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# PENTECOST

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## THE HOLY SPIRIT, YOUR STRETCH-ER

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### John 14:23-31

**23** Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. **24** Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. **25** "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. **26** But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. **27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. **28** You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. **29** And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. **30** I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, **31** but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.

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When you were a child growing up, your parents may have used a growth chart. Every so often, they would have you stand next to it. With pencil in hand, they would mark your growth. Then show you how much you'd grown since the last time they marked it.

There are a number of ways, though, in which we grow.

Dancers may keep track over time of how much higher they can kick. Or keep track of how much farther they can stretch. Because stretching is something dancers do.

We think of athletes stretching in order to prevent injury, to ensure stamina, and to enable peak performance. Dancers stretch for those same reasons. The great dancer Gene Kelly, who starred in *Singin' In the Rain*, believed in the athleticism of dancing. Growing up, he dreamed of playing shortstop for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Even as a dancer, he thought of himself as an athlete. To prove his point, he once put together a TV show that featured some of the best athletes of that time: Bob Cousy of the Boston Celtics, Mickey Mantle of the New York Yankees, and boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson. He had them show some of the moves athletes have to make to slip a punch, to double pump fake a shot, or to make a diving catch in the outfield. Then, he revealed how dancers make those same moves. So, dancers, like athletes, must stretch.

The confirmand also has been stretched. Confirmation instruction stretches the confirmand. Stretches his or her understanding of the Christian faith. Their understanding of the Christian faith is stretched for the same reasons that athletes and dancers stretch: to prevent injury, to ensure stamina, to enable peak performance. Now, this Confirmation Day is no performance in the narrow definition of the word. Yet, the confirmand does stand on a grand stage today. Stands before the church and affirms his or her faith. It is this stretching through Bible instruction and instruction in the teaching of the Christian faith that makes public confession of faith possible. Whether it's by the confirmand on this day, or by the church every Sunday, or by individual Christians in their witness every day.

The confirmand has been stretched also to prevent injury and ensure stamina. In light of what's to come: the unfamiliar territory of adulthood. In fact, the unfamiliar is waiting for every one of us. The unfamiliar: those stressful experiences we've not yet had to go through. When faith is tested. When, like a muscle, faith can be strained and injured. Think of a pulled groin or a hamstring injury. Faith too can be injured. Or, like a muscle, faith can reach the limits of its endurance. Think of dancing until you reach fatigue. Faith too can be pushed to the limits of its endurance – as it was with Jesus' disciples.

It was a Thursday evening. Jesus warned them of what was coming: "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid... I am going away... I will no longer talk

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much with you..." Unfamiliar territory for those disciples. Jesus would not physically be with them very much anymore.

First, He was arrested. Then, He died. When He rose He appeared to them now and then, but He was not with them constantly. Then, He ascended into heaven. They were tempted to not follow Him. Their faith was tested. In at least one case, faith was injured. Their faith was definitely pushed to the limits of endurance. That can happen to our faith, too. The unfamiliar is waiting for us, to push our faith to the point of fatigue.

So, first, our faith has to be stretched. An instructor or coach is needed. That's what Jesus promised. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name..." Jesus called this coach the Helper. We might call Him the Stretch-er. Only, instead of using exercises on us, the Holy Spirit uses God's Word, the Lord's Supper, and the remembrance of our Baptism to stretch our faith.

Jesus said the Holy Spirit "will teach you all things." Teach you God's Word through your pastors and teachers. "And He will bring to your *remembrance* all that I have said to you." Like, "take and eat, take and drink, given for you, shed for you, do this in *remembrance* of Me."

Without the Holy Spirit's stretching us, we tend to fall back on our own methods of coping. In the unfamiliar territory of young adulthood, or being newly married, or having a third child and finding yourselves outnumbered, or experiencing an empty nest, or losing a part of your personal independence what do our methods of coping look like?

It looks like Peter the fisherman drawing a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. Live by your wits. Peter did, but he didn't even come close to stopping the soldiers from arresting Jesus. What do our methods of coping look like?

It looks like Judas looking for a little comfort in thirty pieces of silver... like getting a little retail therapy. It didn't help him, and it doesn't really help us either. What do our methods of coping look like?

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It looks like the disciples running away in the Garden of Gethsemane. Run away from the problem or the stress or the pain. Deny it. Hide from it. It has a way of catching up with us anyway as it did with Peter when he was cornered by a crowing rooster. All of our methods of coping let our faith be pushed to the point where we feel like we'll break, like we'll snap.

But our Lord's love for us stretches even farther. As the disciples fell away one by one, Jesus kept going for all of us. To trials and mocking, to beatings. When given the chance to defend Himself, to provide some defense that would have given Pontius Pilate an excuse to release Him, He instead said He was a king. Well, that's one way to commit treason. His love for us just kept on going. God's love for us stretched so far, that even His nailed hands stretched out on a cross could not fully communicate His love for us. He rose again, so that He can draw our faith farther than we ever dreamed it could go, to stretch us into fuller and better children of our Abba Father, fuller and better followers of Jesus, than we ever thought we could be.

There will come a day at the end of the homestretch when this will be accomplished. When life will be stretched into life everlasting. When we will perfectly follow Jesus and totally know that peace that He promises when He says, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you." Yet, in the meantime, there will be days when you will *begin* to understand this promise. There will be days when in spite of how intensely your faith has been tested, the Holy Spirit has you prepared. The Holy Spirit's got you covered. There will be days when no matter how far your faith has been pushed, the Holy Spirit will have been able, through the means of grace, to stretch your faith to trust that God's hands have stretched even farther than your hardships and already worked all things together for your good. When such days come, you will know that you have grown.

Amen!