

Lesson 11

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Holy Gospel: John 14:1–14

Jesus and His disciples were in the Upper Room to eat the Passover. John's Gospel records their interaction during that momentous evening in significant detail, providing us with the farewell discourses of Jesus that have meant so much to Christians of every era. Jesus washed His disciples' feet, giving them yet another example of willing service to encourage their own willing service. He then pointedly predicted that Judas would betray Him and told them, "Yet a little while I am with you" (13:33). He commanded them to love one another as He loved them, and He told them, "By this all people will know that you are My disciples" (v. 35). He predicted that Peter would deny Him. The mood around the Passover table was somber—heavy with thought and concern. At that point, Jesus spoke the comforting and encouraging words of this Holy Gospel. He reassured His puzzled apostles in the best way possible, by reminding them of who He is and of why He had come into the world. We, too, find reassurance in His words.

"Let not your hearts be troubled," said Jesus. That's easier said than done—especially when facing the prospect of losing Him, as the disciples were.

168. What did Jesus say would calm their troubled hearts? What did Jesus add to "Believe in God" by saying "believe also in Me"?

169. What assurances are given to us through each of Jesus' promises: "In My Father's house are many rooms"; "I go to prepare a place for you"; and "I will come again and will take you to Myself"?

Jesus' disciples had a lot to learn. Their slowness to understand helps us as we deal with our own spiritual dullness. Their slowness to understand became a source of blessing for us because it prompted Jesus to speak more great words regarding His person and mission: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This is the last of the *egō eimi* statements featured in John's Gospel. The Greek verb *eimi* itself means "I am." When the pronoun *egō* is added, it becomes most emphatic. "I am" related directly in the minds of Jews to Yahweh, "I AM," the name by which their covenant Lord revealed Himself. The emphasis has Jesus saying, "I, I only, am the way, the truth, and the life."

170. How do the three concepts of way, truth, and life relate to and interplay with one another?

Jesus' "no one comes to the Father except through Me" completes the exclusiveness of the claim that He is making. In our pluralistic society, exclusive religious claims are not well received. They are seen as bigotry. "God as you understand Him" allows anything and everything. "Whatever works for you" is as specific as many get.

171. What is it about Jesus Christ that makes it essential that our Christian testimony point clearly to Him as mankind's only Savior?

172. What, according to Jesus, is the way for people to know and see the Father? In what two ways did Jesus evidence in His life and ministry the truth of His claim "I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me"?

173. In what sense does anyone who has faith in Jesus do what He was doing—and even greater works than Jesus did during His ministry? How does Jesus' assurance that He will do whatever His disciples ask in His name enter into this?

174. What does it mean for your faith and your discipleship that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?

The First Lesson: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60

Growth brought problems to the Jerusalem congregation as it included "Hebrews" and "Hellenists." "Hebrews" were natives of Palestine and were proud of their authentic Jewishness. They spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Scriptures in their synagogues. "Hellenists" were Jews from other parts of the Mediterranean world and often had lived in Palestine for generations. They were more familiar with their native languages and Greek than with Aramaic and Hebrew. The Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, was used in their synagogues. But they were Jews. Every Jew in the Dispersion hoped to worship in the temple at least once, and some retired as permanent residents in Jerusalem. It was these Grecian Jews who had marveled at the Pentecost gift of tongues (Acts 2:5–12), and Peter had addressed both groups (2:14).

There was tension between these two kinds of Jews, and it carried over into the Christian congregation. It was the Hellenists who complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 4:32–35).

175. As they suggested organizing the group to take care of such matters, what was the concern of the apostles about themselves and their work? What does their recommendation say to us about all organizational structure in the Church and the people who implement the Church's programs?

176. What do the names of the seven chosen for this assignment suggest as an approach to solving problems in the life of the Church?

Stephen is singled out as a man full of ____ and _____. He was elected to “wait on tables” but soon became involved in the ministry of the Word. He went to the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Luke tells us that the Hellenistic Jews there “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Failing in their arguments, Stephen’s opponents arranged for false witnesses, who accused Stephen of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God.” They testified before the Council, “[He speaks] against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (see Acts 6:10–14).

The second part of this lesson is the climax of Stephen’s speech before the Council. He had recounted the history of Israel at some length, emphasizing the covenant through Moses and the frequent defections of Israel and their subsequent exile. Then, in talking about the temple, Stephen was aroused against the leaders before whom he stood, for whom the temple itself had become central and who had reduced the faith to perfunctory temple ritual. His words became direct and biting.

177. Of what did Stephen accuse the religious leaders with his “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in hearts and ears”? In what ways did Stephen say that these men, who prided themselves in perpetuating the traditions of the fathers, were acting “as your fathers did”? How could Stephen say these men, who had surrounded the law with 613 protective rules to assure their obedience, had “received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it”?

178. What testimony by Stephen finally led to the Council’s determination to execute him? How did Stephen imitate his Lord in his dying moments?

With this account of Stephen’s martyrdom, Luke introduced Saul, who became the apostle Paul, whose story was Luke’s main thrust in Acts. The Early Church said, “The Church owes Paul to the death of Stephen.” God’s hand was at work to provide the Church with its greatest missionary and theologian.

179. How does this First Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Peter 2:2–10

180. Do we ever outgrow our need for the “mother’s milk” of the Gospel? What is implied by Peter’s “by it you may grow up to salvation”? (See Hebrews 5:12–6:3.)

Cornerstones were carefully prepared and placed in ancient times, for they determined the direction of the exterior lines of buildings. Peter’s concern was that those who came to Christ would mature into a holy ____, offering _____. We need to be ____ stones, properly aligned with the living ____ who is Zion’s (the Church’s) ____.

181. What added significance can you see in the fact that it was Peter who was using this analogy of a building constructed of living stones?

182. What is the result of our being a spiritual house of living stones who trust in the Cornerstone?

183. How is the either/or nature of Jesus and His Gospel shown in this lesson?

“As they were destined for to do” cannot mean that God predestined them to stumble from eternity, for He desires that all be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:1–7). It is their own disobeying the message that makes stumbling the destiny of unbelievers. It is this rejection of Christ that God foreknew from eternity.

Our society is obsessed with “self-image” and aims at fostering self-esteem in many humanistic ways. Peter points us to our true self-image and worth in God’s grace in Christ. The titles he confers were drawn from the Old Testament. “A chosen race” (Isaiah 44:1–2): “Chosen” was used in verse 4 also in regard to Christ Himself, which adds to our appreciation of the title. “A royal priesthood” (Exodus 19:5–6): As spiritual priests, we offer ourselves to the One who offered Himself for us. “A holy nation” (Deuteronomy 28:9): We are holy through Christ’s imputed righteousness; we are set apart by God for His purpose and glory. “A people for His own possession” (Deuteronomy 14:2): We are His creatures, but more than that, His creatures redeemed by the blood of Christ for life in His kingdom.

184. What function does Peter point to that validates all of these titles in our lives as Christians?

185. Why must we say, “Once [we] were not a people, but now [we] are God’s people; once [we] had not received mercy, but now [we] have received mercy”?