

Sermon Easter 7 2020

May 24, 2020

John 15:26-16:4

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Ascended Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

One thing that our current circumstances remind us is that this life is not the bed of roses we often think it should be. While many of us probably assume ourselves to be realists with regard to this truth, some of maybe even are cynics with regard to it, but the reality is that deep down we really think this is going to be easy. We think that it's going to work out in a way that isn't hard, that will result in the desired outcomes we have sought, that the upshot will be one that fits our hopeful expectations. As I said many of us assume ourselves realists, but it's true, you don't really expect it's going to be that bad. I know it. I know it because you have been disappointed. I'm guessing even now, you are in some way disappointed by something with how things are going on with the state of affairs with the coronavirus. You've been disappointed that you haven't been able to get supplies with the same ease as you're used to. You've been disappointed that you haven't been able to get some of your online orders with the usual reliability of two day shipping. Or perhaps a bit more appropriately, you've been disappointed with how the governor and/or the president has gone about their work in the midst of the pandemic. No, life isn't the bed of roses we think it should be.

And that's exactly the point Jesus is making to the disciples in the Gospel Lesson today. Of course, He's not just generally making this point about this life not being a bed of roses, He's making that point in a very particular way, a way relating very specifically to His Church: **"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 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."** Jesus knows He'll be ascending to Father and so He won't be face to face with His disciples forever. In view of that, He's preparing them for that time. In this passage just before our Lesson, in particular, He has been saying that the world will hate the Church. The world will see the message of righteousness the Church preaches. It will hear that message that they are not righteous enough, that not one of us meets that standard revealed by God in His Law, but that Christ has come to fulfill that righteousness for us. Yes the world will hear that Jesus has lived the perfect life, died the death that we deserve, being raised that we would know that He gives that righteousness to us in His baptism, in His Word, in Preaching, in His Holy Supper. The world will hear that message and call it stupid. They will hear of their unrighteousness and they will feel accused and bristle. They will hear the blessed comfort that Christ loves us and gives us salvation in Him, in His work and in

His work alone, and they'll kick against it. And as they kick, they'll kick the Church. So that's the reality, the Church will be persecuted.

As I say this, there are two things I want to note about that persecution, though. First is how Jesus describes it. He says, **“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.”** Now, this sentence needs to be understood in its context of the Judaism of Jesus' time that gathered in the synagogues. Historically, the center of worship was the temple. That was what the Lord had arranged for them through Moses. There was the Ark there, there were the sacrifices made by the priest before the Ark. There was the promise that the Lord would be with them, would meet with His people in a particular way, in the way that He would bless them, at that Ark, at that temple. Well, all of that changed when the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Babylonians carried the Israelites to exile. You can see how the synagogue arose in that context of exile. The people knew that their God called them to gather. He had called them to gather around that Ark. But without access to the Ark, they found in His revelation, the Torah, that they could gather around that Word itself, that Torah where He spoke to them. Thence arose the synagogue. And as they gathered there, they saw it as an extension of the temple, an extension of that place where they met with God. That's why even today synagogues keep their Torahs in Arks, from what I understand. But with this in mind, in view of the discussion of persecution, you can see the challenge for these Jews, these first disciples of Jesus as He's telling them they'll be cast from their church.

But in another connection to the temple with the Ark and sacrifices, Jesus tells them that those who persecute them and kick them out of the synagogues, these people will think their “offering service to God.” They'll think they're doing this for God. In fact, from what I read, the words there are more so to say that they'll think they're bringing a sacrifice to God, like ritual sacrifice such as occurred in the temple. Now, in the New Testament, we see this fulfilled. We see it fulfilled in Paul, perhaps, in particular, as he starts off persecuting the Christians, and even getting the letter of authority to do so from the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. However, look at how the Church is treated today. We can see some of this arising as well.

Now you might be asking what I'm thinking with that statement, especially in view of the fact that the President of our country just demanded that churches be allowed to be open. And as I say that—and this is not intended as a political statement—I am thankful to hear the government defending the freedom of the Church. That's a blessing. So what do I mean, then? Well look at how groups like the so-called “New Atheists” have treated the Church. Even over the past centuries, older atheists have treated the Church as though she is dumb for her faith, she is ignorant for her beliefs,

she is unreasonable for her trust, reliance, and conviction relating to her Lord and His Word. To be sure, this hasn't been a majority position. To be sure, especially in the last 70 years, the Church has been given a lot of privilege and respect in the culture. But that's definitely shifting.

