

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

SPIRIT OF HOPE

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

As a cub reporter for the *World News and Times Chronicle*, you are sitting in the press section of the courtroom as the trial of the millennia unfolds before you. The importance of the trial is indicated by the array of judges that are to hear the case. Indeed all the powers and principalities are represented on the bench. On trial are the group of souls who have been accused of following the teachings of a man who was tried and sentenced to death for blasphemy and insurrection in two previous proceedings. This Jesus has been eliminated, but his followers still keep his false teachings alive. They are herded into the court room roughly and treated with obvious contempt. It looks as if this will be almost a summary judgment in that the defendants will provide their own defense while all the expertise and knowledge of the world is assembled to prosecute them. Even the rest of the spectators appear to be delirious with a thirst for their blood. One after the other the defendants stand before the bench and recite what Jesus had told them, describe how his actions and words fulfilled the promises given through the prophets, relate the stories of his healings and demonstrations of power, and even explain how his death reveals that he is the Messiah. But their testimony is met with hisses and shouts of derision. The judges, the prosecutors and the crowd are getting impatient and restive. Enough of their lies and blasphemies. Away with them and may we be rid of them forever. The judges rise to pronounce their sentence.

Suddenly, like in a Perry Mason episode, the huge double doors at the rear of the court room are flung open and a mighty wind and fire fills the room. You do not know whether you will be blown away or consumed, but you know a terror and devastation that visits only when you come face to face with absolute power. As all in the court room cower before the power, the defendants stand and indeed appear to grow in strength and stature. In fact, they seem to glow as if on fire. In the turbulence, all things are rearranged. When the smoke clears, the fire and Jesus' followers are behind the bench while the powers and principalities are in the dock. Your head swims as the charges of lies, blasphemies and heresies are read over the heads of those who had judged Jesus and his followers. Likewise the blood-thirsty crowd is herded into the dock to hear read the same charges against them. In the face of the power of absolute Truth, some repent and turn to the light, while others respond in anger and seek to do violence against those who choose to follow Jesus. The court room is completely polarized; there is no middle ground. Everyone has lined up either for or against the Truth. You are not spared from making a stand. Even as a reporter to remain objective is to put yourself above the Truth, which is something you dare not do in the context of the present demonstration of power in the court room.

When we think of Pentecost we seldom if ever think of it in terms of a masonesque court room scenario, yet that is the very picture that Jesus presents in our Gospel reading from St. John. The word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit, *Paraclete*, translated as Advocate in our reading, is the term the Greeks used for one who comes and stands along side a defendant in a court proceeding. In addition, Jesus' whole discourse on the Holy

Spirit is couched in terms of his statement in John 15:20 that his followers would be hated and persecuted by the world because the world hated Jesus whom they serve. So, as our Advocate, what does the Spirit do?

In the words of Jesus:

^{15:26}“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

^{16:8}And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

The Advocate who stands beside and in support of Jesus’ followers is the *Spirit of truth*, a title given by the Jewish holiness sect at Qumran in the time of Jesus to the leader of the forces of good against the forces of evil. In short, the Holy Spirit is the leader of Jesus’ followers, and therefore, represents Jesus’ presence among men.

The Advocate also comes from the Father and is sent by the Son. The Holy Spirit is God in power, in message and in righteousness. So, his power is sovereign; his message is transformational; and his righteousness shines on the world the light of perfect righteousness which shows up any speck of unrighteousness.

Jesus goes on to tell us that the Advocate proves the world wrong when it comes to the related topics of sin, righteousness and judgment. If the Spirit testifies to the truth about Jesus, that is that he is the only way to the Father, then the world does not understand the true nature of sin if it claims that we do not need Jesus in order to be cleansed from our sin. Likewise, because the world does not understand righteousness it condemned Jesus as guilty and unrighteous, and therefore, celebrates his death and absence. The Spirit testifies that Jesus’ absence is a reason for celebration because due to his righteousness he is enthroned with God in heaven. After getting the concepts of sin and righteousness messed up, no wonder the world has gotten judgment all wrong. The coming of the Spirit of God proves that Jesus was not judged by the world at his trial, but rather that the world was judged by Jesus and condemned.

Although the Advocate shines the merciless light of the truth on the world, thereby revealing its untruth and guilt, the Spirit also empowers the followers of Jesus to go forth with the Good News that Jesus was not defeated but victorious. The Advocate is the one sent to guide the disciples into all truth. The Spirit proclaims Jesus’ triumphant death, resurrection and ascension, and by doing so transforms the abandonment of his absence into the joy of knowing where he has gone and why he went away (16:5-7). Without the counsel of the Spirit, his message of truth, we could only stand before the cross convicted of our sins, but with no hope of salvation (16:8-11). Since the Holy Spirit delivers the fullness of Jesus’ teaching to the minds of his followers, specifically what they could not

otherwise understand about the cross before his death and resurrection, a third aspect of his ministry is to disciple believers (16:12-15).

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of hope because he demonstrates God's truth and testifies that the promises of God are real and true. It is the assurance of the victory of Jesus, not only over the powers and principalities of this world, but also the powers of evil and death in the spiritual realms, that fuels the life and ministry of the Church. Because of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church can be both missional and hopeful. We are missional because the Spirit empowers us to announce and demonstrate the purpose and direction of God in the world through Jesus Christ. We are a community of hope because it is through the Holy Spirit that we can proclaim with assurance, "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" Is it any wonder that the first act of the disciples after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to preach the Gospel to the world gathered in Jerusalem? Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, would have you go and do likewise.

Let us pray.

Lord, we live in a world that is hostile to even the idea that there is anything as absolute truth. When we proclaim that you have revealed the exclusive nature of your message, we are ridiculed and rejected even by others in the Church. Open us to the work of the Advocate so that we will hold fast to your truth, proclaim your message in word and deed, and mourn for those who dismiss or deny your truth, even when they attack us. Through your Spirit grow us as your body and as a community of hope in the midst of a world of despair. May we *Always be ready to make [our] defense to anyone who demands from [us] an accounting for the hope that is in [us]* (1 Peter 3:15). Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on May 31, 2009, the Day of Pentecost.