

Pastor Gregory Paul Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/12/2011, Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday
John 20:19-23

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

Bishop Rimbo, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord here at Immanuel, and our dear Confirmands and their families: Our subject this morning is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is alive on earth and is ready to make us better people, a holy people, if we will. The Spirit wants to fill our minds, our imaginations, and our heart with the story and the ways of Jesus, so that we will step out of the ordinary way of life into an extraordinary way of life.

For an opening text, let's take this one, from this morning's Gospel Lesson, John 20. It is about Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples.

²²And when [Jesus] had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22, RSV)

Then, watch out! These lowly fishermen from the swamps and coast lines of the Galilean Sea are set to conquer the world and to win many a heart to Christ.

Once upon a time, quite a while ago now, I brought the Holy Communion to one of our homebound members named Theresa Derby, now of blessed memory. The reason this particular visit stays in my mind is because Mrs. Derby had invited one of her neighbors in the building to join us for the sacrament, and this dear woman very much uplifted me. She was not Lutheran, but rather a Baptist, I believe. She was an elderly Black Baptist sister in the Lord.¹

This woman's spiritual power was gentle, but real. Never has preaching been so easy for me as in the presence of that dear woman, who prayed and preached along with me. When she said, "Hear him, Lord, strengthen him, Lord," I felt strengthened. When she would suggest some theme, "Oh, preacher, tell us about the look of joy on Mary Magdalene's face," then I would dive into the subject without fear, without hesitation. I believe that she was a woman filled with the Holy Spirit. She had so opened her heart to Jesus and to his ways that she was strong and confident before the world, and she made others stronger too. She made me stronger.

¹ If you have not attended a Black Baptist church yet, I encourage you to do so. I really do think we can get some idea of the power of Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit by visiting such a church. And if you do that, you will be following the example of the great Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Back in 1930, when Bonhoeffer studied at Union Seminary here in town, he loved to worship at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and to hear the powerful preaching of Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. See Eric Mataxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2010), pages 106-109.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to give us *life*. I know that is an odd thing to say, because it *feels* as if we are alive even apart from the Spirit. Yet there is evidence in the Bible that we are never so fully alive as when the Holy Spirit is moving us along.

We can hear the echoes of creation in this morning's Bible story from John 20. It has to do with breath:

²²And when [Jesus] had said this, he *breathed* on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22, RSV)

This is the same divine breath by which, in the beginning, we became living souls:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7, KJV)

Apart from this divine breath, we are not much -- nothing special, just some dust of the earth.

This is the same Spirit that came upon King David and made him dance:

¹⁴And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the horn. ¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart. (2 Samuel 6:14-16, RSV)

Well, David's wife might have despised him for all his joy and leaping before the Lord, but David did not care. He meant to make himself even more contemptible in her eyes if only he could continue to rejoice in the Lord.

This is the Spirit that came upon Ezekiel's valley of dry bones and caused those bones to come to life:

⁹Then [the LORD] said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."
¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host. (Ezekiel 37:9-10, RSV)

This is the Spirit that inspired the old hymn writer John Newton and made him speak of a great enlivening in his life:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Using the terminology of Martin Luther, the Holy Spirit is what turns “historical faith” into “saving faith.” Luther said that we need something more than intellectual belief in the history of events of our salvation. Luther said, why, even the devils believe that Christ was crucified and risen. And they tremble.² But we need more than such intellectual belief. We need something higher and better: We need conversion. We need sanctification.

It is good to receive the Holy Spirit, for that good Spirit makes us livelier and more holy. The Holy Spirit comes along and says, “Brothers and sisters, it is time to live! It is time to shake off all dull sloth and all sin that weighs us down so heavily, and time to become more alive!” Maybe we could put things this way, “If you think you have been alive so far, you haven’t seen anything yet! The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, yearns to make us really lively.”

We have some experience of that even in daily life. For example, I bet there has been a lazy fellow or two in this world who has repented of his lethargy and could give his testimony, saying: “I didn’t really begin to live until I developed some discipline and started to get up and do the things that needed to be done.” And there has been an alcoholic or two who could say, “I didn’t really begin to live until I put down the bottle for good.” And I bet there has been some careless person, some flirt, who could say, “You know, I didn’t really begin to live until I gave my heart entirely to my beloved, and we married and settled down. Then life got better.”

