
“More to Say”

A SERMON on John 16:12-15 for Holy Trinity Sunday, Year C
Preached 15 June 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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As a child—and particularly as a child who was, admittedly, a bit academically and intellectually precocious—I never much appreciated such age-based condescensions as “you’ll understand when you get older.” I suppose, really, no one does... do they? You don’t have to be Dougie Houser to feel resentful about such things. No matter where you stood in the school rankings, I suspect just about every one of you had some moment along the way when someone—a parent or grandparent, teacher or pastor, neighbour or friend—said to you, “you’ll get it when you get older” or “I’ll tell you later, when you’ll understand more,” and you probably didn’t like it. And yet, nevertheless, now as an adult, I admit that I myself have said something like that to a child or youth at least a time or two.

More to the point, though: As my own life continues to journey onward, I realize that, indeed—even for *me*—there *are* things I’ve come to understand, or understand *better*, as I’ve gotten older. Experiences that I look back on and recognize that I’d be in a different and better place *now* to receive the fullness of that thing than I was five or ten or fifteen years ago. There are plenty of life-experience sorts of things like this; perhaps you can imagine your own: relationships and their ups and downs, endings and beginnings; struggles and trauma you’ve been through; gifts and graces from others that you weren’t able to fully receive *then*, but can see more deeply into *now*. Sometimes, it’s even something as simple as a movie, a poem, a book... I occasionally find myself cracking open something I’d read back when I was in theological school—lo and behold, some 19 years ago now—and it hits me how much better I understand what’s there, or how much more meaningful it would be for me if I were to delve back into that work now, compared to how I was able to receive it when my eyes first scanned those very same words so many years ago.

With these sorts of realizations, it’s not altogether unreasonable to me, then, that Jesus tells his disciples that he still has many things to say to them, but that “[they] cannot bear them now.” After all, let’s remember where and when these disciples find themselves when Jesus says this to them. Here in John 16, we are dropping into the story on the *very last night*. It’s that infamous night when Jesus gets arrested, that night when he is gathered with his closest followers for one last meal and time together before he would be tried and crucified.

Things are a whirlwind for these disciples at this point, I’m sure. They’ve followed him all along the way and now into Jerusalem, where an ominous mood casts shadows all across the horizons of their hearts. At this last meal gathering (in the way John’s gospel tells it, anyhow), Jesus flabbergasts them all by washing their feet, taking on the role of a slave or servant to them. He foretells his betrayal, and Peter’s denial, too. And then he begins schooling them on how they are to be together after he’s gone—that “new commandment” that they love one another as he has loved them. Jesus, this Jesus, he even tells them that they are going to face nothing short of outright hatred,¹ and even death,² all because of him.

Can you imagine? Can you fathom what those disciples are thinking, feeling, praying, by this point?

¹ John 15:18-19, NRSV.

² John 16:2, NRSV.

And yet there is more to come... we who know the story in hindsight, we know this. Jesus, this Jesus, he gets arrested, tried, tortured, crucified, killed, and buried. He rises again, appears *to* them, and departs *from* them.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Between what has *already* been said, and what is about to happen... indeed, it's all too much to bear.

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We ourselves run up against limits to what we can bear, what we can understand, what we can begin to fathom as being possible in this world. Like the foreboding sense of urgency that those disciples undoubtedly felt as they sit, with their freshly-washed feet, listening to Jesus give his farewell words... we, too, often feel like life—whether our life specifically, or life in general—that it's "urgently moving toward... something."³ And that "something"—occasionally it's good, but more often what gnaws at us is that grave sense that what we're urgently moving toward is *not* where we'd like to be.

