

“Our Heavenly Helper”

John 14:23-31

May 23, 2010

Day of Pentecost

In our day and age, we enjoy flexibility. We like flexibility in our clothes. No one likes a dress code. Many enjoy varying degrees of casualness in our clothes, whether they be for school, work, or even church. We like flexibility in our schedule. Rather than being expected to be at a certain place at a certain time, we enjoy the flexibility of arriving “noonish”. That means we can be there any time from 11:30 to 12:30. And we enjoy flexibility in our words. We don’t want to be nailed down to precise meanings for words. We would prefer that words mean what we want them to mean.

A good example of this is the word “love”. We use this word in a very flexible way. We can love pizza, love camping, love our pets, love school, or love our family. While there are differences here in the objects of love and the intensity of the feeling, there is some commonality here. In each of these cases, “love” refers to some strong feeling of affection, often times based on what the object of our love can do for us or provide for us. Often, we balk if something is required of us from our beloved. What we call “love” is often very self-centered and self-serving.

Nowhere is this more clear than when we talk about “loving Jesus”. What does that mean? It usually means we have some warm fuzzing feelings about Jesus. He is our friend, our good buddy, who does what we want we want him to do and give us what we want, but doesn’t really bother us any other time. We can believe what we want about Him and live the way we want to. If anything IS expected of us, we balk.

My son, Tom, was telling me about a book he was reading for his job called "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled, and More Miserable Than Ever Before" by Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. Although it is not a religious book, it does make a short reference to present day religious views. As far as religious beliefs go, the author describes the belief systems of young people as being very flexible. “Many don't adhere to a specific belief system

because, as Melissa says 'I believe that whatever you feel, it's personal....Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is...You have your own personal beliefs of how you feel about it and what's acceptable for you and what's right for you personally.' (p.34)

As far as behavior goes, many are very flexible and have rejected organized religion because of the restrictive rules that are imposed. Some examples:

Dana said she attended Jewish services growing up but stopped going when she got older because "there was this pressure from the people at the synagogue to be, like, kosher, and I just didn't like having anyone telling me what my lifestyle should be." Beth was raised Catholic but by adulthood came to believe that humans all have natural, animalistic urges; she stopped believing because feeling guilty "made me unhappy." Charles grew up Episcopalian but stopped attending because "I realized I was not being encouraged to think for myself...It is, literally, 'This is black. This is white. Do this. Don't do that.' And I can't hang with that." (p.34-35)

Yet, I'm sure the Christians in these surveyes probably still said that they "loved" Jesus and "believed in" Jesus.

Jesus has a very different understanding of what it means to love him. In our text for today, He says, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word." A few verses prior to our text, He also says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). Love is not simply a warm fuzzy feeling or a matter of pious, nice sounding words. Love results in actions or it is not love at all.

Jesus says that anyone who claims to love Him will keep His Word and keep His commandments. The word "keep" here is a very strong word. It literally means "to guard" or "watch over" something like a prisoner in jail. A good English equivalent might be "hold fast". We are to "hold fast" to Jesus' Word, that is, to believe and teach only His Word. We are to "hold fast" to Jesus' commandments, that is, to completely and exclusively obey Him and His commandments.

How's that working out for you? You may say, "I'm not one of those young people with flexible beliefs and morals." But not so fast! While its easy to bash young people today, this is not anything new at all. This is the way it has always been since Adam and Eve fell into sin. Like Eve, you and I have also listened to Satan's enticing question, "Did God really say....?" We have constantly

doubted the Word of God and come up with alternate beliefs, especially when we feel such beliefs serve our best interests. Like Adam, we have given in to pressure to adhere to a popular form of morality, even when it contradicts God's clear command.

Let's not fool ourselves into thinking this doesn't matter. Formulating our own doctrine and constructing our own morality, although it seems quite tolerant and sensitive in this day and age, is quite dangerous. Sin – that is, violation of God's commandments in thought, word, or deed – earn His wrath and punishment, no matter how right it might seem to be. False doctrine – any belief contrary to God's Word – does not provide us a way out, no matter how right it might seem to be. It only leads us on a variety of wrong ways and dead ends which ultimately result in very not politically correct destination - hell.

