

## **“The Best Comfort”**

Liturgical Date: Pentecost (B)

Primary Texts: St. John 15:26-27, 16:4-15; Acts 2:1-21

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, The Day of Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson from St. John 15 and 16. The Epistle Lesson from Acts 2 will also be referenced. The title of the sermon is “The Best Comfort”.

Today I want to talk to you about comfort. When we hear the word “comfort” it has a positive connotation. We think about being “comfortable” meaning we are content, not stressed. Climbing into freshly washed linens and laying on fluffy pillows. Air conditioning and a cold beverage on a hot day. Having enough money to pay the bills and get a few extra things. But there is a deeper and more profound meaning to comfort as well, is there not? This is the aspect of when you have experienced a rough day, received bad news, or been through a traumatic experience. It is then that we don’t just want “creature comforts”. We want something or someone that makes us feel better. That is there for us. That we can count on. This is the aspect of comfort that we want to drill down on today.

So when you are particularly distressed or afraid, what is your comfort? What makes you feel better? Human beings all through our life have comforting mechanisms. A crying baby is comforted when mom picks her up and cradles her in her arms. When a child gets a little older they may have a special doll or stuffed animal or “blankie” that if they grip and hold close to them they feel at ease. Who could forget Linus’ “security blanket” in the Peanuts cartoons? Then maybe it is a special food or trip to get an ice cream cone. We even have a term in our language “comfort food”. Also,

when times come where we need extra comfort we often want someone. Someone who can be a listening ear or just be there for us. This special person could be a parent, a spouse, or a best friend. As people grow older comforts often take the form of nostalgia. Hearing a song or watching a movie that was popular in your youth can have a powerful impact.

Sometimes comforts can even involve chemicals. A cup of coffee, a can of soda, or an energy drink provides that “caffeine kick”. A cigarette or alcoholic beverage “takes the edge off.” Some of these ways people comfort themselves can move beyond the occasional indulgence to full-blown addiction. While we Lutherans do not believe drinking alcohol in moderation is sinful, we must recognize the potential for abuse. Alcohol abuse is rampant in our country. As is the abuse of both prescription and illegal drugs. Many lives, both of the one addicted and their loved ones, have been damaged and even destroyed by a person’s search for “comfort.”

Jesus speaks of comfort in our Gospel text for today. He certainly does not offer vices as a means of comfort. Nor does He simply offer a “spiritual blankie”. He does not even offer another human being that will make all the discomfort exit. What Jesus promises is the comfort of God Himself. In many ways this builds on what we heard preached last Sunday. Our Gospel text for last week was from John 17. Jesus will be leaving the Disciples, as He is about to be arrested and begin His final steps to the cross. He will rise again after His death, but then will ascend to heaven after 40 days. Before their Master leaves them He will provide extensive teaching, which the Evangelist John records in his Gospel. Jesus will not leave them alone or unprotected. He prays the High Priestly Prayer for them. He will continue to pray for and with His people. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come to be with them. This we all heard last week.

And then we come to Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection and 10 days after the ascension, which we celebrate today and every year in the Church. This is the coming of the Holy Ghost, or Spirit, to directly be with God's people. Jesus' Disciples did not grasp the fullness of what was about to happen to Jesus when He taught them the night on which He was betrayed. But they knew something, something big, was about to happen. They knew that Jesus would not longer be directly walking among them and teaching them. Jesus says in Chapter 16, verse 6, *"But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart."* The Disciples needed comfort and they would get it.

Let's back up to the first verse of our reading for today, 15:26. *"But when the Comforter is come, who, I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me."* Our Lord and Savior would not just be sending His people "comfort" but a "Comforter" with a capital "C". A fruit basket or flowers from a person we miss may bring some comfort, but it is not the same as having the "real thing." Remember that when Jesus was with His Disciples this meant that God was directly with them, Emmanuel. And God would still be with them directly, even after Jesus leaves them. As I noted, "Comforter" there is capitalized. This means that this is a specific being, and in fact is God Himself who will fill and indwell each believer: God the Holy Spirit. Verse 26 told us that this Comforter is the Spirit (note capital "S") who is sent from Jesus and the Father. If there is any doubt who this Comforter is, go back to Chapter 14 verse 26 and you read, *"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, who the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said*

unto you.” It is crystal clear that this Comforter is indeed God the Holy Ghost.

The Greek word translated as “Comforter” is interesting. It is used 4 times from Chapters 14-16 of John’s Gospel and we see two of those uses in our text for today: 15:26 and 16:7. This Greek word is *parakletos*. As sometimes happens, it is hard to find an exact English equivalent when translating from one language to another. Most literally *parakletos* means “called to one’s side.” It suggests the capability of giving aid. Also we see words in Scripture that pertain to how God works that are legal terms and this is one of those. A *parakletos* in the judicial system was a counsel for the defense, an intercessor who pleads another’s cause. English translations of the Bible generally use one of three words to translate this Greek word. One is “Advocate” (such as in the NIV) which certainly directs us to the legal aspect of the word. Another is “helper” (such as in the ESV) which emphasizes that the Spirit will be with God’s people in a sinful world. Then finally there is “Comforter” which is what the KJV and some other translations use. In my opinion, this is the best translation as it best captures what will be happening here. The disciples were not wanting Jesus to leave. But God will still be with them. God is going to call one, Himself in the third person of the Trinity, to their side. He will be with them, not forsaking them, providing the best comfort imaginable in the most personal way. God indwelling and empowering you, that is the best comfort!

