

Rev. Danny Mackey
The Day of Pentecost
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John 14:23-31
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

He is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] Alleluia!

“Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

When out in the wilderness and it's pitch black, you need some kind of a light. So one of the essential pieces of equipment that you need to bring along on any camping trip is a flashlight. We take electric lights for granted until we go out into the wilderness and realize that we're absolutely dependent on something as simple as a flashlight if we're to accomplish any number of tasks after the sun goes down. What does this have to do with Pentecost? Well, a flashlight's value is in how the flashlight works, right? So also with the Holy Spirit, who was given at Pentecost.

A flashlight isn't very helpful if you hold it before your face and simply stare into the beam of light. In fact, using a flashlight like that won't help you see at all; instead, it blinds you. A flashlight functions not by drawing us to gaze at the light bulb, but by throwing light on the object that we need to see. Ultimately, seeing that object is the whole point. After all, a camper doesn't look into the light in order to see how to pitch a tent after dark. Instead he shines the light on the tent. So it is with the Holy Spirit. We don't gaze directly on the Holy Spirit but instead the Spirit causes His light to shine through His Word so that we see its object—Jesus Christ.

That's why one theologian has called the Holy Spirit “the shy member of the Holy Trinity.” Just as we don't focus our eyes on the flashlight but on the object that the flashlight sheds light on, so we don't focus on the Holy Spirit alone but on the Savior to whom the Spirit testifies. We know the Father through the Son, and we know the Son, because of the Spirit's “shy” work in pointing us to Him.

Although it's not nearly as popular now as it was a last century (thanks be to God!), entire churchly bodies made the point of saying that the Holy Spirit had been neglected. They sought to place emphasis on the person of the Holy Spirit. As a result, many new denominations formed, further fracturing the unity of the Body of Christ. But that's the exact opposite of what the Holy Spirit wants to happen. You see, the Holy Spirit doesn't call attention to Himself but rather focuses us on the Son who was sent from the Father into our

flesh to suffer, die, and rise again as our Savior.

The Spirit's focus is Christ. So too should our focus be Christ! While others may celebrate the flashlight (and in so doing they blind themselves to Christ); we celebrate Christ, which makes the Spirit quite happy, even if He goes seemingly unnoticed in the process. He's quite content to illuminate the eternal Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, to illumine He who is the Light of the World.

Have you ever noticed that many of our Pentecost hymns make reference to the Holy Spirit using the imagery of light? For example, "Lord, by the brightness of Your light, In holy faith Your Church unite"; and again, "Come holy Light, guide divine, Now cause the Word of life to shine, Teach us to know our God aright And call Him Father with delight" (*LSB* 497).

The Holy Spirit's work is to shed light on Jesus Christ so that we know Him alone as "the Way and the Truth and the Life," the only way to the Father. And this work the Holy Spirit accomplishes through His Word, for His Word is a "lamp unto our feet and a light to our path," to paraphrase Psalm 119. Through God's Word, the Spirit sheds light on Christ that we may see Him and none other.

God's Word and His Spirit come together. You can't have one without the other. That's why our Lutheran Confessions make the point that "In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before.... Accordingly, we should and must maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacraments. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacraments is of the devil" (*SA III:VIII, 3, 9*).

And so in today's Holy Gospel when Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit, "the Helper" whom the Father will send in His name, He also speaks of how those who love Him will keep His Word. To keep Jesus' Word means to hang on to what Jesus says. That, in fact, is how the Holy Spirit teaches us. He doesn't bubble up inside of us as a warm emotion. He doesn't give us some special, secret insight into the plans and purposes of God. No, the Spirit works by bringing "to your remembrance all that I have said to you." This He does in and through the Word.

To love Jesus is to keep His Word. And to keep Jesus' Word is something different than obeying the rules and regulations which God's set in place. When people understand the

Christian life primarily in terms of “playing by the rules” or obeying the Ten Commandments, they often end up accusing God when life doesn’t turn out the way they’d anticipated. Such a person, in the face of some disappointment or tragedy, says, “Why is this happening to me? I went to church and gave my offerings. I said my prayers and acted decently toward my neighbors. I did what God told me to do.”

But the minute we utter such words, the very law of God that we thought we were obeying slaps us across the lips with the harsh verdict: “You didn’t do enough.” We never, ever measure up to God’s law. His law always finds our works incomplete. There is no comfort or consolation in the law. We’ll find no shelter in our own obedience to God. When it comes to the law, we always come up short. And the more we try to argue the case, the more the law condemns.

No, keeping Jesus’ Word isn’t about our obedience to the law. To keep Jesus’ Word is to hold on to the forgiveness of sins that He bestows on us in the Gospel. It is to rely exclusively on the fact that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners through the shedding of His blood. To keep Jesus’ Word is to let nothing in life or death, no affliction or suffering, no joy or even pleasure, tear from your heart the promise that the crucified and risen Son of God is for you. That is the faith the Spirit implants, the Spirit cultivates, the Spirit deepens and the Spirit strengthens as you hear Jesus’ Word.

It really is just as we confess in the words of the Small Catechism: “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.” The Holy Spirit most certainly did call you by the Gospel even from the moment He brought you to this place. The Holy Spirit at the font has enlightened you and sanctified you, and through His most Holy Meal the Holy Spirit nourishes you and keeps you in the true faith.

This is what the Spirit does. He has brought you to Christ. He has given you rebirth in Christ. And, from this point on, He will continue to feed you with Christ’s Word, sanctifying and keeping you and the whole Church on earth in the one true faith. That’s the purpose of the Divine Service after all. The same Holy Spirit who breathed the gift of new birth into each of you through the waters of Holy Baptism, comes to you, even here, even now. He comes to you in the preaching of Jesus’ Word. Where these words are received in faith, we

have what they declare unto us. This is the Spirit's work!

Listen again to what Jesus says: "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." How deeply God makes His home with us we know from the Sacrament of the Altar. For here He gives us His own body and blood to eat and to drink. The flesh born of Mary and nailed to the cross as the atonement for the world's sins is given us to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of them. The blood that poured from the Savior's veins to blot out our sins is given us to drink in the cup of the New Testament.

And so the Spirit isn't given once but over and over again wherever the Lord's Word is going on. The gift of the Spirit is the gift of Jesus Himself, His peace. The Spirit does bestow in great measure once and awhile as at the first Pentecost, but He is not here today and gone tomorrow. He does not swoop down on us to give us a spiritual high, which soon fades away leaving us empty. No, He comes constantly and surely in Jesus' Word spoken to us in Absolution and sermon, in Baptism and with the Body and Blood. These are His gifts and with these gifts we have peace. Not as the world gives, but the peace bought with the blood of Christ. Peace that the world cannot take away, peace that the Holy Spirit will never stop testifying to.

So "let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

In Jesus' name.

He is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] Alleluia!