We need help. There's no doubt about it. We can't turn it around on our own. And that's what Jesus promises in our text today: "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name." Today, on the day of Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit, but not the Holy Spirit.

What do I mean by that? Many people think that the focus of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit never focuses attention on Himself. His focus is on Jesus and Jesus alone. Jesus is the doer. The Holy Spirit is the helper. He is, as the Greek word for "helper" indicates, the one who has been called in to help, summoned to give assistance. In other words, Jesus has done it all for our salvation and the Holy Spirit helps by bringing the results of what Jesus has done to His people.

Jesus is the one who kept God's commandments perfectly, not us. It is Jesus who is holy, not us. Jesus is the one who kept God's Word, not us. God had promised to send Someone who would crush Satan's head, make restitution for sin with the perfect sacrifice, and conquer death. It is Jesus who fulfilled this Word by taking the sin of the world to Himself, accepting the outpouring of God's anger on that sin, earning forgiveness of sins through His death on the cross, and overcoming death by rising from the dead.

The Holy Spirit brings the results of Jesus' work to sinful humanity. The Holy Spirit obviously did that for Jesus' original disciples. The Holy Spirit taught them all things and brought to remembrance everything Jesus had said as Jesus prophesied. He enabled them to keep Jesus' commands by preaching the Good News to all the world and bring about faith to receive God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He enabled them to keep Jesus' Word by leading them to write the Word of God down so that we might have it to this very day.

But the Holy Spirit is not an ancient relic or a God of the past. The Holy Spirit is alive and active today in the life of the Church and its members – you and me. St. Peter urged in the book of Acts, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39) In Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit entered your life, created faith within your heart, and enabled you to receive the forgiveness of sins which Jesus earned for you on the cross. But that's not all. Where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation and we have those also through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit also brings Jesus' holiness to us and credits His obedience to our account. As the Scriptures say, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:19)

We have Jesus' word to keep because Jesus Himself has fulfilled that Word and the Holy Spirit has put the benefits of that fulfillment – forgiveness, life, and salvation - in our hearts by faith. We have Jesus' commands to keep because Jesus Himself has fulfilled those commands and the Holy Spirit has put the benefits of that obedience – Jesus' own holiness – in our hearts by faith. Jesus has done it for us.

So, how do we love Jesus? It is certainly not through our own feeble and self-centered attempts to love. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." (John 15:9) As we remain in His love, we are not only loved but are enabled to love in return, again, through the teaching, leading, and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Where is His love? We don't have to seek some mystical emotional experience to have Jesus' love. Simply be where Jesus has promised to offer His love. First and foremost, Jesus gives His love to us in His Word. Be in His Word consistently, constantly, and continually. Hear His Word. Read His Word. Learn His Word. You will receive and experience His love for you in His Word. The Holy Spirit will help you keep that Word in your hearts, and rightly witness to that Word in your lives.

Secondly, Jesus gives His love to us in His Sacrament. He gives us His very body and blood with the bread and the wine, promising us His forgiveness, comfort, and strength. The more we receive forgiveness of all our sins and are comforted by that forgiveness, the more we are encouraged and strengthened to avoid sin and keep His commandments. And the Holy Spirit, who has brought Jesus' holiness into your lives, will also help you keep His commandments by holy living.

There is nothing flexible about God's Word or God's commandments as some in this world today might hope or think. His Word is always true and His Commandments are always in force. But, then again, there is nothing flexible about God's mercy or gifts. There is always forgiveness of sins and holiness available to us for the sake of Jesus' perfect obedience in His life, all sufficient sacrifice in His death, and unshakeable guarantee in His resurrection. The Holy Spirit helps us to receive His forgiveness and holiness. The Holy Spirit then helps us to keep His Word in our belief and our witness. The Holy Spirit helps us to keep His commandments in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds. He is truly, in every sense of the word, our heavenly helper. Amen.