

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Preparing for Sunday, May 20, 2018 // The Day of Pentecost, Year B

## The Gospel: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Jesus said to his disciples, "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. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But, now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

## Background and general observations

*The Day of Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit 50 days after the Resurrection. We had 40 days of Easter resurrection appearances, then 10 days of Ascensiontide (a kind of in-between time, when Jesus has ascended into heaven and is no longer appearing as he had been), and now the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Day of Pentecost is one of the three major feasts of the church year, along with Christmas and Easter and is sometimes called "the Birthday of the Church," as it marks the transformation of timid and fearful disciples into empowered and enlivened apostles who end up being the catalysts for the transformation of the world.*

*As long as Jesus remained present in bodily form, even in resurrected bodily form, he could be present only to certain people at certain times. Now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Lord can be present to all people and at all times. Perhaps this is one reason Jesus emphasizes in this Gospel lesson that "it is to your advantage that I go away."*

*The only writer in the New Testament who tells us about the Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit is Luke in Acts 2:1-21. Paul and others talk about the Holy Spirit, but only Luke talks about the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. In the Gospel According to John, it is on Easter Day, not Pentecost, that the resurrected Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). This recalls the creation story from Genesis in which God breathed life into the human being.*

## Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "...it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Jesus is saying that the bewildered and grief-stricken disciples will actually benefit from his going away. Jesus' leaving will allow the Holy Spirit to come.

When have you benefited from a parting that you had feared and dreaded?

Think of a time when, against your will, someone whom you loved left you. Or think of a time when you had to leave someone whom you loved. What unexpected gift or spiritual revelation ultimately came from your being separated from one another? If you had not been parted, would you have received this same gift or spiritual revelation?

2. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Do you tend to think of faith and the spiritual life as something that a person “gets” all at once, or as something that evolves and changes over time?

How has your faith changed over the years? How has your religious understanding changed?

Are there some aspects of faith that are very important to you now, but that you could not have handled years ago?

3. “Pentecostal” churches are considerably more “freewheeling” in their worship than churches like the Episcopal Church with its typically well-ordered liturgies. It might remind some of the use of form in poetry or song—a strict form like the sonnet, or the ballad, is often the vessel by which we contain difficult or unwieldy subjects (like love or grief) that cannot be otherwise contained, a way to find order in what would otherwise overwhelm us in its chaos. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is more “alive” or active in gatherings that are more emotive and spontaneous? Or can the Holy Spirit be just as alive in liturgical traditions and well-ordered monasteries?

Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see it, but you can see its effects or signs of its presence (as in the movement of leaves in a tree). What are some of the signs that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in a person or in a group of people?

4. “[The Advocate, the Spirit of truth] will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify....”

The language here is awkward, but Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will lead us into a deeper knowledge of Jesus. The Spirit will come and will even, in effect, make Jesus present. And we are also to “testify.” That is, our lives are to give others a deeper knowledge of Jesus and, in effect, make him present.

Share how you have sensed the Spirit drawing you deeper into truth—truth about Jesus, about God.

How has the Spirit been revealing the presence and activity of God, or Jesus, in your life over the past few weeks?

How have you witnessed or testified to the people in your life about Christ?

5. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you....”

The disciples are sad and perhaps frightened about Jesus' leaving. Jesus has been an important guide to them. But Jesus says that they will continue to be guided by the Spirit. Elsewhere (Matthew 10:19, Mark 13:11, and Luke 12:11), Jesus tells the disciples that they do not have to worry about what they will say when they are later handed over to the authorities, because "the Holy Spirit will teach you what you are to say."

When have you had the experience of being guided? Have you ever had the experience of being given the words you needed to say at a certain time?

Do you have a sense of the ongoing presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in your life today?

How can you be more attentive to the promptings and guiding of the Holy Spirit, and less worried about what you need to say or do about a particular situation?

6. The great reform theologian Martin Luther explained the third article of the creed (about the Holy Spirit) this way:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Commenting on Luther's explanation, a modern pastor has said:

I have frequently described the content of faith as "tentative absolutes." This is what I am absolutely sure about now; but I am open for the Spirit to give new revelations, new insights, new information which might change me and my beliefs tomorrow.

How do you respond? Do you need to have the content of faith and the spiritual life a bit firmer and less paradoxical? Or, does this make some sense to you?