

A LONGER LOOK AT THE LESSONS

Study Guide and Leader Guide

for Pericopes as Listed in *Lutheran Service Book*

Series A

Lent 1–Easter 7

By Ken Behnken

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”?

Lesson 11

Fifth Sunday of Easter

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 14:1–14

168. The basis of calming troubled hearts is trust in God (see Isaiah 26:3). “Believe also in Me” focused their thoughts on their experiences as His disciples and on the hopes that were tied to Him. It is in Jesus that we know God is our loving Father and can trust Him to help us and never forsake us.

169. “In My Father’s house are many rooms” assures us that there is room for each of us in God’s saving plan for humanity. “I go to prepare a place for you” assures us that our place in the Father’s house has been reserved and confirmed through Jesus’ accomplished work of salvation. “I will come again and will take you to Myself” assures us that our relationship with Him who is the center of our faith and life will continue into eternity.

170. Help your group relate and interrelate each of the concepts to the others by beginning each consideration with “Jesus is the way (truth) (life) because . . .” Jesus is the way because He alone has revealed the truth and gives life. Jesus is the truth because He has provided and now reveals the way to life. Jesus is the life because His acting out the truth of God’s love makes Him the way for the spiritually dead to find new life in the power of the Spirit.

171. If Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God and was God from the beginning, the Creator of all that is (John 1:1–3), who became flesh to reveal God’s grace and truth (John 1:14; 17–18), and who invested Himself in love as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2) so He could be way, truth, and life for us, it is foolish and spiritually deadly to suggest that there are other ways to the Father. Christian testimony must always point to the only source of assurance: God’s surprising gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

172. Jesus said it right out: people know and see the Father as they know and see Him. The logical counterpart is this: people do not know and see the Father when they will not know and see Jesus (see John 3:31–36; 5:21–23; 1 John 2:22–23). Jesus evidenced that the Father is in Him and He is in the Father through His teachings (see Matthew 7:28–28; John 7:14–18, 45–46) and through His miracles (John 3:1–2; 7:25–32).

173. Jesus testified in word and deed to the forgiving love of God. Anyone who has faith in Jesus testifies in words and in a changed life to the forgiving love he has received and the life-renewal this has brought. Christians are equipped to do “greater works” because we are able to testify to a completed work of salvation through the incarnation of the Word, His sinless human life, His innocent death as God’s atoning sacrifice for sin, His resurrection victory, His ascension to God’s right hand, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in confirmation of His completed work of salvation (see John 7:37–39). Our testimony always has the full backing of Jesus and His Holy Spirit. Modern Christians also have means of communication available to

them that enable them to reach far more people than Jesus Himself was able to. Because our Lord has gone to the Father and has been given all authority in heaven and earth, whatever we ask in His name—consistent with His will for His kingdom—He will do it. That enables us to attempt great things for Him and to expect great things of Him.

174. Give your group an opportunity to relate personally to each concept. Jesus is the way—the one through whom God came to us and through whom we may come to God. Jesus is the truth—in Him we see the full truth of God’s gracious love for sinners and are assured that we are now forgiven children of God. Jesus is the life—as Creator of all, He is the ultimate source of life; as Redeemer He enabled restoration of life with God now and forever through the Holy Spirit in those dead in sin.

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

175. The concern of the apostles was that involvement in details like the daily distribution of food would take them away from teaching and preaching and prayer. The solution was to organize and carry out that effort through others in the Church. Their recommendation says that all aspects of the Church’s program aim finally at allowing and supporting the ministry of the Word—and are to be carried out by people who are dedicated to Christ and ready to be led by His Spirit. It is significant that the seven were chosen by the congregation and not just appointed by the apostles.

176. The seven’s names are all of Greek origin, suggesting they were Hellenists, but this is not conclusive because some Palestinian Jews also were giving their sons Greek names—the apostles Andrew and Philip, for example. The deacons probably represented both groups, but Hellenistic members must have been reassured because of the men selected. Problem solving is most effective when it involves people who relate personally to the problem.

Fill-in Answers: Stephen was described as a man full of grace and power. He evidently was a gifted man, a man who would not involve himself just with mundane matters.

177. “Stiff-necked” means “stubborn”—like an ox that tightens its neck and resists the directions of its driver. Circumcision was the mark of the covenant, worn by each Jewish male in his flesh. To be uncircumcised meant one was outside the covenant faith. But it was not to be just an outward formality; also hearts and ears were to be “circumcised” and belong to the Lord in sincere faith and service. Stephen was telling them that spiritually they were outside the faith even though they followed all the laws and traditions of Judaism. These proud men were like their fathers in resisting the Holy Spirit. Their ancestors persecuted the prophets and killed those who prophesied the coming of the Righteous One, the Messiah. Now they had stubbornly rejected, betrayed, and murdered the Messiah Himself when He had come. They had the covenant law through Moses on Sinai, and they carefully obeyed the system of outward rules intended to safeguard the great principles of the Law. They carefully observed its outward ceremonies. But in their concern they selfishly circumvented the true requirements of the outward-focused law of love for God and neighbor.

178. The text presents a striking contrast: the members of the Council were furious and gnashed their teeth at Stephen, but Stephen didn’t even look at them. Gazing heavenward, he saw the glory of God and Jesus at the right hand of God. His testimony about this was the last straw. His judges became a mob and rushed him out to his death. Stephen imitated his Lord by praying for those killing him and by commending his spirit into God’s hand.

179. The stubborn rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Council was continued in their manipulation of Stephen’s arrest and their rejection of his testimony.

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

180. St. Paul wrote, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). That being the case, we should never tire of hearing the basic story of salvation. It is at the heart of our faith. “Grow up to salvation” implies that we need continually to apply the message of Christ to our Christian discipleship. “Salvation” implies being healed of our sinfulness for a new way of life. That’s what the Good News is and does. It builds not only faith but also hope and love.

Fill-in Answers: Peter's concern was that those who came to Christ would mature into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We need to be living stones, properly aligned with the living Stone who is Zion's Cornerstone.

181. Peter probably liked this analogy because "Peter," meaning "Rock," is the new name that Jesus gave him. His given name was Simon.

182. The result of being a house that trusts in the Cornerstone is that we will never be put to shame.

183. To those who believe, Christ is the precious Cornerstone through whom their lives are properly aligned and given full purpose. Those who will not believe stumble over Him (see 1 Corinthians 1:22–25). Help your group understand that those who are saved praise God for their gracious election in Christ (see Ephesians 1:3–8). Those who are lost cannot blame Him as if they were eternally predestined for this by the will of God. They are lost because of their unbelief (see Luke 13:34–35).

That we are chosen in grace just as Christ was God's Chosen One to save mankind emphasizes that all of it is God's gracious plan of salvation. We cannot boast! But since God is the one who has done it, we can enjoy assurance—and praise Him for it!

184. The titles that assure that God has moved into our lives with His gracious gift of salvation in Christ are validated when we live up to them as we "may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light."

185. For many of us, our ancestors were Gentiles who lived in spiritual darkness until the Gospel of Jesus was brought to them by Christian missionaries. In our own experience, we have been freed from spiritual darkness and death by rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Now we are privileged to be the ones who carry out the Christian mission.