

# Sixth Sunday of Easter

## THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT

John 14:15-21

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Paul Jaster

15If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

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## DIAGNOSIS: Loveless, Divisive Spirits

**Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Not Loving, Expelling and Splintering*

The great scandal of Christianity is that we are a fractured community of disciples, and that gives a lousy witness to Christ's love for the world. In John, “not loving” is code for “expelling” and “splintering”: expulsion from the synagogue of Jews who see Jesus as the Messiah (John 9) and the “splintering” of the Johannine community itself (1 John). Notice this is an

“in-house” problem among God’s own covenanted people. Such loveless “expelling” and “splintering” still goes on. Take my own (Lutheran) biography for example: the “wars of Missouri” and the growing alphabet soup of LC-MS, ELIM, AELC, ALC, LCA, ELCA, WELS, and LCMC. Our inbred, divisive spirits is the very opposite of what Jesus desires. Yet his command anticipates them, claims Martin Luther in his sermon on this passage (LW 24:101): “The dear Lord definitely foresaw that unrest would be afoot in Christendom after his departure, particularly among the preachers and teachers. He knew that they would not remain in agreement but would be split into schisms and factions.” Ain’t it the truth!

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Living a Nasty Lie***

“Expelling” and “splintering” does not come from justifying faith in Christ. That kind of faith (the justifying kind) results in the fruit of the Spirit, the first of which is “love.” And love is that rubber-band elasticity that suffers, endures, and redeems differences and tensions. No, “expelling” and “splintering” comes from the loveless and divisive spirits of fear, pride, and the push for power and position. And that results in blindness (John 9) to the Spirit’s “new thing” in God’s new day and age, post-Pentecost. Often these divisions come from taking “faith in Christ alone” and adding additional requirements to it: faith plus Torah, faith plus religious obligations, faith plus the inerrant verbal inspiration of the Scripture, faith plus social action, faith plus traditional family values. And much of this is “legalism” as John Goldengay defines it: “a Christian heresy, an attempt on the part of some Christians to make other Christians take on a body of commands that are not meant for them” (Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel, 380). Among my tribe, divisions once due to ethnic origins and time of arrival in the United States have been

replaced by divisions over social issues. Like the “world” around us, the church has become polarized, politicized, and often downright nasty. And this undermines the very gospel we claim to defend. We live a lie.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Orphaned, Fatherless and Dead*

Reject the working of the Spirit, who keeps us “in the one true faith,” and we reject Jesus. Reject Jesus and we reject the Father. Without a fatherly God, we are orphaned and fatherless. And without the animation of the life-giving Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, we become nothing more than that valley of disconnected, dry bones that we saw eight weeks ago in Ezekiel 37. This very vision can be seen in many declining Christian congregations that have stopped being mission stations for the gospel and have become insular burial societies instead. The Wind/Spirit blows where it wills. And if it does not find a receptive home in us, it will blow on to somewhere else.

**PROGNOSIS: Given the Promised and Promising True Spirit**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *Loved by the Crucified Jesus Who Lives*

At his baptism Jesus is filled with the Spirit. And the Spirit leads Jesus to a cross to be lifted up in obedience to the Father. Jesus undergoes the most severe “expulsion” of them all—rejection and crucifixion by the epitome of the religious and political communities of his day. And Jesus endures the betrayal and the “splitting” (desertion) of his own disciples. And yet, he loves the world and those who cling to him to the very end. He does not abandon, split off and orphan them. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Given the Spirit of Truth***

Jesus did more than just sacrifice himself for us in love and forgive. He also gives another advocate just like himself, the Spirit of Truth. In fact, it is himself. His Spirit. In the Gospel according to Saint John, Pentecost happens on Good Friday and Easter (not 50 days later). With his last breath on the cross, Jesus “hands over” his Spirit. To whom? To the Father? Hardly. Jesus is returning to the Father to prepare a place for us and to intercede and advocate for the unity of the church. His Spirit is here, not there. Rather, Jesus “hands over” his Spirit to those who are receptive to his word of promise and who believe in him. Towards the end of Easter Day, the risen Jesus immediately delivers on his promise and breathes on his disciples and says to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This Spirit enlivens and animates us...and reminds us of all that Jesus said, including his command to love and his new and higher standard “to love one another as I have loved you.” This Spirit functions as a defender in time of trial and gives us a spirit of peace in times of anxiety and adversity and the very unity Christ prays for (John 17). This Spirit is true, genuine, and trustworthy. It will not fail us. This Spirit is much more promising than our loveless and divisive ones.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Loving Jesus and Keeping His Commandments***

Spirit-filled disciples love Jesus and his commandments, in a large part, by loving each other as he loved us. Such love results in unity despite our great diversity. Without such unity it is very hard for the world to see the true character of Christ. “Loving one another” involves hospitality towards and support of Christians different from ourselves. Such love is easier when we see, as the original Lutheran confessors did, that it is sufficient for the true unity of the church that the

gospel be preached and the sacraments administered. It is not necessary that all practices be everywhere alike [including all those nasty, polarizing and divisive social issues] (Augsburg Confession (1530), Article 7). Unity in Word and Sacrament expresses and is the result of “faith in Christ alone” without all the tempting, but divisive, legalistic additives. There is something else that keeps Christians united other than polity and politics...and that is that is Christ and his love to us and through us.

As Luther writes (LW 24:102): “‘Therefore,’ Christ says, ‘I do not impose anything else on you. I ask and demand no more than this one thing, that you faithfully preach about me, watch over my word and sacraments, show affection and harmony among one another for my sake, and patiently bear the adversities that this entails for you.’ These are the brief commandments which Christ calls ‘My commandments’.... Bear with one another in love, and do not introduce schism and factions.”

If something as divided as the church can show unity in diversity, wouldn't that be an amazing and powerful witness to the world?