

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, who gives grace to the hateful and to the loving, we acknowledge how we often fall short of what it means to be your followers. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, as the saying goes. It is much easier to take all the benefits of a follower of Christ without recognizing the responsibilities. Guide us to take pleasure in the gifts you give us while taking seriously the ongoing calling of the Christian. Help us drink fully of the cup of love and dispense it to all those along our paths. Lead us to you in all parts of our lives, not simply when we find you and your ways convenient.

We await the coming of the Holy Spirit once again, we await the day of Pentecost, as we have recognized the resurrection and continue to contemplate what new life means to us. When Jesus appeared to his disciples, he breathed upon them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." As we prepare to receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, we recognize it comes with responsibility. Help us remember that the Holy Spirit is not merely here to comfort us but to empower us and lead us into a fuller understanding of what it means to be yours, what it means to follow you, and what it means to give deeply of ourselves and our gifts for the Reign of God. At the same time, allow us to hear what it means to truly believe your loving statement of "Peace be with you," in a world that often shows more fear than the peace you freely give. Help us walk with you the way you walk with us. We pray all these things in the name of Christ Jesus, Lord of Life and Love, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

One of my greatest and favorite past times is building LEGO models. I have many fond memories of opening a new model, pulling out the directions, and starting to go to work. When I was much younger, I would always get one big present from Santa at

Christmas. It was usually a LEGO model. It was the stuff of legend, what happened on Christmas morning. Since we were the family that opened our gifts on Christmas Eve, I knew what I had gotten on Christmas morning. I was not allowed to open up my new models on that evening. I was told to wait until the next day. Oh, parents with all of their rules that make no sense. So, being the full of energy child who thought sleep was more of an inconvenience to life, I would regularly wake up on Christmas morning and silently creep outside my room at Grandma's house. The clock would read something like, oh, 4:30 am, and I would pick up my new models and take them to the kitchen table. If I'd gotten a new movie, I would put that in, or I'd turn on the famed 24 hours of "A Christmas Story" and watch it through several times. What followed was hours of plastic joy, assembling the models as fast as my little hands could find each of the pieces and put them in their correct space. My parents would probably wake up at 7 or 8, to find me there, and ask the same old question that they probably should have known the answer to by then: "Why are you up so early?" But I didn't care. By roughly 9 or 10 am, I had a completed product, whether that was a train, a Y-Wing and TIE Fighter from Star Wars, or a good-sized robot. Five minutes after that, I would slump in the sofa and go back to sleep.

What is absolutely necessary to the LEGO experience are the directions. Even the most seasoned LEGO builder will be in so much of a hurry to get to the end goal that he or she forgets that there is an order you have to follow, there are even the smallest steps that must be fulfilled, to get the best end product. Each picture-by-picture in the directions will show where the pieces go, big and small. If you neglect the smallest piece, the next step may be thrown off, on and on, until you realize the error and correct it. I remember having

to take half of a model apart because I was concentrated on getting it done. Speed is not the goal; accuracy and faithfulness to the directions instead is the goal.

In the same way, we sometimes mess up on the directions. Sometimes we have the “ready, fire, aim” mentality with how we want life to be. It’s easy to go from step 3 to 5 when we consider step 4 to be not worth our time. Then again, we have directions for a reason, and, as difficult they may be, they help us in the long run. In this passage, right after Christ’s resurrection, we see how Christ, in essence, showed us what the Christian life is all about just by how he presented himself and how he gave the disciples the Holy Spirit. Within these acts are some basic directions that lead us toward faithfulness.

This may seem like we’re going backwards, but these two stories are at two different parts of Jesus’ life. Our first Gospel lesson went back to a story in Jesus’ earlier life, and the second tells the story of how Jesus first encountered many of his disciples after the resurrection in the book of John. In the first story, Jesus fully claims his identity as the Messiah. In the second, he shows it. He comes among the disciples and fulfills many of the things he claimed in his long farewell in John. Let’s take a look.

