

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Day of Pentecost (Series A)

June 8, 2014

Text: Acts 2:1–21

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today and next Sunday are transitional Sundays, of sorts, transitioning from Lent and Easter into the Pentecost season. It's sometimes called the time of the Church. Throughout the months of Summer and early Fall we knuckle down and learn from Holy Scripture what it means to be Church, the redeemed body of Christ living by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit under God's grace. Before we begin that enriching journey, we need to be reminded about 2 things: 1) the person and work of the Holy Spirit – that's today's service and 2) our Trinitarian faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – that's next week's service.

Pentecost Sunday is always 50 days after Easter. For it was 50 days after the Lord's resurrection that the Holy Spirit came upon the 120 disciples of our Lord. Just before His ascension to the Father's right hand, Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for power from heaven, power promised by God the Father Himself (Lk 24:49). They waited for 10 days in prayer, like a holy remnant of old. The world was passing them by with all its usual activities. But these disciples waited in hopeful expectation for something transcendent.

Acts 2 picks up with the disciples waiting, "When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place" (vs. 1). There's something amazing about this! They were a praying congregation gathered around God's promise before the coming of the Holy Spirit and they remained a gathered congregation focused on God's Word and prayer after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Such is God's pattern for His Spirit-filled Church from the beginning: believers gathered around God's Word and Sacraments taught and distributed in all their truth and purity while praying, praising, and giving thanks to God the Father through His Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This praying, Pentecost congregation of 120 disciples received God's promised gift after 10 days of waiting. A rushing mighty wind filled the room, divided tongues that looked like fire rested upon each congregant, and they all spoke in human languages they had never learned before (vs. 2–4). Each of these signs pointed to the mighty

presence of the Holy Spirit. These signs weren't the Holy Spirit but signs indicating that God the Father had made good on His promise to send them power from heaven.

And what a gift the Holy Spirit is. He is no mere force or influence or nebulous whatever. He is a person, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, in the Blessed Holy Trinity. He is one with the Father and the Son, of the same substance with them, but a person distinct from them. God the Trinity wasn't content simply to give us some ill-defined presence, some "luminous other" as you occasionally hear theologians speak about from time to time, but they chose to give to us themselves!!

The Bible describes angels as ministering spirits sent by God to serve those receiving eternal life. That's marvelous in itself. But the Bible never describes holy angels living in the hearts and minds of God's people. Only God is said to dwell within us. And God the Trinity Himself dwells within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are made God's holy temple through the on-going work of the Holy Spirit! That's the significance of Pentecost Sunday.

And this Gift, the person of the Holy Spirit and all that He gives and promises, comes to God's gathered, praying, anticipating, and worshipping congregation. To be sure, the Holy Spirit fills each individual believer but this in-dwelling is always described in the Bible as happening in the context of the gathered congregation. The individual is brought into the unity of the Church. In turn, the Church's unity is enriched by the gifts and talents of the individual. The Church is a miracle of grace created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Jesus.

There's a reason why I keep stressing the corporate nature of the Christian faith. Individualism runs deep in our way of thinking about the world. We are Americans, after all, the place where individuals can make something of themselves. We aren't bound by a cast system like Hinduism. We don't have a ruling nobility class or wealthy gentry like Europe knew for so many centuries. We cherish various kinds of communities in our country but not at the expense of the individual. That's part of what the Bill of Rights was all about, protecting the rights and freedoms of the individual from the potential tyranny of a group, like the government or even the collective majority.

That kind of individualism works beautifully in capitalistic democracies but not in Christ's Church. The Bible consistently describes God's people as a congregation, a gathered group of believers committed to a common confession and hope, as a body

made up of individual members connected intimately and mysterious to Christ and each other, as a Temple made up of individual living stones, as a called out, sanctified nation ruled under the headship of the Lord Jesus. In Christ's Church, the individual believer is always brought into the living fellowship of Christ's Church. And the Church is enriched by the individuality of her members.

American individualism has a detrimental effect upon God's design and purpose for His Church. A number of the problems we face as a congregation, as a denomination, and even as a religious group in the world grows out of this kind of radical individualism. Private religious experience is most often viewed as being more authoritative and authentic than corporate events even if such experiences are contrary to the teachings of Scripture and the Church. This is exemplified in the many individual testimonies about their personal experience of heaven and occasionally hell and the willingness of people to put more trust in such testimonies rather than the Church's teaching on these topics from Scripture.

Have you ever heard people say, "Who does the Church think it is to say that my religious ideas about Jesus are wrong?" even if those ideas are contrary to the Church's long-held teachings? This can be exemplified by the various struggles churches are facing over human sexuality issues, gay marriage, women's ordination, and the rejection of Christianity's claim to being the exclusive source of truth about God and salvation. I've read of people saying, "I've prayed about this (...) and I'm at peace with it. It doesn't matter what the Bible and the Church say about it. Jesus loves me and He's ok with it too."

Most of the objections to our practice of closed communion flow out of an individualistic understanding of Christianity. Many Christians think that they alone should decide whether or not they should receive the Lord's Supper. For them and this way of thinking, the congregation has nothing to say about who should and should not participate in communion. "That's between me and Jesus!"

In all these brief examples, the individual reigns supreme. And it's taken for granted that the congregation, church, or denomination will comply with the wishes of the individual even if those wishes conflict with that church's public teaching and confession.

And yet, on the Day of Pentecost, we see the exact opposite. The Holy Spirit brings 120 disciples together for a common experience that each individual shared together

with the others. They all heard the wind, saw the flames of fire, and spoke in unknown tongues. Each was filled with the Holy Spirit; each was brought into the unity of the Holy Christian Church through the gracious working of the Holy Spirit. In John 17, the Lord Jesus prayed to the Father and asked that His people be made one. That prayer was answered on Pentecost. And the Holy Spirit continues to bring people into the unity of the one, holy Christian and apostolic Church through the saving gospel of the Lord Jesus. Later in Acts 2, 3,000 people received the same Christian baptism and confessed the same saving faith in the Lord Jesus. And, according to Acts 2:42, those early Christians committed themselves to the apostles' teaching and preaching, the breaking of bread (Holy Communion), fellowship (support of the church with their time, money, and talents), and the congregational prayers.

One of the most beautiful and powerful description of the Church's unity is found in Ephesians 4:3–7. As I read these Biblical words, listen to how the Bible holds the balance between the collective unity of the Church on the one hand and the blessings of individuals within the Church on the other, "...maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Each of us individually has received grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. That gracious gift brings us into the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The Holy Spirit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity, creates and sustains that unity among us by bringing us to Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, we are remade in the image of God Himself and given a holy hope that overcomes all evil. In each of your hearts and minds, the Holy Spirit has prepared a holy habitation for God the Father and God the Son. You are true, living temples of God made one in Christ.

May the Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit, strengthen our unity in the bond of peace so that the gospel may continue to expand among us and into the hearts and lives of others in our community.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.