

“I Have Much More to Say to You”

In the name of him who gives us his Spirit to guide us into all truth, dear friends in Christ: “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” With these words the Lord Jesus attempted to prepare his disciples for his upcoming departure – that is, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion – which, at the time he spoke, was only a few hours away. But, as often happened, especially when Jesus told the disciples things they didn’t want to hear, they didn’t understand. “What’s this? What does he mean ‘a little while’? We don’t know what he’s talking about.”

And that may strike us as rather strange. After all, at this point the disciples have been with Jesus fully three years. They have heard all of his public teaching, and they’ve been privy to countless hours of private instruction as he has patiently explained to them the mysteries of the kingdom of God. You would think that if anyone ought to understand what Jesus meant when he said something by now, it would be his disciples. But no. They had an insurmountable mental block in place that prevented them from grasping what he was saying. It happened every time he spoke to them of the necessity of his passion, death, and resurrection. The only way they were going to understand was by experiencing it. They needed to have their grand notions about what the promised Christ was supposed to do for the nation of Israel dashed to pieces – that glorious myth they held of a restored earthly kingdom. That misconception had to die in them—and it did when Jesus died on the cross. Then they were completely lost, their expectations zeroed out, wiped clean. Only then, after his resurrection, could they start over and hear correctly what Jesus had been telling them all along. Jesus knew this; which, in part, is why he told them, “I have much more to say to you; but you cannot bear it now. I can say the words; but you will not understand them. But afterward, you will. And when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into *all* the truth.”

All the truth indeed – and not just the truth that it was God’s plan for Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for sin; but also, of other truths that the disciples were not yet capable of understanding. We see an example of this in today’s first reading from the book of Acts. In it Peter is testifying before the leaders of the Christian church at Jerusalem. They are conducting a hearing on Peter’s alleged misconduct. The charge is that he has gone to the home of an unclean Gentile, a Roman centurion named Cornelius. And that he, Peter, without proper authorization, took it upon himself to share the holy Gospel of God’s grace with this filthy pagan and the others with him. What could Peter have been thinking? They all knew that the message of salvation was meant only for God’s chosen people. Even though Jesus told them to take the Gospel into all the world, it never occurred to them that that meant *everyone*, Jew and Gentile alike. Not even Peter would have thought it possible had the Spirit not first given him the thrice recurring vision of the unclean animals being declared clean, and then specifically told him to go with the men Cornelius had sent to get him. And even then, when Peter arrived, he was utterly astonished that as he spoke of Christ to these Gentiles, the Holy Spirit filled them, and they too became Christians. To us now it seems obvious that all people are to be included in the Gospel; but to Jewish Christians in the first century it was unimaginable. It was a truth to which the Holy Spirit needed to guide them, for that is what the Spirit does. He is always guiding people to new insights and truths about the Christian faith – truths that for one reason or another they couldn’t grasp before.

And that's why it's especially appropriate that we heard these Scripture readings today as we celebrate this same work of the Spirit in the lives of the young people who will be confirmed very shortly. They have been believers in Jesus pretty much their whole lives – most of them from the time they were baptized as infants. Then, through water and the Word, the Spirit worked in them the gift of faith in Jesus their Savior. It was a simple faith, to be sure; not much different than the trust an infant has for its parents. But it was a genuine faith nevertheless – even though at the time they didn't have the mental capacity to understand or articulate it. But that's okay. Jesus still had much more to say to them that they weren't able to bear then. And he gave them his Word, his Spirit, and the ministry of his Church, to guide them into all truth.

And over the years, as they have been able to understand more of his truth, the Lord Jesus saw to it that they received it – bringing us to this important milestone we're observing today. For the past two years they've been involved in a rather extensive course of instruction covering the essential basics of Christianity. I can say quite honestly that during this time with all of them I have witnessed any number of "Aha!" moments, when the Spirit brought new light to a formerly dark understanding of some article of the faith. And yes, I have to admit that there were other times along the way that we pushed the envelope a bit too far, and they looked at each other blankly and said, "What? We don't know what he's talking about." But that's okay. Jesus had more to say to them, and through patience, perseverance, and no small amount of effort they've arrived at the point they are today at which they are able to make a more or less complete confession of the faith into which they were baptized. This is their opportunity to testify before the world the truths of Jesus Christ that the Spirit has led them to believe.

And so, I'm going to let them do that in their own words by sharing with you excerpts of their written answers to a series of questions I put to them. These questions covered the broad scope of the Christian faith, and all of candidates completed them in a satisfactory way. Still, I'd like you to hear from them – and ask you to consider what your own answers would be to the same questions.

To the question "Who and what is God?" I received such answers as these: "I believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is never ending, everywhere, knows everything, has power over all, and is everything I will ever need", and "God is one spirit in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the creator of heaven and earth, and he is also my Lord and my Savior."

To the question "Who and what is man?" the following are typical of the student's answers: "God created man and woman in his own image, with authority over all the earth." "When Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, they became sinners, and all people from then on are born into sin. The result is that we cannot save ourselves; but we can be forgiven when we repent and trust in Jesus."

