

John 15:26-16:4 (Exaudi)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
Trinity, Frankfurt/Main
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Maybe you've heard the slogan popularly attributed (or misattributed) to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." I remember seeing a similar saying framed and hanging on the wall in different churches growing up: "Witness always. Use words if necessary." Though this could potentially mislead people to believe the Word of God is not necessary to create faith, the point is that it's not just what we say that confesses our Christian faith, it's also how we live. In learning how to evangelize or witness to those around us, we are taught to keep in mind that our actions can have as much weight as our words. The point is well taken, but in learning how to share our faith with others, we also need to keep in mind how Jesus tells us the Gospel will be received. Many Christians falsely believe you can proclaim the Gospel in such a beautifully simple and plain way that most everyone will accept it. This is simply not true. In fact, the opposite is true. The more clearly you proclaim the Gospel, the more resistance you will receive. That's why Jesus warns His disciples and us about what is coming. The disciples, the Church, will be sent out into the world, where they will meet resistance. They will bear witness about Christ and be killed for it. That's the way the unbelieving world has treated the true Church since the beginning. But Jesus also promises the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who also bears witness about Christ and brings all these things to remembrance to keep us from falling away. So witness always, but keep in mind that whatever you do in the name of Jesus, whether in word or in deed, will not necessarily be received with joy.

The word “witness” used in our Gospel text this morning means to confirm information based on first hand experience, as in a witness who testifies in a court of law. During a trial, witnesses are called upon to corroborate evidence. Witnesses can make or break a case. In the Old Testament legal system, witnesses were as important as they are today. In Deuteronomy [17:6; 19:15], we learn that a charge could only be established on the basis of two or three witnesses. One witness was not enough. Jesus [Matthew 18:16] and the Apostle Paul [2 Corinthians 13:1] say the same thing. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as such a witness: “But 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.” The Holy Spirit is the perfect witness because He is “the Spirit of truth.” A witness who remembers everything perfectly and cannot deceive!

And what does the Holy Spirit testify to? What does the Holy Spirit witness to? Jesus says: “He will bear witness about me.” The Holy Spirit testifies concerning the righteousness of Christ (John 16:8). When Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose from the dead, the entire world was declared righteous in God’s sight. The work of the Holy Spirit is to proclaim this perfect righteousness of the God-man in all the world. Later, in John 16:14, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit “will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Holy Spirit takes the perfect righteousness of Christ and declares it to the whole world in the preaching of the Gospel.

But it’s not just the Holy Spirit who is a witness. Jesus continues by saying to His disciples: “And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.” Where did the power come from to confess Christ before the entire world? The power certainly did not come from the disciples themselves. On their own the disciples locked themselves in the

upper room for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). On their own the disciples didn't understand the kingdom of God, asking Jesus right before His Ascension: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The disciples didn't have the power on their own to understand that Jesus's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). On their own the disciples are completely unworthy and incapable of understanding, let alone proclaiming, the great things of God.

We're the same way. On our own we are fearful, unworthy, and lazy. Our natural reason doesn't understand the nature of God's Kingdom, a kingdom not of this world. We desire a glorious kingdom here and now with many returns in this life. On their own the disciples couldn't be witnesses. But Jesus tells them: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The power to confess Christ before the entire world, the power to be a witness, comes from the Holy Spirit, who shares in the divine nature with the Father and the Son and who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

And what is the result of the disciples' bearing witness about Christ? Jesus 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." The Jews had already agreed that anyone confessing Jesus as the Christ was to be excommunicated from the synagogue (John 9:22). Stephen, the deacon, was dragged before the council and stoned to death because the Jews could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (Acts 6:10). And the Apostle Paul, then called Saul, was right there and "approved of his execution." Saul believed murdering Christians was a God-pleasing act! The Greek word for "witnessing," "to bear witness to" is "martureo." It's where we get the word "martyr" from. To be a martyr means to bear witness to Christ not only in word but in deed, by laying down one's own life for the sake of the Gospel. As the Early Church

Father Tertullian (c. AD 155–220) put it: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” It seems counter-intuitive, but that’s how things are with God. The church grows by being persecuted and dying, just as the salvation of the world came in the most-unexpected way: the death and resurrection of God’s Son. The Church grows through persecution and death.

