



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Holy Trinity Sunday: June 16, 2019

Sermon Title: "You cannot bear them now..."

Gospel Text: John 16:12-15

Over my years of reading and studying the Bible, few passages have come to intrigue me as much as today's Gospel. Jesus says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." What do you think he was referring to? Well, based on the broader context of this passage, we can certainly infer *some* of the things the disciples weren't quite ready to hear. Jesus spoke these words at the last supper. He had been quite candid that he would die, but surely the disciples weren't ready to hear or bear or accept all of the gruesome details about the betrayal that was about to unfold or the sheer bloodiness and brutality of the execution Jesus would suffer.

But I don't think Jesus was referring only to the coming days. He knew that in the coming *years* and *decades* his disciples would face difficult theological choices and incredible adversity that would lead to conflict, persecution, and even death. Jesus knew his disciples weren't ready to hear that just yet.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." As you read on in Chapter 16 it seems these words brought more stress than comfort to the disciples. There's just something inherently worrisome when someone says "there's more I'd like to tell you, but you just aren't ready for it." Imagine, for example, that as the carnival worker straps you into the roller coaster, he says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." How long would it take you to leap out of that rollercoaster and race to the safety of home?

Admittedly, the rollercoaster example is a little silly. So let's make this more personal. What if *today* you could write a letter that would travel back in time to yourself at key moments in your past? How much of your future life story would you really want to disclose to yourself? Imagine opening that letter from the future as you prepare to make your wedding vows, or welcome a new child into the world. I'm certain there are things about my life that my 22 year old self wouldn't have been prepared to hear. I'd probably end my letter with, "Scott, I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Linda and I've been married for over 30 years and we've been parents for nearly 22 years, and I can say with absolute confidence that I had no idea what both marriage and parenthood would really be like. It has been the adventure of a lifetime, and if I had a chance to do it all over again, right from the start, with the very same people, you can bet your bottom dollar I would. But it's a lot easier to say that *now*, in retrospect, than it might've been a few decades ago, because now I *know* how the story plays out. Back then, I wonder if I would've been overwhelmed if I had known the full range of life's ups and downs.

I was thinking the same thing this past Friday as I watched the ordination of two new pastors at our Synod Assembly. I imagined myself back at First Lutheran in Altoona, just as Bishop Pile placed his hands on my head. What if he had said, “Scott, I’m about to ordain you a pastor. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” I don’t know if I would’ve fainted or ran for the doors! Had he said those words, surely they would’ve been true. But I’m glad he didn’t. For *all* of us, the challenges of marriage, parenthood, careers, and daily life are large enough on their own as they *gradually* come to us across the years. We don’t need to know them all up front. It’s just too much to handle at once.

Now, if this is where the story and the sermon ended, there wouldn’t be much here worth celebrating. If all I had to offer you is a reality check that “life is tough, so just be glad you don’t know in advance *how* tough it will be,” then you’d have every right to walk out right now. Heck, I’d probably join you. You don’t need to come to church to hear that kind of depressing message. Just flip on the cable news or pick up a paper.

But that’s *not* where I’m going to leave you, because that’s *not* where Jesus left his disciples, and it’s *not* where he leaves us. You see, Jesus made sure that when the challenges of life would inevitably descend upon his people and his Church, we would not be left to navigate those stormy seas on our own. The Holy Spirit would be there to guide and bless us. The Spirit’s wisdom was never intended to merely be a one-time thing that we experience at big moments like baptism or Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is a gift God’s people can draw upon every day, and something God’s Church can depend upon throughout all generations of time.

On Holy Trinity Sunday, it’s worth noting that Lutherans are often accused of underplaying the Holy Spirit. Sure, we talk a lot about God the Father and Jesus Christ, but our critics claim we make little room for the work of the Spirit. I think that’s an unfair charge. The Book of Concord, which for hundreds of years has laid out the Lutheran way of understanding God, the Gospel, and theology in general, is *filled* with references to the Holy Spirit’s work, references which are fully and faithfully attuned to what the Bible teaches about the Spirit’s presence and activity in our lives and in our world. Among other things, the Spirit fills us with faith... comforts us... endows us with gifts... increases our holiness... helps us to struggle against sin... guides us in doing good... and causes us to grow in love for God and our neighbor. What an amazing gift.

All of this may seem painfully obvious. But I think it’s crucial for you to explicitly hear Christ’s ongoing promise of the Holy Spirit’s assistance, because too often, when those “things we cannot bear” happen in our lives, we forget that we have the Spirit’s presence and help. It’s always disastrous when we forget that, because it leads us down one of two really destructive rabbit holes.

Option A is that we rely solely on our own wisdom, strength, and understanding. That never ends well. Do we really think we are wiser than God? Of course not. *Option B* is to retreat into the Bible in a way God never intended. In our fear and insecurity we diminish and minimize sacred scripture by turning it into a mere book of petty rules that we use to silence, control, and marginalize the people society pushes to the edges. Historically, this approach has

resulted in misuse of the Bible to excuse anti-Semitism, defend slavery, exclude women from serving in ministry, and to define your righteousness solely upon the gender of the person you love. I don't believe that's where the Holy Spirit leads God's people.

Instead, when we rely on the Spirit, we embrace God's Word as Luther did, as the manger that holds Jesus Christ. When we rely on the Spirit, we "read the Bible from its center—its witness to Jesus Christ—and not from its edges." And there we discover, in the words of the great Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, the "measureless and shocking love of God."¹ And so if you wonder if the Holy Spirit is active in your life, just assess whether you are growing in your love of God and neighbor. *God is love*, and so that's where the Holy Spirit will always lead us.

Friends, none of us know what the future holds. Chances are, there are a few things we're not quite ready to bear at this moment. But do not be afraid. Do not worry. Do not let fear of the future steal your joy in this present moment. Live as Christ's beloved, forgiven, and saved people, because *that's who you are*. The Spirit is with us, and will *guide us in hope* and *lead us to love*. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Citations:

¹ Herbert W. Chilstrom, in *Living Together as Lutherans*, p. 36.