When asked "Who and what is Jesus Christ?" the students responded, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who was born on this earth as a man to live a perfect life and be sacrificed for the sins of the whole world", and one, wisely quoting from the catechism, said, "Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of his Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary".

To this most vital question "What did Jesus do for you?" they gave the following answers: "I believe that Jesus Christ is my Savior and by dying on the cross, rising, and

ascending to heaven, he freed me from my sins. This means that when I die, I will also go to heaven because of what he did” and “A picture that helped me understand the full meaning of Jesus’ death is that of a balance. On one side are all the dead, helpless, and lost sinners. On the other side are all the perfect people, which is no one. The scale would tip to the sinners’ side and be unbalanced. But when Jesus died on the cross, God died in Jesus so the scale would be balanced, and sinners wouldn’t have to be punished for their sins anymore.”

To the question “What does the Bible mean when it says that a person is saved by grace through faith?” the students answered, “This means I am saved through God’s grace alone, not from my own works”, and “Saving faith in the Gospel is a great gift of God. It is mainly trusting in what Jesus did for me, and that is the only way the Bible says a person can be saved.”

Asked, “Who and what is the Holy Spirit?” the confirmands said, “The Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Triune God. It’s the Spirit that works within me every day, giving me faith and making my faith grow stronger”, and “Before the Holy Spirit called me by the Gospel, I was a dead, blind, and lost sinner. The Holy Spirit works through God’s Word and is always communicating Christ and his salvation by which his light fills my dark mind and heart. The Holy Spirit brings me to true faith and keeps me in it.”

To the question “What is the Church?” the confirmands replied, “I believe the Holy Christian Church is the total number of those who believe the Gospel” and “The first purpose of the Church is to teach God’s Word and proclaim the Gospel. The second purpose is to absolve the penitent, which is fancy talk for forgiving the sins of those who repent. Another purpose of the church is to foster the love of Christ among its members.” Others mentioned also another aspect of the church: “I believe that a church is the house of God and a place of worship, where the things that build my faith happen.”

To the question, “What is Baptism?” one over-achiever wrote: “I believe that my Baptism was like God putting me on his list of people to save. When I was baptized, God cleansed me through the water and Word, forgave my sins, gave me the Holy Spirit, granted me a place in his kingdom, adopted me into the faith, opened my eyes that were blinded by sin, saved me from evil, and put me close to Jesus.” I like that answer because it was so thorough; but the others were equally as good.

The question “What is the Lord’s Supper?” elicited answers such as: “In the Lord’s Supper I will receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ. Participating in the Lord’s Supper also helps me learn the sacrifice that Jesus made out of his great love when he died for my sins. It will also help me grow closer to my family and my church family through the faith that we share” and “The Lord’s Supper is the body and blood of Christ given under bread and wine. I want to receive it for the forgiveness of my sins.”

There were a number of other questions by which the confirmands demonstrated that they have much more to say about their Christian faith, questions about worship, prayer, and living the Christian life, that in the interest of time I won’t share with you except to say that I was pleased by their answers. But there is one more I would like to share. When asked, finally, “What is the ultimate hope and goal of your faith?” the confirmands said, “I want to be like my mom and dad by raising my own family in the Christian faith and the Lutheran Church. I want to live and die in the faith and go to

heaven so I can be reunited with Jesus and my family forever” and “My ultimate hope and goal is to live a Christian life and always have faith in God’s grace, and always trust in him so that I believe the Gospel. I also want to attend church regularly so that I can always learn more of the Word of God and the one true faith so that, one day, I will live in God’s kingdom forever.”

Now, having heard their answers, I trust that you are satisfied as I am that they are ready to be confirmed in their Christian faith. And yet, especially in light of that last response, a word of caution is in order here. For too many young people, Jesus’ words “A little while and you will see me no longer” would be a far more fitting Confirmation verse than the one they actually receive. To such as these, Confirmation is seen as the end of the road – the farthest they’ll ever get in the faith. They imagine that somehow, they’ve learned all they need to know about the grace of God in Christ, and so they perform the disappearing act. It’s the last time they ever darken the door of the church and we really do “see them no longer”. And what’s worse, by cutting themselves off from the Word and Sacraments by which Christ comes to his people, it’s the last time they see Jesus. Then the life of faith that started so well and with so much promise withers and dies in time. We pray that will not be the case with these young people who are being confirmed today.

Why? Because to them and to all of us, Jesus continues to say, “I have much more to say to you.” It’s through a lifetime of hearing and growing in God’s Word that he keeps us in his grasp, continues to guide us to new truths and deeper insights, and progressively changes and shapes us to conform to the image of Jesus who saved us with his life, death, and resurrection. His Word and Sacraments are the hands by which he molds this clay, making his impression upon us so that we become ever more like him. It’s a likeness we cannot bear now; but through continued growth in time we can move closer to the goal that we will bear forever in eternity. What we will become then has yet to be revealed; but only at that point will we be truly confirmed in the eyes of God. May he grant it to us for the sake of his Son. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!