

This morning, our Gospel lesson continues from St. John's Gospel, chapter 16. And next week's lesson is from the end of this chapter as well. You may recall from last week, this is part of the teaching of Christ after the institution of Holy Communion and prior to His arrest later that night. The disciples do not know or understand how badly their lives will be wracked by Christ's crucifixion, but Christ in this portion of scripture is trying to prepare them for what will come to pass. In so doing, He also prepares us to be His ambassadors in this world in His absence, empowered by the Holy Ghost. For the disciples, these sayings would not sink in until later – until after everything had been made known; but this is due to the limitations of human belief and imagination, not for the failings of Christ to warn them. We humans usually believe everything will carry on as it always has, and therefore we are surprised when dramatic and sudden events change everything.

Yet we, like the disciples, should know better. If this world is characterized by anything, it is by its subjection to futility, to change, to instability; and this persistent mutability of the world highlights for us one of the primary contrasts in this morning's lessons and collect. God, as the Creator and as the Source of all that is, is not mutable. We say that He is immutable. God doesn't change. That which is imperfect is always changing. That which is perfect doesn't change. So in our individual and collective pursuit of holiness, we should be seeking that which is good and right. We should be seeking that which is perfect and immutable. We should be seeking God. And then we should incarnate that which we are seeking in our lives. This is what Christ was attempting to communicate to the disciples on that night of the last supper – that they had what was good and true and perfect right there in their midst. They no longer needed to flail about in the world, worrying, fretting, manipulating, grasping for that next thing that would fix all their problems; for that which was to overcome the world was speaking directly to them, face to face.

Yet Christ, in His incarnated presence, would not be able to perfect them and simultaneously save/perfect the rest of the world. It wasn't that He was unable, it was that He was located in space. As fully man, He was only in one location at a time; but the extent of His followers, the Church, would be much much greater than a man could physically instruct. Additionally, Christ as the Word of God, was external to His followers, and yet He desired that they would not be dependent upon His presence externally for their perfection, but that they would have the Spirit of God writing the Word of God in their hearts.

Consider for a moment if Christ had not ascended to the Father. Even if the Holy Spirit had descended, would not humanity seek council from the physical presence of Christ rather than from the Spirit of God which dwelt within them and within the Body of Christ, the Church? Even that term, The Body of Christ, implies that Christ is, in fact still physically present in this world. He is present in you and me and in the membership of His Church. Had Christ not ascended, our spiritual perfection would have been stunted. Christ knew this and tried to tell His disciples, but even His very direct teaching, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you," fell on deaf ears of the disciples. It

simply defied their categories of thought.

But when the Comforter comes, which is another way of saying, “when the One who Strengthens or Fortifies you,” comes, then every believer becomes territory taken from the evil ones, the kingdom of darkness, and brought into the kingdom of light, the Kingdom of God. These individuals have been and are being remade into the perfected, immutable, image of the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is a direct assault upon the powers that have reigned in the world since Adam and Eve, largely unopposed. Not so anymore.

Christ says, “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.” This seems a somewhat cryptic statement, but reveals the battle that is waged by the Church against the powers of darkness. Prior to Christ, the world was dominated by powers that opposed the One True God. These powers operated unopposed except when God's covenant people, the Jews, obeyed their God. However, this changed when God entered into the world as a human being. Christ's presence in the world was a direct assault upon these forces. The fallen existence of humanity and the spiritual rulers of the world were now confronted with pure righteousness and eternal life as found in Christ. The Holy Spirit working in the believer to make Him Christlike continues this confrontation.

When the believer encounters those who do not believe, a confrontation occurs between the righteousness of God in the baptized individual and the sinful nature of the unbeliever. The sin in the world is judged by the righteousness of the Holy Spirit. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus have the Spirit of God, while those who resist Jesus set themselves in opposition to God by default. Righteousness in the Spirit reveals and judges the sin in the world.

And thus the Spirit reproves, or convicts, the world of righteousness. What does this mean but that every human being is expected, is required, to live in a righteous, holy, way. As Christ says, “of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more.” Since Christ now exists in the presence of God the Father, it is evident that His righteousness was perfect, for only the perfection of righteousness is admitted into the presence of God. After the Ascension, the disciples do not see Christ anymore which is vindication of the Lord Jesus' character, ministry, and of the redemption that He wrought on our behalf. And the fact that the followers of Christ pursue righteousness in this world in the power of the Holy Spirit even in the absence of Christ therefore convicts the non-believer who does not pursue the righteousness of God.