What makes this story unique is how Jesus presents himself to the disciples, what he says, and what he does. According to the podcast Sermon Brainwave, the pastors there take special note of the order of how Jesus speaks, what he does, how he goes about the lesson. It’s pretty awesome that he just appears in a locked room. It’s also a great juxtaposition between the first statement in the passage that the disciples were locked up for fear of the Jews, and the first thing that comes out of Jesus’ mouth. Jesus says, simply, “Peace be with you.” And the second thing that comes out of his mouth reaffirms it: “Peace be with you.” In their greatest depths of fear, Jesus message is simple and to the point. I

believe he is trying to say something there, something remarkable, for when the bible repeats something back-to-back, there is a grave seriousness to the message. We're supposed to open our ears and fully take it in.

I think that this story hits us very well right now. This is a very fearful world, and it requires that we take action to make ourselves safe. The latest examples from the Boston Marathon and the ricin-laced letters sent to Congress and the President show that well. We live in a dangerous world. Because of this, we often turn to fear, and Jesus tends to go out the window as "impractical." We want to over-react; we want to go miles beyond what is necessary to grasp the peace we feel comes from a certain strength instead of the peace of Christ's gospel. "Do not fear," he says. How do we take that seriously? Sometimes it seems like fear shuts down the logical centers of the brain, and, in actuality, it does. We want to take strength in our weapons, in our own personal might, and we find that we wrap ourselves more in insecurity than anything else. Jesus here is telling us that there is more peace with him than in any strength of arms or being hidden can provide. The true source of peace is relationship with God and God in Christ Jesus.

After the statement of "do not fear," we have Jesus breathing on the disciples and saying "Receive the Holy Spirit." After which are the instructions. The Spirit does not come to bring comfort; Jesus already provided that. He already gave peace to the disciples. The Spirit is not simply the comforter here. The Spirit shows that something else is up.

What I found interesting in my study of this scripture is that the order is very intentional and specific. Jesus first comes and wishes peace to the disciples. Then they receive the Holy Spirit, and are told what to do. It has a similar feel to the way that the Christian life feels. In Methodism, we have the three kinds of Grace. The first is Prevenient

Grace, the grace that is with us even before we have the opportunity to accept God. God works in our lives before we know God. The second is Justifying Grace, the grace that helps us name that we need relationship with God and allows God to cleanse us of our sin. And finally, there is Sanctifying Grace, the kind of grace that allows us to grow more mature in our lives as faithful Christian people. Jesus' words of peace are an experience of Justifying Grace, in a way. He is providing the peace that comes from knowing and being in relationship with God. The calling of the Spirit is like Justifying Grace. The Spirit here is not in the role of comforter; the Spirit here is in the role of empowerment. The Spirit gives us the strength and the power to go and be the Gospel to all people, just as Sanctifying Grace allows us to grow in holiness and understanding of Christ's calling to love and serve the entire world.

We are nearing the season of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, I will not be able to be with you on the Day of Pentecost, as we'll be getting ready to head to London, but I know Jeff will lead you on that day. The Book of John tells a story slightly different to that of the one of Pentecost in Acts. Here, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to his disciples before the recognized day of Pentecost in Acts, but it appears he just shared the Spirit with his Disciples at this point. The Spirit will come rushing out to invigorate the world and us once again, and I hope we will continue to receive its comfort...and its responsibility, time and time again.

If you have the time, I'd suggest you go out and get yourself some LEGOs. Be it a small or big model, they are not only fun to put together, they also keep your mind and child-like spirit active. However, one big piece of putting together LEGOs is being aware of the order in which things come, which pieces go where, and how that all, literally, fits

together. It's the same way that Jesus presents himself right after the resurrection to his disciples in the book of John. He provided peace first, gave them the Holy Spirit, and revealed responsibility that went with it. God provides us peace and the gift of the Spirit, but it is for our benefit as disciples and followers who move in a broken world. It is not always a calling of comfort but a calling of actively loving and serving. Christ does appear in our lives, and it does take some strength to receive his peace and to receive the responsibility of the Spirit. The message here is always the same: do not fear. Receive the Holy Spirit. Let the Spirit invigorate you for the journey ahead. Our times change, our lives change, circumstances change. Bombers appear, unrest seems to reign, but Christ is there, naming that these things pass, and our deep strength comes from a different place. Thanks be to God. Amen.