

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Spirit and Your Future

John 16:5-15

In many Christian congregations, today is set aside to remember and reflect on the doctrine of the Trinity, the affirmation that God is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With our lips we confess it, and with our brains we struggle to grasp it. Of course, to some degree, every attempt to explain the Trinity or to make it manageable falls short. It always has been, and always will be, impossible for any of us to wrap our minds completely around this fundamental yet perplexing Christian conviction. As preacher David H. C. Read has pointed out, when one of the early Christian creeds speaks of “‘The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible’ the modern mind has been tempted to add ‘and the whole thing incomprehensible.’”¹

Thankfully, we don’t have to fully comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity in order to experience its reality in our lives. Even when we’re not thinking about it or speaking about it that much, the interrelationship of Father, Son, and Spirit is still shaping the way that we relate to God and to one another, especially in the life of the church. For those who receive Jesus’ gift of eternal life, the way that we understand the past, the way that we view the present, and the way that we think about the future, are all influenced by our convictions about God as three in one.

Something similar is going on in today’s Scripture passage from John. Our text is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse. He’s trying to prepare his disciples for the fact that he’ll soon leave them and return to the Father. I say trying to prepare them because this is now the fifth time that Jesus has explained to his disciples that his imminent departure and the coming of the Spirit are a positive thing for them. They’re understandably perplexed, and most of all saddened. Actually, worse than saddened. As Jesus himself observes, “Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief” (v. 6).

So remember that the setting for our text is no cool, detached academic exercise, designed to help the disciples master the intricacies of the Trinity. There’s no lectern from which Jesus delivers a speech. There’s no remote control that he uses to move to the next presentation slide. There are no desks. There’s only a table for fellowship, and on it a box of tissues that the disciples keep passing around to one another, in case anyone needs to wipe away a tear. The kind of tears that come with saying goodbye.

Jesus is getting his disciples ready to face the future, a future where he’s with them, but not in the same way that they have him with them now. 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."²

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 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."³ 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.

That's why Jesus tries to comfort them and reassure them. He has been with them for several years now. He called them to follow him and to join in his public ministry. He has been forming them and teaching them what it means and what it looks like to be part of the community of those who love him. Jesus and his disciples have been through all kinds of situations, circumstances, and experiences. He knows them well. And that includes knowing their fears. Knowing our fears.

We're fearful beings. We have the capacity to perceive existing threats, and to imagine potential threats. The kinds of things we fear can vary, depending on our situation, our social status, our background, our age. One of the most common fears is the fear of loss. The loss can take many forms. The loss of a sense of security. The loss of job or career. The loss of a relationship. The loss of physical strength and health. The loss of freedom and independence. The loss of life itself, particularly through the death of a loved one. In this case, as with all the other forms of loss, there's grief. The grief that comes from a sense of losing something or someone important to you.

As I said earlier, Jesus doesn't respond to his disciples' grief by giving them a formal presentation on the Trinity. He doesn't handle their heartbreak by pulling out a chart explaining how God is three in one. But Jesus does comfort them by reminding them that their relationship with the Father, which they've experienced through him the Son, will be preserved and sustained by the work of the Spirit. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth: Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (v. 7). The word translated into English as "Counselor" is the term that John uses to refer to the Spirit. It's the word "Paraclete," which basically means one called alongside to help. The Paraclete, the Spirit, will come alongside Jesus' followers to give them encouragement, guidance, and instruction.

Jesus even acknowledges that he has much more to say to his disciples, but right now, in the midst of their grief, their sense of loss, they're just not ready to hear it or handle it. That, says Jesus, is another reason why the Spirit is critical. "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (v. 13a). There are things that those first disciples could only grasp, and things that we contemporary disciples can only grasp, when we're at the point, or in the circumstance, where we're actually able to hear and receive what Jesus is saying to us. Part of the Spirit's job is to take the words and teachings of Jesus and make them available to us in fresh ways so that we can hear Jesus in the new and changing circumstances of our lives.

So knowing the Son, and living in relationship with the Father, isn't about going back in time. The Spirit takes what happened back then, in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and makes it available to us now. And on top of that, the Spirit points us towards, and guides us into, the future. That's where Jesus has already been, and where he wants us to be.

Pastor Jack Hayford tells about how God used hardship to teach him how to comfort others. Hayford writes:

On January 17, 1994, ten thousand freight trains seemed to be thundering through our house as the Northridge earthquake hit Los Angeles. When it was over, our family was safe and our home virtually untouched. Yet in the days following the disaster, I was gripped with a fear I had never known.

After four days, I desperately sought God in prayer. "Lord, I can't understand myself! I am not afraid for my life, and I am not in doubt of your presence and protection. Is there something wrong with me?"

Instantly, I sensed an inner whisper: *My son, there is nothing wrong with you. I allowed you to experience the depth of the trauma and fear that has gripped multitudes so that you might comfort them beyond their fears.*⁴

As with those first disciples, so with us. Jesus draws upon the reality of his own suffering and death in order to comfort us beyond our fears. Jesus knows our fears, including whatever fears you may have about the future. He doesn't pull out a crystal ball to help you glimpse the things that you'll encounter in the years ahead. He doesn't promise that your days ahead will be free of suffering, hardships, trials, and tests. But Jesus does promise that by means of the Holy Spirit, he will be with you, and that he will be speaking into your circumstances, whether good or bad, with words that you'll need in each particular situation, at every stage of your journey.

E. Stanley Jones once noted, "A John Hopkins University doctor says, 'We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact.' But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality."

As Jesus comforts and reassures his grieving and fearful disciples, he gives them a summary of reality, the new reality created by his death and resurrection. He speaks about the importance of belief, and about the necessity of his departure. Then Jesus brings it to a climax by declaring that "in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned" (v. 11). In other words, the devil, the embodiment of all that is opposed to God's purposes, is defeated, and God is victorious. God reigns, and eternal life is available to us.

Author Fulton Oursler once wrote, "Many of us crucify ourselves between two thieves—regret for the past and fear of the future." Remember that through his death, resurrection, and return to the Father, Jesus has secured the forgiveness of sins and gone into the future for us. And he has sent the Spirit to us, so that we can experience the very life of Jesus now, and live forward toward our destination in him.

¹ David H. C. Read, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Walker and Company, 1985) 155-56.

² Darrell Winger, "Jesus with Skin On." Mennonite World Conference website. June 10, 2015. Accessed June 12, 2019 < <https://mwc-cmm.org/content/jesus-skin> >.

³ *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, no. 15).

⁴ Jack Hayford, *How to Live Through a Bad Day: Powerful Insights from Christ's Words on the Cross* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) n.p.