

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

“The Gift of the Holy Spirit” – Acts 2: 1-2

Dear friends in Christ Jesus (especially you, the members of this year’s confirmation class):

The third article of the Apostle’s Creed begins with the words, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the third and, in some way, the forgotten person of the Trinity. It’s not, of course, that Scripture forgets Him. After all, the Bible is replete with His presence and power. In fact, we know that the Bible itself is the work of the Holy Spirit. And it’s not that the Church’s creeds and confessions forget Him either. His person and work are professed, outlined, discussed, and believed every bit as much as God the Father and God the Son. Why is it, then, that some feel that the Holy Spirit is the forgotten person of the Trinity? Perhaps it’s because many Christians, even Lutheran Christians like us, have not focused enough of our time and attention on the Holy Spirit and what He does in us and among us and through us. Well, today is a good day to try to remedy some of that for today is Pentecost – the festival of the Holy Spirit. And so for a few moments I invite you to focus your attention on the Holy Spirit.

Now the Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is God – the third person of the Holy Trinity – equal in substance, majesty and power with the Father and the Son. He’s not just a force or an impersonal power but is, like the Father and the Son, a person within the Godhead. Throughout Scripture He is given various names – the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of Christ, Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, among others. He is often symbolized by breath or wind or a dove or the finger of God or fire.

The variety of terms and the different symbols which the Bible uses for the Spirit gives us some insight into His identity. But beyond His identity, we see Him most clearly revealed in what He does, especially what He does in and among and through us as Christians. And just exactly what does He do? Well, once again the third article of the Apostles’ Creed, which is itself a summary of Scripture on this matter, gives us some needed direction. It says, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

Remember what Luther said in his explanation to this article? He said, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; in which Christian church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers and will at the Last Day raise up me and all the dead and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.”

As someone once said, if the first article may be summarized as “God at work with us” and the second article as “God at work for us,” then the third article may be summarized as “God at work in us.” And I agree. The very fact that we are Christians – children of God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. He is the one who brought the Good News into our lives – the Good News of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection on our behalf – and He is the one who created, or better yet re-created us by water and the Word to be God’s own in

Christ. It's not that we knew the Holy Spirit or chose Him, rather it's that He knew us and chose us and gave us new life in Christ Jesus.

But that's not all. Having been given new life in Christ, the Spirit enlightens us with His gifts. We who once walked in the darkness of sin now walk in the light of forgiveness and, in that, are given gifts by the Spirit to equip us not only to walk in that light but also to build up the whole church in that same walk. The Bible says that every Christian has been given one or more such gifts and the discovery of those gifts and the implementation and deployment of those gifts are some of the greatest joys of the Christian life – and all because the Spirit not only calls us to faith but also equips us in that faith to live out that faith.

But having been called and enlightened, the Spirit also sanctifies us – that is, He makes us “holy” by “setting us apart” for a holy purpose. No longer seen simply as sinners in the eyes of the Father because of the Son we are judged “not guilty” through the forgiveness that the Spirit has brought to us by grace through faith. And as impossible as it may seem, we forgiven sinners made holy are set apart to live a holy life to the glory of God the Father and to the building up of the Kingdom of His Son. You see, the Spirit is not only the one who makes it possible to do that, He literally is the one who does it in and through us.

And having been sanctified, the Spirit keeps us in the faith – that is, He continues to work faith and its growth within us by the very means through which He first called us to faith, that is, through Word and Sacrament. Unlike some who believe “once in faith, always in faith” the Bible makes it clear that one stays in faith and indeed grows in faith only as long as the Holy Spirit continues to work in the believer's heart and mind through the Gospel. Surely the saddest thing that could ever happen to a Christian is to reject the ongoing work of the Spirit – either intentionally or by neglect. The Bible calls the rejection of the Spirit the one unforgiveable sin – unforgiveable because it kills faith and without faith one is lost.

And what the Spirit does for each of us He does for all of us – the whole Christian Church on earth. All those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior and are living in and growing in that faith have been called, enlightened, sanctified and kept in the same way by the same Spirit. There is not one Spirit at work in the Missouri Synod and another in other Lutheran bodies. There is not one Spirit at work in the Roman Catholic church and another in the Episcopal church. Nor are there different Spirits at work within different members of the same church body. As many differences as we Christians may have between and among ourselves, there is one overwhelming uniting presence – the Holy Spirit. In our diversity, we are still united with Christ in one body, the body of Christ, the Church, through the work of the Holy Spirit in us and among us and through us. It's in this very church which the Spirit created and to which we are gathered that we daily and richly experience the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of the resurrection to eternal life with God in heaven.

Today is Pentecost – the Festival of the Holy Spirit – God at work in us. As He came upon Christ's first disciples so many years ago to enlighten and empower them for the work of the Church so may He come upon us today (and especially upon our confirmands) to enlighten and empower us for the work of the church today. And to Him be thanks, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, one God, now and forever. Amen.