All the Apostles except John were martyred for their confession of the faith, bearing witness to Christ until the very end. Jesus had warned them earlier: “they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness [to be martyred] before them and the Gentiles” (Matt. 10:17-18). This violent rejection of the Faith continued for the first three hundred years of the church until Christianity was made legal. Countless martyrs were led like sheep to the slaughter. In their lives they confessed our Lord with their words, and in their deaths they confessed our Lord with their deeds. They bore witness to Christ, they were martyred. These early Christians knew that whether they lived or died they belonged to the Lord (Rom. 14:8).

What we learn from Jesus’s warning to His disciple and to us is exactly what Jesus said earlier, in John 15:18: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.” The most sure thing to come after bearing witness about Christ is suffering and the cross. Our reason expects people to hear the simple message of the Gospel and receive it with joy. But just as the unbelieving world hated our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, so does the unbelieving world hate our Lord’s messengers. The world wants to silence Christ because the world wants to retain its semblance of control. The world doesn’t want to be told it is in the wrong, that it’s drowning in sin. The unbelieving world wants to silence Christ’s messengers because the unbelieving world doesn’t want any competition. As St. Paul says to Timothy: “all who desire to live a godly

life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” The unbelieving world hates Jesus, and so the unbelieving world hates you, too, because you are connected to Jesus.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? Why do the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed (Ps 2)? Why does the unbelieving world despise Christ and His Christians? Jesus says that the world hates Him because He testifies about it that its works are evil (John 7:7). Just as Cain murdered his brother Abel “because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous,” so does the world hate Christ and His witnesses because the world’s works are evil. The world is jealous of the righteousness of Christ. So don’t be surprised when the world hates you (1 John 3:12-13). The light has come into the world, but people love darkness more than light because their works are evil. People of darkness do not want to come to the light lest their evil works be exposed (John 3:19-21). Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and you, dear Christians baptized into Christ, are the light of the world too (Matt. 5:14-15). At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8). The world hates you because you are in Christ, and the world hates Christ. The world hates that its works of darkness are exposed by the light. Even your mere existence reflecting God’s light is enough to make the Devil and the world rage against you.

So what hope do we have? If the world hates us and won’t listen to Christ’s message of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation in His blood, then why proclaim anything? It would be easier to just keep quiet. But Jesus tells His disciples and us what will happen so that when these things do happen, we remember what Jesus says. Jesus tells His disciples and us what will happen to keep us from falling away, to keep us from becoming disillusioned when the Gospel is so often rejected. The hope Jesus gives us is the hope of the Holy Spirit: “But when the Helper

comes,” when the comforter comes, the paraclete, the advocate, the spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father and the Son, when that one comes, He will bear witness about Christ. When you are dragged before governors and kings to become witnesses for Christ, martyrs before the Gentiles, don’t be anxious about what to say or how to present God’s Word, “for what you are to say will be given you in that hour.” Jesus says that “it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:20). You will be hated by all for the sake of Jesus’s name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:22).

In the end, it is not our words or deeds that bring the world to repentance and faith in Christ. It is the Word of God alone that has the power to raise those who are dead in their trespasses and sins to new life in Christ. The Word of God you bear witness to before the unbelieving world will not return to God empty. It will accomplish exactly what God wants to accomplish with it. The Word of God will have a positive effect even if we don’t see the results in this life (Is. 55). God is watching over His Word to perform it (Jer. 1:12) and in that Word, the Holy Spirit is working when and where it pleases Him. As Christians you bear witness about Christ before the world and you will suffer for that witness. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). In Him, your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.