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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost, Series B (Confirmation)
Saturday, May 19th, 2018
Sunday, May 20th, 2018

Sermon: The Holy Spirit Helps Us Witness
Text: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-16

Focus: The Holy Spirit helps us to bear witness to Jesus.
Function: That they would gladly and boldly bear witness to Jesus.
Structure: Text-Application
Locus: “The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...” (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. In our Gospel reading today Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit. And tells the disciples that both the Holy Spirit and they will bear witness about him to the rest of the world:

“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. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:26-27, ESV).¹

Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the way God poured out his Spirit on 120 people who prophesied and preached 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead (and 10 days after his Ascension into heaven). But Pentecost was *not* a one-time event. *We* are a Pentecost people (not Pentecostal). God continues to pour out his Spirit on us in Baptism and the preaching of the Gospel. Wherever and whenever God’s kingdom breaks into our lives, the Spirit is at work. And Jesus tells us that we are part of the Spirit’s work.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “the Helper” (v. 26, ESV, NASB). Other Bible translations say things like “counselor” (NIV) or “advocate” (NRV). The Greek word is *Paraclete* (not “parakeet”), and it means somebody who comes alongside you and speaks on your behalf in a

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

court of law. *Paraclete* is forensic language, courtroom language. And in the verses omitted by our lectionary (16:1-4a), Jesus leaves no doubt in the disciples' minds that they will be put on trial for believing him (cf. Mark 13:9-11).

“Witness” is courtroom language too. Witnesses in court swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The Spirit bears witness about Jesus (v. 26). He testifies to the truth because he is the Spirit of truth. And, oh, by the way, the Holy Spirit is a *he* (not a “she” or an “it”). He is the third Person of the Trinity, and Jesus refers to Him using masculine pronouns. He is not a metaphysical force or feeling. He is the Lord and Giver of Life! And he bears witness to Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world!

The Spirit's job is to point people to Jesus. “He will glorify *me*,” Jesus says, “for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). And in another place, Jesus says that “the Helper, the Holy Spirit..., will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (14:26). The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus and tells us what Jesus said because the Holy Spirit wants people to believe in *Jesus*! The Spirit of Truth bears witness to the one who *is* the Truth (John 14:6). He convicts us of our sins (16:8) and points us to Jesus. Or, to put it in simple Law and Gospel terminology: the Holy Spirit shows us our sin and then shows us our Savior! He bears witness to Jesus.

Yet the Holy Spirit is not the only one who bears witness to Jesus. His disciples also bear witness. “You also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:27). These words are a commissioning, a sending, of the disciples to tell other people about Jesus. I am reminded of what Jesus said to them at his Ascension in last week's reading: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

All believers, the people of God—the Church—bear witness to Jesus in our daily lives. The way we live and the words we speak are meant to point people to Jesus. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). My dear brothers and sisters, *you* are witnesses to Jesus! Together we all bear witness to the saving death and resurrection of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.

Unfortunately, personal evangelism is in decline in America. According to recent research by the Barna Group, fewer and fewer Christians even believe that they have a personal responsibility to share their faith.² The same study indicates that an increasing number of believers say they wouldn’t tell a non-Christian friend about Jesus because of fear of losing that person’s friendship. No doubt, our secular, anti-Christian culture exerts tremendous pressure on us to keep our faith cloistered at home. And I can relate to the nervous feeling about not wanting to offend people by my faith. But think about what we’re really saying: that we are more interested in having people like us on earth, yet spend eternity in hell, than to enjoy life and friendship with God forever! If you really think that through, though, it doesn’t add up.

