

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/27/2007, Pentecost Sunday
The Confirmation of Alexandra Lincoln Robertson
Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17, 25-27

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus said] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, ¹⁷even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells *with you*, and will be *in you*.

This sweet promise of the Spirit is meant for our Confirmand, Exie, and for each of us today as we recommit ourselves to Christian faith and seek to draw nearer to Jesus. The promise of the Spirit is the promise that you need not read the story of Jesus and remain unmoved thereby, though years upon years might have passed since the talk of Jesus lifted you heavenward. You may contemplate Jesus, and in the contemplating, be improved, beginning even today – indeed become more Christ-like, starting today. You are not condemned to your present reality, nor to your present ways, but are free to move on to a new life and to a new spirit.

Over the past two years, I enjoyed many delightful conversations with Exie as we studied the Bible and Luther’s *Small Catechism*. One of those conversations especially tickled me. It concerned archeology. Exie said, “Wouldn’t it be great if archeologists found the bones of Jesus!” And I understand that. Just two weeks ago, Carol and I entered deep excavations beneath Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and we stood in that one spot where we could see the bones that modern archeologists believe might indeed be the bones of St. Peter. And it was a very moving thing to be so close to that dear old fisherman.

But to the possibility that archeologists would find the bones of Jesus, I simply blurted

out, “They can’t!” And Exie’s eyes opened wide and she asked, “Why not?” To which I answered, “Because Jesus is risen and he needs his bones.”

Then Exie gave that beautiful smile that many of you have seen before, for I believe that she had come to a new appreciation for the doctrine of the resurrection of the *body*.

The festival of Easter celebrates the bodily aspect of the resurrection of Jesus. The angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone from the door to the tomb, and sat upon that stone. And when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, the angel told her that the tomb was empty:

²And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. ³His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: ⁴And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. ⁵And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. ⁶He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. (Matt 28:2-6)

And then, when Jesus meets Doubting Thomas, again the bodily resurrection of Jesus is stressed:

²⁷Then saith he to Thomas , Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.(John 20:27)

So, Jesus needs his bones.

But likewise, if Jesus lives, then he has his spirit about him. This is what Pentecost celebrates. The Holy Spirit of Jesus and his heavenly Father is alive and roams the earth, to the strong blessing of anyone who seeks that Spirit.

Last Sunday I began First Communion instruction with young Bobby Franzese. His little brother Kenny was there too, and though the instruction was meant for Bobby, I could tell that Kenny was interested too.

I started the conversation in the way I often do, with a simple two-part observation that “Jesus is the best person on the face of the earth.” Oh, yes, “on the face of the earth,” because he is risen and alive and is glad to dwell with his people on this earth.

But what about the other part of this claim: that Jesus is the best person? Now, Bobby and Kenny know other good people, including their parents Vicky and Dan. And as they grow older, they will learn of other people whose lives have been a blessing to this earth. Think of Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther himself, St. Francis, and other saints and martyrs.

Also think of people we have personally known. For example, when I think of good people, I think of Fr. Raymond Shaheen, my dear old pastor. Why, when he walked into the room, things just seemed to get better!

Well, that is how Jesus is. He has a sweet spirit. When he is around, things become better, more pure, more noble, more hopeful. If ever a person can lift your spirits, Jesus is the one.

Now, the sad thing about most of the people we admire is that their spirit is theirs! Not ours. We can read about Abraham Lincoln, for example, but we have no promise that we can ever gain the spirit of Abraham Lincoln. It would be really great if we could, but we have no promise that we can.

But the glory of Pentecost Sunday is the promise that we can grow in the spirit of Jesus. It is not a hopeless task. We are not condemned to being the same fair-to-middlin’, moody, unreliable people we have so far been. Rather, the Holy Spirit is available to every Christian — every one of them. If we will, we can become Christ-like.

Notice about all those other people with good spirits: they all changed the world and made it better, from Mother Theresa to St. Francis. They might not have been rich or powerful, but they were stirred by the Spirit of Jesus, and in being so stirred, they were people who improved this world.

So it is with us. As we take on the spirit of Jesus we become a blessing to this world, and to our families, and to ourselves.

The promise of Pentecost is not simply a good promise for you, but also for the whole Church and for each congregation of the Church. For the gift of the Spirit means also for the community that it need not hear the story of Jesus and remain unmoved thereby, but that in meditating on Christ, the spirit of this congregation and of every congregation can become better – indeed can become more holy. And so it will be the case that as our congregation opens itself to the Holy Spirit, visitors to our congregation will pause and wonder to themselves, “What is this place? In entering this place, I feel that I have crossed

the threshold of heaven. I feel as if I have stumbled upon a holy community!”

Soon we turn to Exie’s Holy Confirmation. I believe what any of you would believe if you had had the joy of teaching the Catechism to Exie: She has already made a good beginning in her spiritual life. And so when we pray that the Holy Spirit of God will increase in this young person, then watch out! I believe that the Church and our world are in for some good times through Miss Exie Robertson.

There is a two-fold movement in this liturgy – one by Exie and one by God. Exie, for her part, will publically and solemnly take on the life in Christ her parents pledged for her when she was baptized as an infant. And so, we will be seeing Exie joining Ann Siemer and so many of you saints of the church in your grown-up lives. We will be glad when we see this, and Christ’s Church will be strengthened.

And then there is the part played by God. It is the part of power and strength and goodness. It is the divine promise made to Exie that as she tries to walk with Christ, the Triune God will be with her and she can indeed begin to show the world something of

what it is like to have a follower of Christ in our midst!

Each morning, when Exie awakens, her job is to manifest Christ in this world. Her divine mission is to let others know something of Jesus by knowing her. Her life’s task is to let the spirit of Jesus shine through the lovely spirit she already has.

And Jesus, each morning when he awakes, will be interested in how Exie is doing. “Let’s see what Exie is up to. I have high hopes for that one! Her hands, her mind, her grace, her courtesy... whether she lives a quiet life of love known only to a few, or a big, public life of service known to many... she can walk in my spirit. She can bless a world very much in need of some blessing.”

This is our destiny, each one who is baptized. This is the end of our lives, that we should become like Christ. And this spiritual life is possible because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, first poured out on ordinary folks on that first Pentecost Sunday. No wonder Pentecost is a major church festival. It salutes the possibility that we are free to change in a holy direction, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.