Is the world edging toward the brink? With all that has happened in our world just in these last few days, you would not be alone if you've had that question run through your mind. A tragic and catastrophic airplane crash, politically-motivated assassinations, an attempt at a dictator-like military parade to please the ego of the occupant of the office previously considered the leader of the free world, and violent conflict between two other lands led by men of similarly-questionable discernment, driving our world dangerously close to the cliff-edge of all-out war... is it all too much to bear? Can we hold it together in such times? For that matter, can we hold it all together in our own lives, with fluctuations in mortgage payments and retirement savings, hearing unwanted medical diagnoses and having to keep "good-enough grades to be accepted into good-enough programs in good-enough schools"⁴ ...?

Under the pressure of the moment that the disciples faced, they could not bear all Jesus could have said to them. Can we? Or are we balancing and bearing enough—*too* much, even—as it is?

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The writer and poet Wendell Berry, in his poem "The Real Work", writes:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*⁵

On one hand, I think that the poet here is right, and it seems an especially keen insight—that the "mind that is not baffled is not employed"—today as we observe Trinity Sunday. But on the other hand, and more to the point, the good news is that *God does not leave us on our own* to do

³ Brian Wilker Frey, "From a Preacher" commentary for May 22, 2016; in *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*, ed. Robert Farlee, 2016, Year C (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 176.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wendell Berry, "The Real Work," in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1983).

such work. When we reach that place where we cannot bear to hear any more, because we are already balancing and bearing too much, that is where God reassures us of the power that comes to our aid from outside ourselves, and from inside the very heart and being of God—the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice, after all, that when Jesus says to the disciples that he has more to say, but they cannot bear it, Jesus does not berate them. He does not say “you fools! Why can’t you seem to get it together?!” In fact, quite the opposite—“you can’t bear it now? It’s o.k., because the Spirit still will come, still does come, to guide you into all truth.” Here on Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the fact that what the Spirit testifies to and empowers us for—that this is in unity with Jesus himself. As one New Testament scholar puts it, “The Holy Spirit communicates [the] presence [of God among humans] to us today by reminding us of what Jesus said and then by teaching us what God has to say now.”⁶ That would seem to be what Jesus is getting at, when he assures the disciples that what this Spirit they will receive will do is declare to them all that was already Jesus’, and all that God has is in Jesus’ grasp, too.

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I could very quickly wander off here into territory that’s rather esoteric and heady and convoluted. Such is the danger for a preacher on a day like Trinity Sunday, the only day on the church calendar devoted to a theological doctrine rather than some part of the story of Christ and the church. For that matter, such is also often the danger whenever we’re given scriptures from Paul’s letter to the Romans, or from John’s gospel.

But like the poet Wendell Berry, might we affirm that it can be right at that place where all seems too much to bear... where our attempts to make sense of it all start turning arcane and obtuse, that it is *there* where the real work happens—both on our part, and on God’s? Safwat Marzouk, an Egyptian Protestant Christian pastor and biblical scholar, writing for the *Christian Century* a few years ago, writes, “As we acknowledge our limitations to perceive the truth[,]”—hear that again, “As we acknowledge our limitations to perceive the truth”—“we leave room for the Spirit to teach us and to form us as disciples of Christ.”⁷ Or as Karoline Lewis, a Lutheran pastor and biblical scholar in the Twin Cities, puts it, “Inherent to being church is an *ongoing endeavouring* toward naming God’s activity in our world.”⁸

In other words, when we think we’ve got it all figured out, then that’s precisely where we’ve probably stepped out of it... left the living and active life of God, the grace-filled and life-giving life *with* God to which we are called and for which we have been claimed. But that, you see, is the glorious good news of God in all times and places—that it doesn’t depend on us... that our hope of sharing in the glory of God is not ultimately our work to achieve, but God’s work—God’s *ongoing* work—for us to receive.

Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.

⁶ Lamar Williamson Jr., *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 212-13.

⁷ Safwat Marzouk, “The Truth of the Triune God,” Sunday’s Coming (blog), *ChristianCentury.org*, 20 May 2016, <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-05/truth-triune-god>

⁸ Karoline Lewis, “Trinity Talk,” Dear Working Preacher (blog), *WorkingPreacher.org*, 15 May 2016, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4648>. Emphasis added.