Sermon — 05/28/23

*(The Day of Pentecost)*

Text — 1 Corinthians 12:3

….no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Theme — “Not By My Own Reason or Strength”

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago, when I still lived in Green Bay and was working for the county Department of Social Services, there was a little white-framed church a couple of blocks from my apartment. It had been the home of a Pentecostal church until they had outgrown it and moved to a larger, newer, ritzier building. And, to my surprise, the ones who then bought that old church were a group that called themselves “The Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit”. Isn’t THAT interesting, I thought. So, one Sunday, I went to visit their services just to see what it was all about.

Well, without going into a lot of detail, I will just say that the church — and its pastor — were very different from the Lutheranism that I was used to. In fact, it was a lot like that Pentecostal church which had moved out. Same sort of worship format. Same sort of music. Same sort of sermon. Same sort of activities. But here is where it got even more interesting to me. That church did not make it — they closed less than a year after they opened. And that “Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit” pastor? Well, he showed up at our LCMS church (he had graduated from one of our seminaries), angling to be our vacancy pastor since our pastor had recently taken a call.

I was on the church council at the time and so I spent a little time talking with him about his previous church, his understanding of Lutheranism, and how he envisioned things going in our congregation. The bottom line was that he basically seemed rather embarrassed about our teaching on the Holy Spirit. I think his words were something along the lines of “Lutherans do a fine job of taking about Jesus but a lousy job of talking about the Holy Spirit”. That we ignore the work of the Holy Spirit and focus “too much” on Christ. Well, to make a long story short, he did NOT become our vacancy pastor. (pause)

**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. Amen.**

*What does this mean?* 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 the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

I love the Catechism. Every year, as I get older and older, I appreciate its simplicity, beauty, eloquence, and clarity more and more. And this section — the Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed — is one of the best examples of that. These were words which that pastor seemed to have forgotten. Or else failed to understand. How he ever got through confirmation class — let alone seminary — without grasping them is beyond me. For here we talk about the true and great work of the Holy Spirit. That is, the Holy Spirit creates/gives/keeps/sustains us in faith toward what our Savior, Jesus Christ, has done. And as we celebrate Pentecost this Sunday, it seems good for us to review that work of the Spirit one more time. (pause)

It seems that many, like that “Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit” pastor, get caught up in what are often called “the gifts of the Holy Spirit”. Things like speaking in tongues, or prophecy, or healing, and the like. And, yes, the Bible does indeed speak of the Holy Spirit giving such gifts. However, there are a number of problems with this focus on the so-called gifts of the Spirit. First of all, what exactly are they? Different churches give different lists. Some say there are seven, others say nine, and still others twelve. Secondly, they forget that the Holy Spirit gave these gifts — not for their own sake, but in order to advance the Gospel. To give verification that the Gospel preaching/teaching of the Church is from the Lord. But we no longer need that verification. We have almost 2,000 years of church history/teaching to give that support. Thirdly, God still does these wonders today — but He does them in different ways, using earthly means. So, for example, we have missionaries who are trained in other languages rather than relying on a miraculous gift from the Holy Spirit (like on Pentecost). God prophesies today using the Scriptures and the collected teachings of all our forefathers in the faith. God heals, but He ordinarily uses doctors and nurses, medications and surgeries, and the like.

But the bigger problem with a focus on these “gifts of the Spirit” is that they often crowd out the Gospel. When that pastor said we Lutherans don’t talk enough about the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit would disagree. Because the Holy Spirit does not talk about the Holy Spirit! No, He always talks about — and points us to — Jesus Christ. Listen to how our Lord Jesus Himself puts it: *“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father — the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father — He will testify of Me.”*

You see, that is the way it is with the Trinity. The Father sends the Son. The Son reveals the Father. And the Spirit points us to the Son’s work for us. There is no egotism amongst the Trinity. None of the Persons of the Trinity have a “Hey, look at **Me**!” kind of attitude. So, if you want to rightly focus on the Holy Spirit and His work, then you need to realize that He will always direct us to Christ. Which is precisely what we say in that Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed.

And the first thing we confess there is that we are, by nature, sinners who cannot — and would not — ever come to God on our own. No, that is how deeply sin has infected and poisoned us. The Bible teaches that we are conceived in sin, meaning that from the moment of our conception — even before we have ever thought, said, or done anything sinful — we were already sinners. So, there is no such thing as an “innocent” baby. No, every person born of man and woman is sinful and unclean. Dead in our trespasses and sins, the Bible says. And dead people cannot heal themselves.

That is why we need the Holy Spirit to call us to life. And He does. How? Through the Gospel! That is, by the Good News of what Christ has done for us. God became man for us. He took on our flesh and blood. He put Himself in our place. He picked up our burden of the Law. And He fulfilled it. Perfectly. Every commandment — which we break daily in our thoughts/words/deeds — He has kept. He has loved God above all things. He has loved His neighbor as Himself. So much, in fact, that He suffers our hell for us. Imagine such a love as that, if you can! I love my wife, you love your kids, we love our parents — but would we really, truly go to hell for them? No, only God loves that much. Only His love can conquer hell. And it has.

For after Jesus suffered and died, after He endured our hell on the cross, He rose again. To break Satan’s power. To destroy death’s stranglehold. To liberate us from hell and to give us heaven. All that needed to be done — all that we ourselves could never do — Christ has done for us.

But what good would any of it do us if we did not take hold of it? Or, as the Bible teaches us, we are saved by grace (that is, Christ for us), through faith. But if we cannot believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, or come to Him on our own, then where does that leave us? If Jesus had done all that work to save us, but we never believed it, where are we? Well, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, it would still leave us in hell! That’s why we need to be clear on the work of the Holy Spirit in calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying, and keeping us in the Christian faith. And HOW He does all of that. (pause)

The Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel. By the Gospel Word, preached and taught. By the Gospel in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. You see, the Spirit does not just “zap” a person into faith apart from these Means of Grace. No, He works through them to call people to faith. To GIVE them faith. You can’t make yourself believe any more than you can make someone else believe. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who plants that faith in you. Using the Good News of Christ. Your baptism, then, is a treasure because there you were called. Washed clean of your sins. Birthed into God’s family. Grafted and joined to Christ Himself, made one with Him. What is His is now yours — because of baptism.

The Spirit does the same through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. That’s why it is so important and vital for us to be here each week. Not because God needs us, but because WE need to be here. To hear that Word again and again. Because by means of that Word our faith is refreshed, renewed, and strengthened. To absent ourselves is to risk spiritual starvation. The same holds true with our daily prayers and devotions — we NEED them, to remain connected to our Savior.

And obviously, that faith is fed when we receive the Lord’s Supper. For there we are given the very Body and Blood which have purchased our salvation. So, the Spirit leads us to hunger and thirst for that blessed sacrament. Because it binds us to Christ in a way like no other. He comes to us and makes Himself part of us. Just as He joins us together with the other members of His body, the Church. Because, as we also confess in that Explanation, the Spirit does all these wonderful things for EVERY Christian. The saving faith He has planted within you, He has also planted in them. He has made you one with Christ, just as He has done for them — and so we are one with each other too. All Christians, of all times, and all places. United, despite all the fractures and divisions Satan would try to cause within us. That, too, is a miracle of the Spirit. (pause)

So, you see, we Lutherans DO talk about the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit talks about — and gives — Christ Jesus. And He gives us the Father and His love. And so it is that we pray of the Holy Spirit:

*Teach us to know the Father, Son*

*And You from both as Three in One*

*That we Your name may ever bless*

*And in our lives the Truth confess. Amen.*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Offertory/Offering

FE — Offertory/Prayers