

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Lifelong Learners

John 16:5-16

I spoke to someone whose son recently completed second grade. Following the recognition ceremony, brochures were being distributed about summer school. The young boy proudly announced to his parents, "They didn't give me a brochure, so that means I passed!"

For our Lord's first disciples, these learners of Jesus and his way, instruction was nonstop. There was no summer break. No two-hour early dismissals or in-service days. Maybe a pause here or there for some of the major Jewish holy days. But otherwise, it had pretty much been three solid years of intensive teaching and study. Learning who Jesus is, what he's doing, and what this means for themselves and for the world, required a steady curriculum of information and transformation.

Today's text is part of a larger section called Jesus' farewell discourse, where he meets privately with his disciples prior to his crucifixion. During this closed-door session, Jesus takes his teaching to an even more critical and more intense level. His final speech to his followers covers deep and difficult subjects, especially his impending suffering and death and the persecution that his disciples will suffer. Jesus also takes some themes that he had already introduced earlier in his ministry and develops them even further, topics like glory, mutual indwelling, and love. Though his followers had heard plenty about these subjects, now is a crucial moment when they need to revisit the fundamentals of who Jesus is, who they are, and what this means for their present and their future.

In his farewell teaching, Jesus' main point is the life in God that his disciples have and will continue to have. In other words, the loving relationship that exists between the Father and the Son will take shape in, and be realized among, the disciples. And making that happen will be the work of the Holy Spirit. So far in his Gospel, John has given us glimpses of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and mission. But this intimate, intense session with his disciples is where Jesus brings the work of the Holy Spirit into sharpest focus.

In this case, Jesus doesn't teach them by putting a PowerPoint slide on the screen, displaying three interlocking circles representing Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus knows that in this moment, his disciples need more than just a download of doctrine. Yes, they need instruction. But most of all, they need comfort and reassurance. Jesus himself recognizes and acknowledges that they're "filled with grief" (v. 6). So he has to speak to their hearts as well as their heads. Jesus has to remind them, once again, that it's actually good for them that he'll soon leave to return to the Father. But at this point that's hard for the disciples to see, hard to believe.

There's a story that circulates in various forms, but the gist of it goes like this:

Late one stormy night, a small voice was heard from the bedroom across the hall. "Mommy, I'm scared!" Mom responds sympathetically, "Honey, don't be afraid, I'm right across the hall." After a short time, with thunder snapping in the distance, the little voice says again, "I'm still scared!" Mom replies, "You don't need to be afraid. Close your eyes and pray. And

remember that Jesus is always with you.” The next time the pause is longer—but the voice returns along with a little child standing next to her bed: “Mommy, can I get in bed with you and Daddy?” As Mom is just about to lose her patience, her little boy catches her eyes and says, “Mommy, I know that Jesus is always with me, but right now I need Jesus with skin on.”¹

That’s the Jesus whom the disciples have gotten used to having with them, the Jesus with skin on. During his earthly ministry, Jesus has been their point of access to God, the embodiment of God’s saving love and life-giving power. As John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:14a). So what will it mean for Jesus’ disciples when he’s gone? How will they have a relationship with God when the Jesus they’ve seen, heard, and touched has returned to the one who sent him?

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “The soul that has once been waked, or stung, or uplifted by the desire of God, will inevitably (I think) awake to the fear of losing Him.”² Maybe that’s at the heart of what the disciples are going through in today’s Scripture passage. They’re afraid of losing Jesus. They’re fearful about being cut off from the presence of God and the experience of God that they’ve known through Jesus.

So Jesus comforts and teaches them by repeating his promise about the arrival of the Spirit. The Spirit will continue to unfold the meaning of God’s revelation of himself in Jesus. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, and most of all in his coming death, resurrection, and ascension, has made God known. But once he has left this world, that doesn’t mean the disciples are cut off from the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus. Through the Spirit, Jesus will still be with them, teaching them and guiding them. Even though they’re worried and fearful about Jesus’ departure, the disciples can rest assured that whether it’s he himself in the flesh right now, or the Spirit with them after he’s gone, the source of the revelation is the same: God the Father.

