in Jesus Christ may rest assured that God is protecting His church and His children, allowing the Gospel to be proclaimed to a world that needs to hear the truth, just as we have heard the truth and believed it.

God has given us the Spirit of truth. May the Holy Spirit continue to sanctify us and keep us with Jesus Christ in the one faith that *is* the truth.

In the name of Jesus. **Amen.**