This week I finished reading an amazing book called *Light in the Dark Belt*.³ Told by Rosa Young, it’s her autobiography of how she started the first Lutheran school in Alabama during the early years of World War I and how she worked with the LCMS mission board to bring the first Lutheran missionaries to rural Alabama. Even as a young black woman in a segregated society, Rosa made it her mission to tell every single person in her county about the love of Jesus. Traveling at times by train or by horse and buggy—but mostly on foot—she spent time everyday visiting homes, farms, and shops so that she could share “the pure Gospel” of the Lutheran teaching that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. She

² <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>

³ Rosa Young, *Light in the Dark Belt* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950).

didn't always know what she was going to say, but she prayed each morning, "Lord, help me." And he did! LCMS historians today credit Rosa with bringing thousands of people (blacks and whites) to faith in Jesus Christ during her lifetime. (If you want to learn more about her incredible story and simple method of personal evangelism, you can pickup her book in our church library. The LCMS also has a documentary film available for free download from its website.)

You don't have to be the Apostle Paul or Billy Graham or even Rosa Young to tell people about Jesus. You just have to love Jesus and believe that he loves you and the unchurched people in your life. You don't even have to know what you're going to say ahead of time. Just pray, "Lord, help me," like Rosa did, and then lean heavy on the Holy Spirit to do the rest. After all, he is the Helper, isn't he?! Jesus says that he'll remind you what Jesus said (John 14:26). And the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say (Matt. 10:19-20).

Earlier this month, while I was attending the second immersion of Pastoral Leadership Institute (PLI), I learned about the importance of *presence* prior to proclamation. People no longer go to church just because we have a building and open the doors on Sunday morning. And people aren't automatically going to be interested in hearing what you have to say about Jesus just because you strike up a conversation. You need to be *present* in their life *before* you tell them about Jesus. People don't care what you know until they know that you care. "Presence prior to proclamation."

So here are some simple ideas to help us be present in people's lives so that you can bear witness to Jesus when the Holy Spirit's timing is right. Get to know your neighbors. Learn the names of their children—and dogs. Serve them by mowing their grass or shoveling their snow. Don't walk down to the mailbox to get your mail until you look outside and make sure that

you're going to bump into somebody. Park on the driveway instead of your garage so that you have more opportunity to strike up conversations. Offer to pray for your coworkers or classmates when they tell you about tough stuff going on in their life. Follow up and ask how it's going later on. Eventually, a real relationship may develop with some of those people. You may even be able to invite them to church or offer to bring their kids to Sunday school. You might even say, "Jesus loves you, and I do too." But you don't have to start there. Begin to bear witness by just loving your neighbors. God will do the rest.

Today is Confirmation Sunday. At the eleven o'clock service, six young men and women will confess their faith in Christ before the entire congregation. That is wonderful and worthy of celebration. The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). But there is a big difference between confessing Christ in Church and bearing witness to Jesus in the world. It is relatively easy to talk about Jesus at Church—"preaching to the choir," as they say. But where the rubber hits the road in your life of faith is when you go out of these doors into the world the other six days of the week. That is where the Christian life really happens. The mission field is "out there," not here. The world is where Jesus sends you.

C.F.W. Walther, the founding pastor of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, preached about the marvelous mission Jesus entrusts to us:

"Through holy baptism, every Christian has been consecrated, ordained and installed into the ministry to teach, admonish and comfort his neighbor. Through holy baptism each Christian has obtained not only the authority, power and right, but also the high, holy obligation...of rousing himself to care and to help so that others may be brought to Christ."⁴

⁴ C.F.W. Walther, "Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian's Desire and Duty," as quoted by Lutheran Hour Ministries, *We the Church: The Priesthood of All Believers* (video).

So whoever you are, wherever you go, you are a disciple of Jesus, a Christ-follower. You bear witness to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit bears witness with you. Or how else would you be here today? The fact that you are a baptized believer in Christ is all due to the fact that God sent somebody into your life to tell you about Jesus. A parent, teacher, coach, neighbor, friend, or colleague, bore witness Jesus' forgiveness and what God did in their life. And now he's doing it in *your* life too.

No wonder that the Holy Spirit is called the Helper! He points people to Jesus. He points *us* to Jesus. And he *helps us* to point others to Jesus too. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.