Jesus tells them, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (v. 12-13a). In order to fully open the way to eternal life with God, Jesus must proceed to die, be raised, and return to the Father. He must complete the work God sent him to do. Then the Spirit is sent to convict, convert, teach, guide, and form. The Spirit will take believers, individually and together, into a fuller understanding of what God has shown us in Jesus.

Notice how this kind of teaching and instruction assumes the passage of time and changing circumstances in our lives. It assumes that we who believe in Jesus are human beings who follow his way in the context of events, experiences, and relationships. We inhabit time and space. We practice eternal life while still in the midst of this mortal life. This shouldn’t really surprise us in view of the fact that we worship and serve a God who came to us in human form in order to save us. And this present life is the only place where we can begin to receive and experience his saving love.

Editor and columnist Louis Cassels once noted, “How long does it take to become a Christian? A moment—and a lifetime.”³ No matter how far those first followers of Jesus had come with him, and no matter how many grade levels of discipleship they had already completed, there would still be countless moments to meet, experiences to encounter, challenges to confront, and sufferings to survive after Jesus had departed. When it came to processing and practicing the revelation of God in Jesus, the disciples would have to be lifelong learners.

Speaking of learners, what a blessing to recognize and celebrate with our congregation's graduates during today's service. We rejoice with them and pray for them as they take this significant step in their educational life. It's a good example of how the church is called to be present and to participate in the lives of its members, at all stages of their faith journey. From birth to death, and at all the major and seemingly minor steps in between, believers are sent to accompany one another and love one another as a sign of God's saving presence in our lives. This includes those moments when you're handed a diploma and move your tassel, to the glory of God.

Surely this is part of our commission as a community of disciples, namely, to help individuals, including the children and youth in our fellowship, stay attentive to and open to the presence and work of God in their lives, to be responsive to his call and to discern their place in his redeeming work in the world. A few years ago, author and columnist David Brooks noted,

Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to [character growth] do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?⁴

Being a follower of Jesus includes asking similar kinds of questions about what God is asking of you, especially when you take a significant step like completing high school or college, or pursuing a particular career. How can my studies and my life's work contribute to the revealing of God's love for the world and his sovereignty in accomplishing his purposes?

Gaining clarity on an answer to that kind of question takes discernment. Discernment is largely about listening for and following the guidance and direction of God as you make the journey of faith. In the second major section of today's text, words for "say," "speak," "tell," and "declare" appear several times. So what has been true throughout John's Gospel is true at this stage as well. God's word is his way of conveying love and life. In this season of commencement speakers, who certainly have much wisdom and truth to offer, we need to remember that for believers, the speech of God is what most determines our decisions and direction.

Pope Francis has observed, "Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions." He continues, "We need it at all times, to help us recognize God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of his grace and disregard his invitation to grow."⁵

We certainly do need discernment at all times, in order to hear, to stay in sync with God's will, and to grow. The good news, as Jesus assures us, is that his return to the Father won't cut us off from God's presence and communication. The Spirit comes to facilitate our listening, so that we're able to recognize the voice we need to hear most. God will always have plenty to say, but he knows that timing is important. Like those first disciples, our comprehension of what God is saying to us, individually and together, isn't just about what but about when.

"I have much more to say to you," says Jesus. But he knows that the time has to be right. When the circumstances are conducive, when we recognize our need, when we're ready to hear, the Spirit works to make the connection, using a variety of means. Prayer, spiritual disciplines, worship, reading, reflection on experience, spiritual community, the counsel of others, and as always, Scripture. This is part of why you can return to a Bible text you've

read, or heard preached or taught on, many times before, and suddenly it comes alive to you in a new way, with a fresh word that is just what you needed in that moment or that particular season of your life, in those particular conditions. The gift of the Holy Spirit helps ensure that we're able to hear Jesus speaking into our lives, and speaking into our congregation, across time, at all stages of the journey of faith. This is why you and I need to be lifelong learners, students of the way of Jesus, at all times, past, present, and future.

¹ Darrell Winger, "Jesus with Skin On." Mennonite World Conference website. June 10, 2015. Accessed June 12, 2019 <<https://mwc-cmm.org/content/jesus-skin>>.

² *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, no. 15).

³ Louis Cassels, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33,. No. 2.

⁴ David Brooks, "The Moral Bucket List." *The New York Times* (April 11, 2015).

⁵ Quoted in James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Brazos: Grand rapids, 2022) 129.