

Pentecost B 19 May 2024
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. Let's pray: ...

Once upon a time there was a natural spring of cool, clear and refreshing water found on an open hillside. People would come from miles around to drink from the water and they would go away satisfied. The water was so good that they would tell their friends and neighbours to come and drink. More and more people came and soon there was always a crowd around the fountain. Gradually, people began to complain about the weather while they were waiting. So, a canopy was erected over the fountain. Then some people grizzled about having to bend down to drink the water so the spring was encased in stone and drinking taps installed. The number of visitors out-grew the capacity of the canopy so a permanent building was erected with enough room for any number of visitors. Some people hung pictures on the walls. Others spent large sums of money adorning the building and drinking fountain with gold and jewels. Those who'd given much started to demand special rights and privileges to the water and decided to charge others to drink from the fountain. Special guardians and keepers of the fountain with special garments and insignia were employed to keep the people orderly and obedient, and the focus shifted from the water to the gathering place. Many lost sight of the fact that there was a fountain at all in the hustle and bustle of the assembly. Then the fountain dried up.

Is this a parable about the Christian Church? We gather because we've been offered "living water." Yet, in our church life, the weight of concern falls on building and budget maintenance, inward focus rather than outward mission to the unsaved, tribalism and factionalism rather than unity in truth and love.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, when we remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. Jesus says, 'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning' (John 15:26-27). The Spirit of God bears witness to Jesus. The Spirit is sent so that we may remember Jesus, see and know Jesus, and be empowered to witness to Jesus. Our Lord is the living spring of water around which the Church is built. We come together to meet Jesus and receive Jesus. Jesus is the one and only reason we gather. So, it's on Jesus and his desire for us to testify to him, that we must expend all our efforts.

I'm convinced that if we focus on our spiritual health and concentrate our faith and efforts on reaching out to the world with grace and love and selflessness and joy, then the finances and peripherals will take care of themselves. When we drift away from the most important things to the peripheral; to social issues, political agendas, and self-interest, then the Church declines. You don't need me to read you the newspaper and provide commentary on current events. You certainly don't need the Church to organise fun activities to fill your day. The theologian Carl Braaten remarks, "Without the primitive Spirit of Pentecost we are way down in the valley of dry bones and the breath we use to chant the liturgy or preach the sermon will not have the power to make those dry bones live again." Life, a willing spirit, and the joy of salvation in Christ are the fruits born of the Spirit's presence. Burnt-out, hollow, dry and lifeless fellowship, is born of the Spirit's absence.

Without the living Spirit, we cling to external authorities. We may try to hide behind the Bible, convincing ourselves that we're Bible-believers and make strong statements about biblical authority. In the Lutheran Church, we state that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and affirm with the confessors that everything we need to know for our salvation is contained in the Bible. But what if you don't read the Bible very much? God's Word is a means of grace. The Spirit works through the ancient words to make them living within us today. The Holy Spirit brings the words printed on the pages alive to us in our own situations and we reap the benefits of the hallowed treasures within.

Decades-long conflict and stiffness in our beloved Lutheran Church over personal theological convictions and an associated rise in Pharisaic attitudes, continues to see the Church in decline. Sure, order is important, but should we over-emphasise our heritage and traditions to the detriment of our God-given, Jesus-commanded, gospel mandate? For too long, many of our people have been more concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than adopting a posture of openness to what could be. This doesn't mean following the latest trends or fads; rather, being clear about what we are called to be as Christians - witnesses to Christ.

I grant that we live in an anti-authoritarian, anti-religious, and belligerent time, which makes it difficult to confess our faith in Christ as the Son of God and Saviour. I know it's a difficult time for bishops and church officials, pastors and lay leaders in a culture rapidly desacralising and dechurching. It's much easier to focus on building homes for the poor, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, supporting social causes and so on. But I never hear Jesus being mentioned in all the jibber jabber. These may be very good and important things and perhaps the Church could be more vocal on social and political issues. But they're also easier than being witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ, in whom lays the only thing that ultimately matters; salvation.

How do we know whether we're alive in God's Spirit? How do we know we've found the water of life? First, we acknowledge that God has found us in Jesus Christ. We don't need to seek what is freely given. God has come to us with forgiveness of sins and life everlasting because of Jesus' death on a cross and his resurrection. Christ comes to us through means, not our own thoughts or understanding, not through will-power or obedience to structures, but through the words of the Gospel. God speaks directly to us through his Word, proclaimed, studied, read, and heard. God comes to us through holy baptism, often before we even develop consciousness of God. God chose us and made us his children. It was God's grace that came to us in baptism. God's grace comes to us in the Lord's Supper, received by believing the words "for you." God comes in bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ, for you. The Spirit is given to us through these means of grace.

As to the question of whether or not we're living out our lives in the Holy Spirit; Jesus says, the Spirit will witness to him and the Spirit will empower us to witness to him. The Spirit doesn't call us out of our communities but more deeply into the Church to witness to others, support and challenge others to work. There's an old German story about a young preacher who bragged that he never prepared his sermons. Instead, he trusted the Holy Spirit to put the right words into his mouth. An older, veteran preacher, volunteered that the Holy Spirit had only spoken to him once in the pulpit. Once, in the midst of delivering a bad sermon, he heard these words: "Heinrich you are lazy!"

The Spirit doesn't make us lazy or complacent, but gives us power and energy to do God's work. Jesus said to his followers, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Being a follower of Christ, being alive in the Holy Spirit, is a joy, not a burden. Look to Jesus, the centre of our faith. Jesus is the fountain of living water offered to all through faith. Jesus is the answer to our boredom and malaise, to our lagging in zeal and reluctance to witness. Come Holy Spirit. Come Lord Jesus. Be blessed as you go out into the world, Saints, in the name of our Dear Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.