

## **“An Ever-Present Help”**

**John 15:26-27, 16:4b-11**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, on this day of Pentecost, we celebrate the birth of the New Testament Church, the promise of the Holy Spirit being fulfilled with tongues of fire and the proclamation of the Gospel to all people, nations, and languages. The promised Helper has been sent by the Father and the Son. Help is one of those things that many of us are either too proud or stubborn to ask for most of the time. Men, we refuse to ask for directions, or for help finding something at the hardware store. We'd much rather just wander around aimlessly until we happen upon what we need, despite our wives telling us to just ask the weird guy in the mesh vest. Ladies, you refuse to ask for help with the dishes, or taking care of the kids. You'd rather uphold an illusion of strength and resolve in your duties and wait for us to step up and offer, no matter how many times we tell you that all you have to do is ask. We all struggle with the reality that we cannot do everything on our own. Whether it is selfish pride or a driving desire to impress, there just simply are things that we need help doing, but are too engulfed in ourselves to allow any vulnerability.

The same goes for our spiritual lives, as well. Everyone is susceptible to the sin of pride, as the evil one convinces you that you have your faith well in hand and don't need anyone's help. So many think that they don't need the Spirit-breathed Word as their guide, because they are “so in tune” with their spiritual side that it's almost as if they are present in heaven with God. These false ideologies fly in the face of the truth of what the Lord Jesus tells His Apostles in our Gospel lesson this morning. He promises them the Holy Spirit—the Helper, the Comforter, the παράκλητος—whom He will send to them from His Father in heaven. But it is not just to them, but to the whole world. And in conjunction with that gift of the παράκλητος, they too will go out into the world and bear witness about Christ. They will not be alone when He goes to His Father, because God is an ever-present help, and the Holy Spirit will come upon them soon as their guide and their comfort.

I know that many of you thoroughly enjoy going to bookstores and perusing the many selections that they offer. But have you ever noticed the amount of “self-help books” that pervade the shelves? Many bookstores these days have more of those than they do fiction novels! Society, which the devil prods along, wants us all to think that it is within our own capabilities to solve our problems. If you are struggling with depression, find what makes you happy and bury yourself in it. If you are battling

addiction, just follow the 12 steps to get yourself out of it. And if you feel separated and lost from God, well that is your own problem too. You have to love yourself before God can love you. The endless platitudes and self-righteous misgivings of these books are astounding, and they fly in the face of the true help which is promised in Holy Scripture.

But that is not surprising when you consider the mainstream churches in the world today. These “mega-church” pastors thrive on being the self-help guru that strings people along in the belief that they have the power to change their life. All they have to do is “let God in” and they will have everything their heart desires. One of their favorite catch-phrases that simply drives me insane is, “God helps those who help themselves.” That is what Satan wants you to believe, not God. The evil one thrusts this idolatry of self so much to the forefront of these people’s minds that they can’t even see the error in their ways.

If I have to help myself for God to help me, what is the purpose of the atonement? What is the benefit of the death of the only begotten Son of God? And what’s more, is that this “philosophy” is just that—worldly philosophy weaseling its way into the theology of the church—and it has no place among the people of God. God does not “help those who help themselves.” God helps those who, by faith in Jesus Christ, know they cannot help themselves. He gives the Apostles the promise of the Holy Spirit to help them be the instruments of His Gospel proclamation to the world. They don’t have to do anything to receive His help. They don’t have to “get right with God” or “love themselves” before He bestows His blessings upon them.

In fact, the opposite is entirely true. That is what Jesus tells them in our text. John 16:7, from our Gospel lesson, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” He tells them that they must first lose Him by His going away, and be utterly bereft of strength and comfort to receive the gift of the Spirit. They must be stripped bare and utterly in need of help, and then HE will send the help. HE will send the relief. Not because of what they will do or what they need to do in order to receive it, but because it is His promised gift. He will not abandon them to be alone in the task of proclaiming His Word, and He has no expectation that they figure it out on their own. Ten days after He ascends into heaven to sit at the right hand of His Father, He fulfills His promise. The Helper comes upon them and they begin their task as called servants of the Word.

And as they go about proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Spirit will work through them to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. This

encompasses the entirety of Law and Gospel. By the proclamation of the Law, the world is convicted of sin. Original sin resides in all mankind, from those still in the womb to the oldest among us. That old man must be convicted and sentenced to death so that the new man can rise by the Gospel proclamation. Those who are lost in their sin hear the Law, and those who despair of their sin hear the Gospel. As C.F.W. Walther states in Thesis VIII of his work, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins, or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins.”

This encompasses the entirety of the counsel of God—sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Law convicts of sin. The Gospel offers the righteousness of Christ to be received by faith. And the Lord has promised judgment for both. For those who reject the gift of forgiveness and righteousness, those who reject the gift of faith, they will be judged to their condemnation. For those who are clothed in the righteous robe of Christ, they will be judged according to His works and given His holy inheritance. Those in the faith need not help themselves, because Jesus Christ has already done everything necessary to help them, in this life and in eternity. Nothing we can do contributes to that truth. If left to our own devices and left to rely on ourselves for our help, we would be like those lost in sin, because our Old Adam wants nothing more than self-reliance.

By faith we know the truth of Jesus’ redemptive work on the cross, because the Helper whom He has sent has revealed it to us in the Word. Isaiah 53:5 sums it up in one perfect little bow. “But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.” Despite our failings, our sorrows, and our sins, the God of all grace and mercy gave up His only Son to die the death that we deserve. He heaped the punishment for our sins upon His head instead of ours, and by the wounds of His suffering, we are made new in the righteousness of His blood. He alone has done this work. He alone has helped us by the shedding of His blood, that we would be declared righteous in the sight of His Father in heaven.

As we traverse this societal wasteland of sin, we need all the help that we can get from our God and Lord. And thanks be to the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that we don’t have to look that hard to find it. Our help in every trouble and need has been revealed to us and is always present in the Word and the Sacraments. John makes this plain and solidifies the authority of these means of God’s grace, where the Apostle writes in 1 John 5:7-8, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.” There we find the solace and comfort of the forgiveness of sins which our mighty Savior won for us by the sacrifice of His body and blood on the

cross. It is there, in the waters of baptism, that we are washed clean of the stain of sin which would keep us at enmity with God if not for His gracious mercy. It is there we receive the real and true body and blood of our Lord Jesus in our mouths as a concrete assurance of our redemption. And by the Word of the Gospel we hear, as we have this morning, that the Holy Spirit is here with us, revealing all that is necessary for us as we seek the day of salvation.

No amount of angst, worry, fear, or grief has the power to override the gift of peace we have received by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Because the gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of the Word, and by that Word we hear the truth that we are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ, justified by grace through faith in Him alone. Our pride and self-reliance are shattered at the foot of the cross, because it is there that we find our identity as one body in Christ, who has sent us the promised Helper—the *παράκλητος*. He will keep us in the faith of Him who died to redeem the world. He is an ever-present help in our time of need, even when our need might be unknown to us. The help that He provides is the only help we truly need, and that is our need to be washed clean of our sin in the blood of the Lamb who was slain. And by that very blood which is proclaimed to us by the Helper and Comforter, we are assured of the salvation that we have in Jesus, and emboldened in the hope of eternal life with Him in His heavenly glory.

The Psalm from which I took the sermon title is a very fitting close to our discussion this morning. Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; He utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how He has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; He burns the chariots with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Amen.