For example, there was a church in Mississippi that was burned down this week for continuing to meet together. I think we can have discussions in our Christian freedom about how best to safely go about the call to meet together in this time—in fact, I expect we'll be doing that this week with the board of elders in view of the President's statement. But notwithstanding, this congregation decided that in the trust of the Lord's care, they would gather, and they were persecuted. The world is not going to comprehend the trust that we have that our God has this in His hand, that even if we get Covid-19 and die, we have something far greater for us waiting. Again, there's conversation about care for our neighbor that needs to occur in this, but the world will not understand the confidence that we have in this. And so she'll be persecuted. And in our day, I think we'll see more and more of persecution, but it will happen not in the Name of Jesus or God, per se, but in other gods. In the name of science—not that science properly done is a bad thing, but there might be attack in that name. Or in the name of love, or freedom, or a myriad of other names. That's the first thing, we'll see this persecution like we're a sacrifice to God.

The second is that this persecution will always be, sometimes visibly, and sometimes invisibly. I've been talking about visible persecution and the possibility that we'll experience it. But the reality is that the Church in many places of the world experiences great persecution. In China, the communist government persecutes the Church and won't let her meet freely. In some places she can meet, but always under great supervision. Or in many Muslim nations, there is great persecution of the Church there, like the Coptic Church in Egypt, who lives in fairly constant fear.

That's visible persecution, as we speak of our enemies of sin, death, and the devil, know that you will experience invisible persecution from these enemies. Sometimes that will be at the hand of those tempting you or mocking you, other times it will merely be in the draw to temptation, the draw away from faith and from good piety. This happens, and I think you know it, but understand this is the devil seeking to drive you from faith, to persecute you that you would fall away.

So I've spent a lot of time talking about this persecution. What do we do then? Well look at Jesus' words: **I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away... I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.** So, we see Jesus has said these things that we wouldn't fall away—literally that we wouldn't be scandalized, that we wouldn't stumble

when they happen—and that we would remember that He told them to us. What's that? Well first He tells us that we will experience this hardship, He tells us that life won't be this bed of roses, so that when it's not, we won't blame God and fall away from faith. Think about how many people look at the world and its brokenness and cite that as motivation for not believing. "Oh I did believe, until all these bad things happened, or until my parent died, or my child, or my friend." Now, I'm not trying to minimize the pain of those losses, but I'm making the point that Jesus tells us so that we'll know this is coming, that we'll be prepared.

If I could go down a rabbit hole for a second as we consider this. Think about this another way. When we see people scandalized and falling away from the faith, it often stems from the incorrect expectation that God is always going to give us what we want. So why do we assume that? Why do we even assume—and let's say for the sake of argument that we want good things—why do we assume God will give us good things? Because He is good? Well as true as that is, we have to realize that sometimes it's good for God to give things that feel bad or feel unjust. Why? Actually out of that goodness. It's good for bad to be punished, right? Ok, so if we can't assume what we want from God because He's good, why do we assume God will give us good things? Because we're good? No, I just touched on that. We're not. So this assumption that God should be good to us as we think of it is incorrect. I say that not to discourage you but to make a point. And that's that despite that all of this, there is hope.

Jesus has ascended and will send His Holy Spirit. You see there is a way in which we can be assured God will give good to us. And that's in Christ. He gives us His good forgiveness, He gives us His good gifts of baptism, the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Supper, His Word. And in that we see His love. This comfort of His Word, this comfort of this love is the promise we need: **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.** When the Holy Spirit comes, He bears witness about Jesus. He says, "Look, you see persecution, you see discouragement, you see what appears to be God not giving good to you. But He is. He has giving you His Son. He is given you His Son. In this Son, He gives you the promise of the forgiveness of every wrong you've ever committed. He gives you the promise that He loves you, will give you far greater than whatever is taken away from you in persecution, promises that even persecution is something He can use for your benefit, for your trust in Him."

Yes, life is not a bed of roses, but the Ascended Jesus promises His Holy Spirit, and that Spirit reminds us that He's always caring for us. And He wants you to be reminded of that. He wants you to overcome the things that would scandalize you by His care. And by the Spirit He sends, you certainly are able. Amen.