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Sermon on John 16,22-33

(Hanover International Worship: May 17, 2009)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I will tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." Then Jesus' disciples said: "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone to ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God."

"You believe at last!" Jesus answered. "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome this world."

Dear friends of Hanover International Worship,
dear brothers and sisters!

I

There are moments in life - and in history - when everything is right, when the world is - or seems to be - in perfect order - just as it was in the beginning when God finished up each of his works of creation by looking at it and coming to the conclusion "that it was good". Even more than that - when the works of creation were completed "God saw *all* that he had made, and it was *very* good." I am thinking of the day when our only child was born. I was allowed into the delivery room and could view the Caesarian section and how the little creature was pulled out of the womb. In this moment earth became heaven, earth was like heaven.

In 2009 Germany will commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the opening and eventually the downfall of the Wall: when the brutal division of our country and particularly of the city of Berlin began to vanish, when at long last the parts that belonged together could grow together again. Moments in history use to be somewhat ambiguous, and many of us may hesitate to identify them as being *very good*. It seems much easier to do so with reference to a meaningful moment in our personal life. It is true: German re-unification did not and does not turn earth into heaven, but even from a perspective twenty years later when we know much better than in 1989 what went wrong we have reasons enough to celebrate the anniversary, to thank those who have contributed to grasping the historic moment and to thank God for creating this historic moment.

In the bible passage we have heard as the second reading Jesus is telling his disciples what will come to pass: "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything." The very last sentence is a wonderful paraphrase of what I have been speaking of at the beginning of my sermon: There are moments in life and in history when everything is right. In these moments we need not ask any questions. In German we have the expression: Somebody is *wunschlos glücklich*, that is: Somebody is so happy, there is nothing else he'd like. When describing the joy to come Jesus doesn't use the phrase *wunschlos glücklich*, but he is speaking of a time when everything is - in German - *fraglos richtig*, that is: when everything is right and you do not feel the need to ask any more questions.

By the way - *fraglos richtig*, to refrain from asking questions is not a universal pattern. When I am returning home after having met friends and relations my wife would like to know what's up here and there. The dialogue between her and me then takes a predictable course. For instance. Her: "Do they still consider to move house? And if so, what is going to happen to their jobs? How are the children?" Me: "I don't know. They didn't tell anything about it." Her: "You mustn't wait for them to speak out about these topics. You must ask, ask, ask." Right she is. But the two of us should be able to manage by ourselves and live up to the mutual expectations. According to the Gospel of St. John Jesus does not promise that "in that day" you will get all the answers, but: "you will no longer ask me anything", the answers and even the questions will no longer be relevant or interesting.

What a pity - this puts an end, too, to that running gag which a former colleague at the Faculty of Theology made use of when we had heated debates on the exposition of an Old Testament passage. "In that day in heaven", he used to say, "we shall learn who was right", and with his tongue in his cheek he regularly added: "One thing I know for certain, Soandso's

theory will definitely prove wrong." All these debates will disappear - to keep us away from fruitless strife and everlasting know best attitude.

Many debates that are mirrored in the passage taken from the Gospel of St. John will disappear. But not all. There are two issues that even after 2.000 years are not done with.

The first one concerns prayer. In the German Protestant churches all the Sundays between Easter and Whitsun have a special name and a special theme. This Sunday is called with its Latin name "Rogate", that is: "Pray". Therefore the hymns we chose for this service are paying particular heed of the issue of prayer.

Jesus - in his address to his disciples - is treating this theme as well. With a surprising result: "In that day" - when his disciples will rejoice and no-one will take away their joy - there is no place and no function left for prayer. This may be different for the praise of God and for giving him thanks. But any prayer that asks anything would be a contradiction to the sentence with which the passage more or less begins: "In that day you will no longer ask me anything". And what is said about prayer in the meantime, between now and "that day"? For us today this is the crucial question because we are - like St. John - still living in the meantime. The passage gives a clear answer, and it puts the finger on the phrase "ask in the name of Jesus". This phrase makes the difference.

The passage begins with a solemn reference to the truth and is repeating the key phrase three times: "I will tell you the truth", says Jesus, "my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive". It is worth noting that there is a difference between what Jesus teaches on prayer in the synoptic Gospels and what he teaches according to the fourth Gospel. Many of us will know by heart what we find in the first three Gospels: "Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7, 7). The wordings in the four Gospels are clearly interrelated. In the fourth Gospel, too, Jesus says: "Ask and you will receive". But the phrase "ask in the name of Jesus" is it that makes the difference.

But what is meant by: "to ask in the name of Jesus"? Some refer to the closing lines of many traditional Christian prayers, such as: "This we are asking from you, heavenly father, in the name of Christ Jesus who with you and the Holy Ghost lives and enlivens from eternity to eternity". But is this all? A reference to Christ Jesus who in the unity with the Father and the Spirit represents our prayer as near to God's heart as possible? I am convinced: This phrase means more. It has the function to help to select what Christians *can* pray for and *ought not*

to pray for: not for anything, a winner in the lottery, rain on behalf of the farmers, but dry and hot weather on behalf of the tourists, a victory of Manchester United in the Champions League. Rather ask yourself what Jesus stands for and what you can pray for in his name: to know what counts in life, not to be led astray by any new ideas and to have the strength to withstand all sorts of temptation.

There is a second issue that remains of interest in the passage taken from the Gospel of St. John. But it shall be dealt with only shortly. It has to do with the language we are using when we speak about God and with its suitability. The Gospel of St. John sees two modes of language in competition with one another: to speak figuratively or indirectly about God and to speak plainly or directly about God. In the fourth Gospel Jesus says: "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father." Later the disciples comment that Jesus is "speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things". Both quotations indicate a strong sympathy of the Gospel for, what it calls, "to speak plainly". But is it at all within the human capacity to speak about God plainly? Where do we know from what it is in practical terms: to speak plainly? And the other way round: Parables - such as the parable of the lost son or the parable of the fourfold soil - are a very prominent example for speaking figuratively. The first three Gospels - St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke - make ample use of parables, the Gospel of St. John none. Which Gospel does speak plainlier than the others? I quite honestly prefer figurative language, and I do firmly believe, we have no better language for God than parables.

III

The passage taken from the Gospel of St. John we have been meditating about in this sermon begins with an address to people who live in the midst of grief, to be followed immediately by the announcement of a joy no-one will be able to take away:

"Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice ... In that day you will no longer ask me anything."

The passage ends with a complete equivalent: first the realistic description of the troubles and tribulations and *angst* Christians, too, have to suffer from, then the appeal to pick up courage, but not as a desperate appeal to mobilize the last bit of own strength, but with Jesus as our friend and refuge:

"In this world you will have *angst*" - I use this German word which has found its way in the English language -, "but take heart! I have overcome the world."

Whether St. John's Gospel from the first century or a hymn from the 19th century or our own life-experience in the 20th and 21st centuries - all three of them describe the Christian existence as a between: to live in the world, but not to be from this world, to live through times of grief, but to share moments of bliss and eternity, on the way with heavy burdens, but with a joy that nobody will be able to tear out of our heart, the mind full of puzzling questions, but the taste of heaven on our tongue. It is not easy to hold these extremes together. The temptation is great to evade the permanent tension. But take heart! Comfort one another! You are not alone! And never forget: Jesus has overcome the world. And therefore we shall overcome, too.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding,
will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.