

## **We Are Not Alone**

John 14:8-17, 25-27

The Feast of Pentecost\ Year C

May 23, 2010

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

We tend, for many reasons, to shun standing alone. Being the last one standing, particularly when waiting to be chosen for a team, is never a comfortable position in which to find oneself. Even standing alone for a principle or a worthy cause can make us uneasy. Doubt, anxiety and uncertainty make us second-guess ourselves. Conversely, people will often say that there is strength in numbers. When other people support us concerning a deeply-held principle, we are encouraged. When others speak up on our behalf, we are relieved. When someone assists us in a daunting task, we find ourselves energized. One finds solidarity in standing together; a solidarity which affirms, strengthens and fortifies us in our convictions and our actions. At best, standing alone is unsettling, at worst, it is frightening.

The gospel reading for this Pentecost Sunday is taken from Saint John's account of the Last Supper. The setting is Passover and Jesus is reclining at table with those he loves. He is speaking with his disciples, delivering to them, what is termed at least in scholarly circles, a "farewell discourse." In other words, Jesus is saying good-bye. There is nothing sentimental or sappy, maudlin or morose in what Jesus is telling his followers. His words, while cryptic and convoluted (as befits John's portrait of Jesus) remain burnished with a sense of the inevitable. The Christ of John's gospel, is very much in control of his own destiny. He is not at anyone's mercy, least of all the political establishment. The extended farewell he offers to the disciples is his way of preparing them for a time when he will no longer be with them. He explains to them that the hour of his departure, that the hour of his glorification, is rapidly approaching. The world, however, will hardly find his departure, which, if truth be told, is nothing short of his death, glorious. The world will want to frame his crucifixion as a bureaucratic footnote, as simply another death among countless deaths to be forgotten in the annals of history. As far as the powers of the world are concerned, Christ's cross is an insignificance, a nonsense pointing nowhere, not an exaltation. Only those whose vision has been baptized will see his death for the glory that it is. Unfortunately, the disciples are still struggling, much as we struggle, with what these words of Christ could possibly mean. Even as our Lord explains the effect his absence will have them and, in turn, what their response should be in light of his absence, namely loving one another; they continue to miss the forest for the trees. Their heads seem to be in the clouds in much the same fashion as they were in last week's gospel. This time, however, they are not wistfully missing Jesus as he ascends to his father, so much as missing the point. The request made by Saint Philip is a perfect example of how thick-headed the disciples seem to be.

"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" Philip asks. Not only does the apostle clearly fail understand what he is asking, but his petition does little more than reveal his inability to comprehend. After all, Christ, had just finished telling those

gathered for the supper that if they “knew [him] they would also know his father.” Christ’s response to Philip is exasperated at best, irritated at worst. “Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me? To see me is to see the Father, so how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak to you are not mere words. I don’t make them up. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act. Believe Me! I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, then believe what you see—these works.” In other words, “Philip, wake up! You are seeing the Father right here in front in you and should you have trouble believing such a statement, then take a look at the evidence. Look at what I have done and at what I am doing.” Despite the gospel of John’s frustrating wordiness, Christ is telling us to take a look at his works. We are to look at him. In so far as Jesus is present with us, he is our advocate. He teaches and models for us how we should love him. In turn, we will become known by how well our lives conform to his life and to his death. Because Christ is “going to the Father,” because he is dying and rising, we will be given power to do greater works. Christ is rather elusive about what these “greater works” might entail. One can be assured, however, that these “greater works” will undoubtedly involve the painful process of dying to ourselves in order to rise again in our engagements with the world. If Christ’s earthly life is any model for us, which it inescapably is, then we know to whom he ministered and why. The lives of the poor, the outcast, the persecuted, the diseased, the lost and the dejected, not to mention the conditions of injustice, intolerance and racism that have often relegated these children of God to their supposed lot in life are a fitting challenge for those of us who claim the name of Jesus. We will not, however, face this challenge alone or so Saint John reminds us.

Even as Jesus “goes to his Father” and we are no longer able to have him present with us in the same way, we rest secure in the knowledge that our Lord will never leave us completely for as the Father sent Jesus, so does the Father send the Spirit, a new Advocate who teaches and reminds disciples in all times and place of what Christ said and did. With the sending of the Holy Spirit, those of us who follow Jesus are never bereft of the divine presence. This new Advocate teaches us just as Jesus taught the first disciples. He calls us to faithful discipleship and supports us in our efforts to love Jesus and to keep his commandments. The Advocate, enables us to love and live as Jesus loves and lives. We become empowered with the ability to continue our Lord’s saving mission and to make him present, to incarnate him, in our very lives.

God can give us no greater gift than a share in God’s divine life and presence. This is precisely what we celebrate on the feast of Pentecost— God, by the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, and sharing his life with us. Moreover, since we all share in the same life, the Spirit is the bond of unity which exists among us. Pentecost, thus, is a celebration of both the gift of the Spirit and the effects conveyed and conditions created by that gift. We are made sharers of the one Body of Christ and are called, as individuals and as a community of faith, to take up Jesus’ mission to preach the Good News of salvation. By this indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we become advocates of God’s presence for others. The Spirit’s presence, however, makes certain demands and brings certain responsibilities. We must be vigilant over our lives and how we live them. We

must ask ourselves whether or not we are living in ways that are reflective of Christ's commands to love another. We must be watchful over our behavior and interior attitudes so that when others look at us, they will see advocates of God's presence heralding new life. This new life that we share with others might be as simple as a reassuring touch or a helping hand. It might be as great as making a sacrifice of time to join the parish choir, to serve on the Missions Committee, to volunteer or support Littleton ACTS. Living the gospel means that our lives should be thankful offerings in which we celebrate the good gift of God's life that the Spirit brings. Living into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection means that this "good gift" has its cost. We must still die to ourselves in order to be the true presence of Christ for others.

Our discipleship, our learning to die to self, is a lifelong process. Each year of our Christian journey, we are confronted with new insights, new challenges, new opportunities to grow in faithfulness to Jesus and his teachings. Just as the disciples, at the end of Jesus' life on earth, did not understand everything that their Savior had taught them; just as they did not understand what would lie ahead of them as they pursued Jesus' mission, so, too, are we unable to fully grasp what our journeys of faith will entail. Yet we are never alone on this journey. We will always have the Spirit who dwells within us and among us; the Spirit who will continue to form us into the disciples that Jesus calls us to be. Moreover, we will also have each other. We all share in the same life, the same saving mission, the same love. There is strength in numbers, after all. Our strength ultimately is the gift of the Spirit who binds us in love and unity as the One Body of Christ for the world.