And of course next Sunday is Holy Trinity Sunday. We see all three members of the Trinity here, three distinct persons, yet one true God. The work of the Holy Spirit is given in our Gospel text. When the Day of Pentecost comes, the disciples will go forward “bearing witness.” Why? Because they go forth in the Spirit and as verses 15:26 and 16:13-14

proclaim the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and He always testifies of Jesus. He does not point to Himself, but always points to the Savior. Without the Holy Spirit's work there can be no true repentance, conversion, or faith. Because it is all about Jesus and what He has done, and the Holy Ghost testifies of and delivers Jesus to us. The Disciples are not "losing Jesus." They will still have Him in their hearts and they are gaining the filling of the Holy Spirit. This is not about decrease, but increase. And as Jesus makes clear in 16:7 for this to happen, Jesus must physically depart.

And this brings us to the Day of Pentecost. Jews from all over the world had gathered in Jerusalem for this feast. The fulfillment and filling that Jesus had promised to the Disciples that is recorded in these Chapters of the Gospel of John will take place. And there will now be many more disciples, not just the 120 or so followers of Jesus that existed before Pentecost, but on that day the New Testament Church would be born and thousands added. Then many more, millions and billions. The Comforter for all the disciples would do His work. And this ultimately is comfort for sinners, deliverance from sin and death by a delivering of the grace and faith by God's Word.

The scene we read in Acts 2 is very dramatic. You know what happened. The early followers of Jesus were gathered. The Holy Ghost arrives with a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire appear over their heads. The Spirit gave them the ability to "speak with other tongues" and the people gathered for the feast could understand what was being preached in their own languages. Three thousand were converted on that one day as the New Testament Church was birthed.

One of the great things about preparing sermons is that I get to study the Bible. And I, as I am sure that you do as well, learn new things as you

study. You may have read a particular text many times, as is the case for me with this text from Acts 2, but you can still learn new things. And one of the commentaries I was reading on this passage pointed out something I had never realized before. I couldn't believe I had never noticed previously. Maybe you have and I am just slow, but let me share it with you.

The aspect that people often focus on with Pentecost is that St. Peter and the Apostles were miraculously given this ability to speak in these other languages (and it is important to note that these were real languages, not in the manner that Pentecostals speak in tongues today) that they did not know. So what did I learn new? That part of supernatural events of the day, the speaking in languages they did not know and people understanding in their own language, was NOT necessary. God did not need to do that for them to understand what was being preached. What? We heard the elder read earlier from Acts 2 that Jews had come from all different parts of the world to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. These different regions had their own languages so how could they have understood without this part of the miracle?

Think about this. What language was the New Testament originally written in? Greek. Why? Most of the authors were Jewish so why did they not write in Hebrew? Or even Aramaic, which was commonly spoken in Israel in that era? The answer is that God had the New Testament writers record in Greek because it was the dominant language of the Mediterranean world of that time. Just about everybody spoke some Greek. They would often have a local language as well, but when interacting in commerce and with people from other regions they could at least get by in Greek. What this means is that if St. Peter and the Apostles had simply preached in Greek

that day, without God working the miracle of tongues, these pilgrims to Jerusalem from all these areas could have understood them.

So why did God do it the way that He did? In answering this I want to give a contemporary example. Some of you may be familiar with the work of ministries like Wycliffe and Lutheran Bible Translators. If you have ever been to a presentation by someone from one of these groups, you know the amazing work that they do. There are still a good many languages in the world that do not have the Bible translated into their own tongue. These missionaries and translators work to get the Bible into the languages of people who don't have God's Word in their language. This can be a very long process taking between 10-20 years. Why does it take so long? Because even in the year 2021 there are people groups that live in very remote areas. They speak a language that is very specialized to them and this language is often only verbal, it has no written component. So before they can even translate the Bible into the language of a people group like this, the translators must first learn the language of these people by verbally interacting with them. Then they must work with the people to create a written form of their language all the way from an alphabet to grammatical rules. All of this must be done before they can begin to put the printed words of the Bible down on paper in their language.

As I listened to one of these presentations before I began to think, and maybe you are thinking the same thing, "there has to be an easier way". We already have plenty of English translations of the Bible, so why don't we just teach these people English and then they can read the Bible? That would be so much faster and would seem more efficient and cost effective. Then the Bible translators will tell you why they do it the way they do as opposed to what I was thinking.

It is the same reason that God used the miracle of speaking in these other tongues on the Day of Pentecost, even though it was not necessary. It is because we all have a “heart language.” What is meant by that is there is a language that you grew up learning as a child in your home, that the people in your community speak, and that is tied to your culture. Even if you learn another language there will always be something about that “heart language” that is “your” language. This is why if you travel to a place (which you don’t even need to leave the country nowadays) where people speak a different language, even if you learn a bit of it, when you hear someone speaking in English you more often than not go talk to them. You don’t know that person from Adam, but you have a bond. You speak the same language and probably have some other things in common. You could say that it is a “comfort.” Just like some of the other comforts I began the sermon with. For example maybe your comfort food is macaroni and cheese, but it probably just isn’t any mac and cheese. It is more comforting if it is your favorite from a particular restaurant, recipe, or mama.

The point is that God speaks to each person in this language. There is a value in it or He would not have worked the way He did on Pentecost. The Holy Ghost, the Comforter, that Jesus promised would not just come in a general sense. He would come in a very specific sense, providing close comfort to each of His children. This Comforter always points us to Jesus Christ, whom by His death and resurrection has provided the best comfort in the forgiveness of sins and closeness to God that can only be accomplished by His work.

Amen.