

Sermon: 7th Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 1:12-26 (vv.21,22)

Theme: 12 Witnesses

Goal: The church united witnesses in the resurrected Jesus

Dear Friends,

Introduction: We just celebrated the Ascension of our Lord last Thursday, and we will celebrate Pentecost next Sunday. These are the two last big events in Jesus' life that the church celebrates: When He went back to heaven; and when He sent His Holy Spirit upon His disciples. The reading from 1 Peter 4:7-11 said: "The end of all things is near". The next big event will be the second coming of Jesus! We are living in between these two events. When will it be? We don't know. But we have to work and to behave waiting for this great day! Peter says: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

The Book of Acts has a very nice and an important record of the first Christian Church in Jerusalem and how was the behaviour of the first Christians. It tells also what happened in between the Ascension and Pentecost. The way the first Christians acted shows their unity and their total dependency on God's direction. Jesus was not visibly with them anymore to give guidance on what to do in specific cases, but they trusted in His promise that He was still with them, and they asked for His direction on the decision that had to be taken. - The church doesn't take mere human decisions, but we always ask for God's guidance.

I – They all join together constantly

After Jesus' Ascension, the disciples and their companions didn't disperse, but all returned to Jerusalem. They knew that united they could do the task of witnessing better, which Jesus had given them. Moreover, they had to wait together in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit to receive power from high. The Holy Spirit would enable them to go to the entire world to witness about Jesus and His resurrection and about the salvation God had prepared for all through the sacrifice of Jesus.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they all went to the room where they were staying. The names of the 11 Apostles are mentioned, "and they all joint together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, mother of Jesus, and His brothers." The women were those who had followed Jesus from Galilee and are mentioned several times in the Gospel as helping Jesus and the disciples, providing food for them and taking care of their needs. They are also mentioned as who had been under the cross and as the first witnesses of the resurrection.

The specific reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and of his brothers, gives a good input to the theme "Witnesses". None of the people attending the meeting had been a better eyewitness of what had happened to Jesus than Mary. We know that the Evangelist Luke was not an eyewitness. He was a Greek medical doctor, and he came to the Christian faith later. But when he wrote his Gospel and the Book of Acts, he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning... to write an orderly account... of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word" (Luke 1:1-3). And Mary was the only eyewitness of what had happened to Jesus since His conception by the Holy Spirit till He was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus' brothers could have added some

details as well. I can imagine Luke interviewing Mary, Jesus' brothers, and the other disciples, collecting data and after this writing his Gospel. He went to the source, to the eyewitnesses, to give us an accurate and faithful report about our Saviour's life and deeds, "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught", as Luke wrote at the beginning of his Gospel.

The unity of the Church was always a concern of Jesus. He knew that false prophets would come and that the church would split due to many human reasons and the temptation of the devil. But even so, Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as a matter of good witness to the world: "Father, my prayer is not for them (the disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have love them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23). Dissensions and the lack of unity of a church are bad witness; but when the church is united and the members show love to each other, this is the best testimony a church can give to the world and to the visitors God brings among us!

II – One new witness had to be chosen

One day, when about a hundred and twenty believers were gathered, Peter raised a question: Jesus had chosen 12 Apostles, but Judas denied Jesus, hanged himself, and was not anymore one of the Twelve. His position must be filled. *The qualifications for his replacement were carefully outlined to avoid any ambiguity that might cause dissension in the community. First of all, the person had to have been a consistent follower of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout His ministry. To avoid any possible confusion, the time span was specified as from the ministry of John the Baptist to Jesus' ascension.*

Secondly, the suitable person was to become a witness. The obligation given by Jesus to the Apostles in Acts 1:8 (...you will be my witnesses... to the end of the earth) would also apply to the elected one. The position offered would not be an easy one to hold. Two men who met these criteria were chosen by the entire community (ABC pp 1301,1302): Joseph and Matthias.

With prayer, and letting God guide them through the cast of lots (a traditional way to take important decisions), Mathias was chosen and was added to the Twelve Apostle as a witness of the resurrection.

Conclusion: At least three witnesses were required to testify in a court in Biblical times. We have now 12 witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. And even so many don't believe it. As stubborn and blind, they will perish in their unbelief... unless they repent and return to God. And this is the task of the Christian Church from Pentecost to the End of the World: To call people out of darkness, witnessing to all that Jesus is alive; that He is among us in His Word and in His Sacraments of the Holy Baptism and of the Holy Supper; that He still offers forgiveness to all who believe, and welcome everyone without distinction. In spite of the many splits among the Christian Church, we believe that there is only One Holy and Apostolic Church, the Communion of all saints – this means: of all who are sanctified/forgiven by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit and believe in Jesus. The heaven is our goal as we are living in this time of grace in between Pentecost and the Second Coming of Jesus, witnessing through words and deeds the love of God in us and through us to all, and using the gifts God gave to each of us to serve each other in the family, in the society and in the church, and to give the glory of God's name. Amen.