

EASTER VII (EXAUDI) – MAY 16, 2021 – JOHN 15:26-16:4

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

²⁶ But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. ^{16:1} I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² 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. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

We've all heard about situations where people were forced to choose between their Christian faith and their own physical lives. From mass shootings in schools, to targeted killings even in churches, evil runs rampant in our sinful world. Recently, it's been about a year since one of our own pastors in Fort Dodge was killed by a man suffering from severe mental illness – Pr. Henderson was trying to draw the attention of the intruder away from the confirmation students who were just across the building from where he was killed. We don't ultimately know why this man killed a man of God, a Pastor – but we know that it's the work of the Evil One. The devil loves nothing more than to weaken faith, to smite the Shepherd so that the sheep will scatter; this is what he hoped to accomplish in our own state. And this is nothing compared to the suffering that's going on around the world by those who are persecuted for the Name of Christ which they bear. From Africa to Europe to the Middle East, many folks whose names we will never know are being targeted with hate because of the faith which they confess with

their lips and bear witness to with their actions. More than just a symptom of the sinful nature of the world in which we live, this is direct, hand-to-hand combat between the prince of lies, the devil, and the Lord of Life, who has already won the victory. We are, as Paul tells us, fighting more than flesh and blood here; we are fighting spiritual warfare!

Jesus anticipated that this would occur, both in His own time of earthly ministry, and even more as the Last Day draws nearer. He told the apostles that they would be scattered, each to their own home, out of fear that what was going to happen to Him would also be visited upon them. Some of these predictions have borne fruit in more recent history, which we'll talk about in a minute. Some of them will only take place as the Day of Judgment draws nearer. But the result is the same – the faith of many will grow cold, and many will turn away from the faith because they cannot bear under the persecution visited upon them. Everyone has their breaking point – there is always something that can be done to us, or those whom we love, that will make us knuckle under to the evil forces. But thanks be to God that He has a plan for this.

We are told that this is why the Helper, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, has come into our midst. He will work within our hearts and souls to strengthen our faith, remind us of the love of God the Father in Christ Jesus our Lord, and give us the courage to remain faithful. He listens to what He hears, and that is solely about our Redeemer and Savior, Jesus. He creates and sustains faith in Christ in our hearts, and works a miracle there every day. Even in these grey and latter days, when it seems like the church is losing the battle, is shrinking in size, and losing influence over society, this is not unknown to Jesus. In fact, He tells us these things so that we will be prepared, and not lose heart. Let's take a look at some of the predictions and promises that Jesus gives us in this passage, and see how they can apply to us today, and give us hope and a future – in His heavenly kingdom.

The apostles were with Jesus from the beginning of His earthly ministry; yet they, too, would fall away. What hope does that give us, 2000 years removed and certainly not blessed with that great depth

of faith? When Jesus was interrupted in His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, the soldiers that had come to arrest Him asked for Jesus of Nazareth. This was to give His disciples that were there with Him time to leave Him. It was foretold in the Old Testament that none of Jesus' disciples would be harmed during His passion, torture and eventual death. Jesus said to His arresting officers, "I told you that I am He. If I am the one you seek then let these go away." This was to fulfill the word He had spoken, "Of those you gave me I have lost none." Now, of course, we know that later on, each of them would die the death of a martyr, with the exception of John. And, he would not exactly have it easy – he would be banished to the island of Patmos, where he would pen the Gospel of John, the book of Revelation, and his three Epistles. However, they would not be taken with Jesus and executed like He was, as followers of Him. We can take comfort from this narrative, in that all of the predictions, all of the foretellings, that Jesus gave would come true. Therefore, we can take to heart His promise that we will never be forsaken, or left alone, by the Holy Spirit, no matter what! His love for us is that strong.

Even though they would scatter, they would be restored to full fellowship by Jesus during His 40 days with them before His ascension. Thomas – who was given the unfortunate moniker of "doubting Thomas", even though they all doubted from time to time – was restored by Jesus appearing to him and beckoning him to touch his hands and his side. Thomas' faith was restored, and his only response was "My Lord and my God!" Peter – who denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed, was later asked by Jesus after His resurrection if Peter loved Him. Peter's response – you know I love you. Jesus' charge – "Feed my sheep." This was then followed with a prediction that Peter would be later led where he did not want to go, and be dressed by others (for execution). The predictions weren't all rosy, but they all came true, including the one that restored him to full fellowship with God, and reassured Peter and Thomas of the forgiveness of all their sins.

Each of the apostles was extremely human, like us – there was a point where they were no longer willing to go in order to contend for the faith. There was something that would rob them of their

courage. For each of us, this is a different point – we’d like to hope that we’d be the brave hero, and would sacrifice nothing for our faith, as we promise in the Confirmation rite. But, as we know in our heart of hearts, “in places that we don’t even like to talk about”, our sinful nature is weak, and we will give in to the temptation to speak against our Savior if the going gets rough. That’s where the disciples come in – they, too, were human. They, too, gave up and scattered, just as the Lord predicted. There was just too much at stake; too much faith in something they could not see would have been necessary for them to not leave Him at His lowest hour.

But, there was and is forgiveness for them and for us – that’s where the Holy Spirit comes in. He creates, sustains, builds up, and restores our hearts from death to life, from lack of faith to trust in Christ as our Redeemer. He does this through means – through the holy Absolution spoken here this morning, through Baptism where faith is born and created, through the Sacrament we’ll partake of in a few minutes. In all of these, our sins are forgiven – those of thought, word and deed, those we are aware of, and those we are not aware of – and removed from us as far as the East is from the West. On top of this, God promises that He will remember them no more – not just look the other way, but save up the guilt for us at a later time – but totally forgets about them. We can’t conceive of this, because we are sinful human beings, but God is not only capable of this, but does it out of His love.

