

+ John 16:5-11 + You're (Not) on Your Own + The Day of Pentecost + 23 May 2010 +

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Alleluia!

Have you noticed it yet? Around the country, people are going out on their own. Now people do that all year long, but did you know that from about mid-May to early July, the number of people going out on their own increases significantly. Why is that?

Around mid-May, school years begin to end at colleges and universities and in school districts elsewhere in the country. Graduations take place every weekend through the end of June. A few weeks ago it was SU. On Friday it was Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Yesterday it was the United States Military Academy at West Point. On top of all that, June and July is wedding season. Wedding seem to take place every day of every weekend. This time of year, all over our country people are going out on their own.

There are new starts for individuals and couples and families. Graduates leave the comforts of home and the dorm to enter the workplace. Couples form families living on their own apart from mom and dad. Families change as grown children leave the nest. Even in our synod, there are new starts taking place as graduates from our synod's schools go off to teach at early childhood centers and Lutheran elementary and high schools or go off to serve or even start congregations. All go out on their own.

For some of us that wasn't too long ago. For others it's been a little longer, but no matter when or how it happened, there are always the same feelings. Going out on your own can be very exciting, but also very intimidating. Wouldn't it be easier to stay at home or at school where you have a protective bubble of family and friends around you? Of course, but that bubble doesn't always last. School ends. Families change. Couples get married. Eventually we have to go out on our own.

It's only fitting then for us to celebrate the Day of Pentecost this time of year. When the disciples came back to Jerusalem after Jesus had ascended into heaven, it seemed they were on their own. Jesus wasn't visibly with them, but even before his suffering began, he had promised to send help—his Holy Spirit. They would never be alone. Ten days after his Ascension, Jesus fulfilled that promise and still does today. So we go back to the Upper Room once more with Jesus' disciples to receive the assurance, **YOU'RE (NOT) ON YOUR OWN.**

The disciples were troubled. Jesus had told them earlier in the evening, ***"My children, I will be with you only a little longer...Where I am going, you cannot come."*** (John 13:33) This shook Jesus' disciples to the core. It was as if they had heard Jesus, but never really got it. Peter had declared his undying loyalty to the Lord and Thomas had expressed his frustration over not knowing where Jesus was going, but none of them actually tried to find out where or why. In fact, the idea that Jesus was leaving them emptied their hearts of hope and filled them with anxiety and worry and grief. They didn't want to be on their own. They wanted Jesus to stay with them, but that couldn't happen. Jesus explained, ***"Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."***

It didn't make sense. Jesus had to leave? It would be for their good? Yes, Jesus had to go out on his own, because his plan to save them couldn't be complete if he did not go out on his own for them. In a sense then, Jesus was tearfully leaving his disciples to save them like a soldier who volunteers to leave his comrades besieged by an overwhelming force to bring them help even at risk of his own life. What was Jesus going to do? He was leaving his friends to bring them the help of forgiveness and life, of hope and salvation at the cost of his life. He had to leave them to save them.

Are we on our own? Sometimes it feels that way, doesn't it? It's tough being a believer in a world that hates the Savior and all who follow him. It's tough being in a congregation that takes God at his Word and refuses to compromise even though what's taught is offensive to those around us. It's tough being the only believer or one of only a few in the workplace or at school or among friends. It's tough when temptation constantly attacks from the culture outside or the sinful nature tries to betray from within. It's tough when you fall into selfish acts on the one side or self-centered attitudes on the other. It's tough when the memory of recent guilt or of sins long past still lingers and attacks your conscience. It's tough to be a believer on your own.

Such thoughts can empty our hearts of hope and fill them with grief or doubt or worry or fear, maybe even frustration or self-righteousness, but at times like that, we need to hear the words of our Savior again. ***"...I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away."***

Jesus had to go out on his own to save us. The disciples couldn't go with him. We couldn't go with him. He had to do it on his own. The prophet Isaiah knew this 700 years before when he wrote, ***"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."*** (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Did you notice who did all the work in those verses? It wasn't "me" or even "you". It was "him" who had to do it. He had to leave his heavenly throne and take on our flesh. He had to live a perfect life from infancy to adulthood. He had to suffer and innocently die on a cross. He had to be buried and he had to rise again—all to save us so we would never be alone. In so doing, Jesus opened wide the doors of heaven for his gifts of forgiveness and hope and life and purpose and joy and peace and salvation to flow out. Above all, he sent out his Holy Spirit to be our ever-present ***"Helper"***.

Sometimes we forget that, though. Sometimes you and I think we can be like Jesus and go it alone. The disciples thought that way, but what happened when they did? Judas allied with Jesus' enemies and betrayed him. He eventually fell into despair and committed suicide. Peter foolishly swung his sword out in Gethsemane and cut the ear off of a servant, which Jesus promptly healed. Then they fled for their lives while Jesus was hauled away by a mob. Later Peter melted under a little pressure and publicly denied Jesus three times. The rest simply hid in fear behind locked doors. When they tried to go it alone, those disciples completely failed.

What would result if we were to try the same—to go out as Christians or as church on our own? The landscape is littered with the ruins of countless churches and Christians that have tried. If you and I go out on our own as Christians or as a Christian congregation, it becomes very tempting to center everything on me, myself, and I. In spite of the name Christian, the focus quickly shifts away from Christ to anywhere else it shouldn't be—to the pastor, to the numbers in the congregation, to the impressive nature of the programs or the building, to the amount of money raised, and so on. Soon Christian will just be a name and ruin outwardly or on the inside will follow. So what do we do? On our own, we can't do anything, but Jesus did.

"Unless I go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." Friends, Jesus promised that help would be on the way. He gave his life to guarantee that promise to you and me and his Church. The same Jesus who went alone to save us does NOT leave us on our own! Even though we don't see Jesus, he has sent and sends his Holy Spirit. We heard all about it in Acts 2. Ten days after his Ascension, Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit on his people, on young and old, men and women. Soon people from all over the known world were hearing a message they had never heard—***"the wonders of God"*** (Acts 2:11), the good news of One who on his own saved them and opened wide the gates of heaven with all his blessings.

Yes, we don't see Jesus, but he sends his Holy Spirit! Unlike the first Pentecost, we don't see tongues of fire or hear the sound of a rushing wind or instantly speak in foreign languages, but Jesus sends his Holy Spirit through his Holy Word and Sacraments to create and strengthen faith in our hearts. Paul writes about that Word, ***"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."*** (Romans 10:17) As we proclaim that Word as the disciples did on the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit creates faith in stone-dead hearts and changes lives forever.

Through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, Paul tells us we are reborn from being hostile enemies of God to beloved children. ***"[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."*** (Titus 3:5-7)

The Holy Spirit works through bread and wine as Christ gives us his body and blood in his Supper for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith. Through this Gospel heard and seen and tasted and touched, the Holy Spirit comes to us and remains with us. In reality, then, even though you don't see Jesus, he doesn't leave you alone because he sends his Helper, his Holy Spirit to you.

Soon it will be time for us as individuals, as families, as couples, to go out on our own from here once again, but really you're not on your own! Jesus went out on his own for you to bring you Help, to save you, to bring you to be with him in heaven forever. So then with great joy we join our voices with believers of every age and sing, ***"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in them the fire of your love."***
Amen.