Christ in this passage also says that when the Comforter comes, He will reprove the world of judgement “of judgement, because the prince of this world is judged.” The presence of the Spirit of God in us and in the Church as a whole, passes judgement upon the powers that usurped the reign of God in the world. They are against God so they are sinful. They continue in rebellion against God instead of submitting to God and pursuing His

righteousness, and yet they cannot overcome the Holy Spirit residing in the people in whom the Spirit dwells. Christ in us overcomes the world. The prince of this world is judged and thrown down.

And the Spirit will guide us into all truth, pointing us towards Jesus as our example of righteousness whom we should desire to embody through our thoughts and actions, and love with our whole being. Should this service and duty that we owe be fraught with untempered passions? By what manner should a mature Christian life be characterized? Should we be ecstatic one moment and the despairing the next? Should we strive for emotional highs in our worship and life? Is this how the love of God should be displayed in our lives or how the presence of the Spirit of God in the Church should be manifest?

One thing that we recently read in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* is that if we approach Christian community with expectations of how we think it should be, expecting specific experiences or emotions, then we are imposing ourselves, our own desires, upon the community. Seeking for emotions or experiences as indications of authenticity runs the risk, ironically, of being inauthentic. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us, and we are to receive this gift as He is, not as we wish Him to be. God has the prerogative to take us through dramatic experiences, but we do not have the prerogative to expect that of Him. If we seek perfection in Christ, then we should seek the holiness of God which does not draw attention to the self, but gives honor to those around us. Holiness ministers to others even in the smallest encounters. On the other hand, extreme emotional ups and downs draw attention to the self. Holiness developed in us by the gift of the Spirit tames our unruly wills and sinful affections.

EVERY good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. God doesn't change. Not only is He immutable, but He is also impassible, not subject to emotional ups and downs. Rather, God, as eternal and divine love, continually gives to and sustains His creatures, particularly to us His imagers through the Holy Spirit. This is the call that is issued to us today. The world doesn't need more extreme rhetoric or emotional manipulation. It needs steadfast and sincere and consistent devotion to Christ by each one of us who have been incorporated into the Body of Christ.

Yes, there is very much in this world that makes us upset. We live during crazy times when obvious truths are denied, and when those who live quiet and peaceable lives are accosted for spurious reasons. There is much about which to be angry. It is so very easy to tap into that core of righteous indignation which each of us has. Anger is addictive. But in doing so, we capitulate in that confrontation between the Holy Spirit in us and the world. We no longer represent the firstfruits of God's mercy and love, begotten through the Word of Truth. St. James encourages us to be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man works not the righteousness of God. The mature Christian should be intentional and deliberate, not reactionary. We are to listen carefully to those around us before responding with care as well. True discussion and debate is invigorating, but it requires us to be dispassionate, for our emotions often will taint what we are hearing and inflame what we are

speaking. To respond to the world in anger generally is more destructive than constructive. Our character, our meekness, our gentleness and love for all people, are what allow the Spirit of Christ in us to reprove the world. Our arguments, especially if they are made in a heated manner, rarely do.

“Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” St. James encourages us to let go of our own agendas, which we attempt to realize through coercion and heated argumentation. Let go of those things, but receive the gifts that God has for you in the Spirit, the Word of God, Incarnate, Written, and given to us in the love of our brothers and sisters. Set your hearts on things above, leave malice behind, seek God.

We prayed in our collect, “Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found.” Our love of God will reveal itself as a love for the commandments of God and a longing for the eternal joys promised to us, and these promises are for us even now – not just at some future time in heaven. God is our sure foundation, Who never changes. He is complete in Himself so that our passions, emotions, and foolishness never diminish His love for us. His love remains steady even when we falter. But may we order our lives to cultivate an ever deeper love for God. Make time to read the Word; make time to pray. Let the disciplines of the Church be your spiritual foundation. And be strong in the gift of the Spirit which He promised to His disciples on that first Maundy Thursday. Be conscious that God's Spirit indeed dwells in you. You are a child of God, sealed with the Holy Ghost. Nothing in this world or in the next can take that from you. Because of this truth, we do not have to react to the insanity all around us. But may we with confidence, care, and love speak the love of God into the world by our actions and our well-considered speech.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.