Like many prophecies in the Bible, Jesus is trying to prepare His disciples, and us, for what is coming soon. He paints a pretty bleak picture. But, that isn’t the final word on the subject – thanks be to God! “They will expel you from the Synagogues” – this happened both in the times of the apostles, and even in our own times. When Paul and the other disciples went from town to town, they first tried to recruit converts to the Faith from among the Jews – this made sense, since Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. Indeed, this worked with a few – and these became the leaders of the new house churches throughout the known world. Think of the church in Corinth, which we just finished studying in Sunday Morning Bible Class – the former Synagogue leader was the

one that later hosted the Christian believers in his own home, located next door to the Synagogue. Talk about an effective witness! Many of the first believers were from among those who were coming to worship at the Synagogue, were converted by the Holy Spirit from Paul's preaching and teaching in the courtyard, and joined up with the new group of believers. However, this didn't often work – often, Paul and the others were expelled from the Synagogues and the Temple courts in Jerusalem, banished to go away and not come back, for they were regarded as heretics and blasphemers. (Once again, just as Jesus was persecuted, so will His followers be). So, what did they do? We're told that Peter and a couple other of the apostles, after they were released from jail for preaching The Way (another name for the Christian faith), rejoiced that they were persecuted! That's right, they gave thanks to God for being given the privilege of speaking His Word to the nations – imagine the depth of faith that such an attitude would take!

Think of why the Saxon immigrants came to the United States in the first place from Germany in the 1830s. They were being persecuted for not knuckling under to the state authorities, who demanded that the Lutherans and the Reformed set aside their theological differences, and unite in worship together under the same liturgy, in what was called the Prussian Union. Pr. Stephan was told to stop preaching "separatist" doctrine to the people, even meeting in homes and at night to avoid detection. The immigrants sought to come to America so that they could worship as they saw fit. The persecution was growing worse and worse; Pr. Walther and the others thought that they would soon be jailed for preaching the truth of the Gospel in their native Germany. Not only speaking the truth, but also speaking it to power, can still get one in trouble today. Think of our fellow pastors in Canada, that I've mentioned before, who are sitting in jail for "hate crimes" that are nothing more than preaching the truth of the Gospel

"Those who kill you will think they are offering service to God" – doesn't this describe what's happening today all over the world? Muslim extremists claim that we're better off dead than refusing

to knuckle under to their faith. They claim that they're on a mission from God to wipe out Christianity, what they call "the great Satan", from the face of the earth. This has accounted for so much violence that I can't even count it – in the 1990s, in the former Yugoslavia; in the early 2000s, in Sudan; today, in Egypt – many of our fellow Christians are being slaughtered, because they will not give up faith in the Triune God. This is just another of Jesus' predictions that Jesus gives in our text – not to scare us, but to give us warning that it is to come. He says that He didn't speak about this before, because He was with His disciples. But, the time was coming soon that He would no longer be with them. The promised Counselor, Whom we've heard about these last few weeks, was coming as soon as He was taken from this earth. However, if they knew what was coming, they would be strengthened to bear up a little bit more of the persecution. If you know that the pain is coming, sometimes you can steel yourself for it, and be able to withstand it a little bit better

We shouldn't be surprised at the violence, the persecution increasing, as we get ever closer to the Last Day, and the devil begins his all-out assault on God Himself. We know Who the Victor is, but it's not going to be easy. Read the predictions about the Last Day in Matthew 25 and throughout John's Revelation for more information on what's coming. However, thanks be to God that He has already won the victory – He will rescue us, He will be with us every day by sending the Holy Spirit to be with us, and He loves us so much that He sent Jesus to die in our place, to take the guilt of our sin upon Himself and the punishment that our sins deserved away from us.

After Peter and his sword cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, Malchus, and Jesus healed him and restored the ear, Jesus told the disciples that they should not resist the soldiers anymore, especially with physical violence. After that, He said to the chief priests, and the captains of the temple, and the elders who had come out against Him, "Have you come out as against a thief, with swords and clubs to take me? When I was with you day after day teaching in the temple, you did not lay

your hands on me; **but this is your hour and the hour of the power of darkness.** All this has happened that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.

Jesus was preparing the disciples for what was coming soon – indeed, later that night. Remember that this entire discourse, from Chapters 12-16, took place in the Upper Room, the night before He was betrayed, at the same time that the Synoptic Gospel writers record the events of the Lord’s Supper. They then journeyed to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed a final time for this cup to pass from Him; but if it were the Father’s will, then He would be passively obedient. In the Garden, what came to pass was dozens of events that were prophesied earlier would happen to Jesus; this being the hour of the Evil One was just one of them.

Even though things will get bad, even worse than they are right now, we can cling to Jesus’ promises in our text. The Holy Spirit will be with us throughout all of it, to strengthen our faith and keep us firm in the true faith until life everlasting. Only the Father controls our soul; the devil, the world, our sinful nature, the government, our spiritual enemies all think they control us, but they actually only have dominion over our physical bodies, which are transient and temporary. He tells us the Master’s business because He regards us as friends, not as servants; therefore, we are prepared for what is to come, ready for being hated for the Name which we bear, the Name of Christ Jesus. He has marked us with the seal of the cross in our Baptism, and continues to bless and preserve us in this mortal world until His perfect time comes to take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven. Thanks be to God for all that He has done for us. He truly has done everything for our salvation. Amen.

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

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.