Likewise with the Christian who yields to the Holy Spirit. That one can say, “Life is sweeter now than it was before. My heart is not so heavy now with guilt. I am no longer trudging along as in quicksand, continually on the look out for some good state of *myself*, as if that is all that matters to me. Now I have higher aims. Now I have holier ambitions. Life is more of an adventure now because I have thrown my lot in with Jesus and with his ways, and I am trying to lend my hand to making a new and better world, a new and better way of treating people.”

On the high festival of Pentecost, we salute the Third Person of the Holy Trinity: the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to make us a holy people on earth. The Holy Spirit moves the story of Jesus from our heads to our

² “...only a historical faith about Christ, something that even the devil and all the wicked have (James 2:19). But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: ‘I am as Christ.’ And Christ, in turn, says: ‘I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone.’” (Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.); Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.); Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 26 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*. Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1963 (Luther's Works 26), S. 26:168)

hearts. The Holy Spirit is what keeps us from hearing the old, old story of Jesus and of his love and being unmoved thereby, dead as a doornail before that story. Creation is done, salvation is accomplished, but our sanctification has just begun. It is the exciting part of the work of the Triune God. It is the part that concerns you and me, here in now, wherever we are in our threescore and ten years, or even our hundred-and-ten years.

How in good practical fashion does the Holy Spirit do these things? How does the Holy Spirit make us holy? Luther's charming image is of a mother and her lap: Luther says that the Holy Spirit makes us holy by placing us in the lap of the Church:

How does such sanctifying take place? Answer: Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us *in the church's lap*, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ. (Luther, *The Large Catechism*, The Creed)

For this part of my sermon, I turn to the help of our Confirmands, Robert, Annie, and Bobby. They have been a great Catechism class! We have spent two years studying Luther's *Small Catechism*, many stories of the Bible, some of the great liturgies of the Church, like Private Confession and Absolution and the Marriage Rite, some church history and ecumenical and interfaith relations. This means that our Confirmands have been studying some of the tools the Holy Spirit uses to teach us how to live a good and holy life. This morning, we are going to talk about three of the means of holiness: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. When the Holy Spirit places us "in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ," these are some of the great tools we find there, in the heart of the Church.

First, let us speak of the Ten Commandments. I have taken from Martin Luther what has always seemed to me to be a sensible description of the Commandments: they are the path in which should walk that we might be living a life pleasing to God and fulfilling of our humanity.³ The first of those commandments is that we should love and trust the Lord, which is something Robert Berk is going to lift up for us. As he comes forward to the lectern for his little sermon, let me set the stage a bit by referring to a bracing line from Ecclesiastes. It goes like this:

³ "Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. They are the true fountain from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow. Apart from these Ten Commandments no deed, no conduct can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world." (Luther, *Large Catechism*, *Conclusion of the Ten Commandments*)

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might... (Ecclesiastes 9:10, KJV)

Sometimes life works out in such a way that when we do what lies at hand, we suffer a setback. But Robert will remind us that even that is within the providence of God, and therefore we should pick ourselves up again and return to the good and holy ways of the Commandments.

[Robert Berk preaches:]

The Ten Commandments have been used to shape cultures and laws. I think that it is more important to live personally by them, not just as social rules. The first commandment is “You shall have no other gods.” I think that many people may believe it while they are reading it and understand the fundamental idea, however they don’t live it.

Martin Luther says that the first commandment means “We are to fear, love, and *trust* God above everything else.” If you follow this then you will be able to follow the other nine commandments. To me the most important word or concept he underscores is *trust*. God knows what He wants us to be and what we can be. Have you ever heard somebody say: why did this happen to me? You might not know why, but God does. As long as you stay faithful then everything will be all right in the long run.

As some of you may have known or noticed, I was on crutches for six weeks. Those were the longest six weeks of my life. It took awhile for me to accept the fact that I was out of my favorite sport, which is baseball. I play for my school, Hunter as well as for my Travel team. I did wonder why it happened *to me*. I didn’t know why, I’m not sure I do now, but I have started to figure it out. Over the last three months I have faced a lot of adversity and it feels like it won’t stop. I once heard: the measure of man is not whether he falls, but whether he gets back up. I had not thought deeply about that until I was in crutches. God wanted me to realize that life has its low points and in order to succeed at anything you must be able to get knocked down and get right back up and I am trusting God both to catch me when I am knocked down and to help me get back up.

Thank you, Robert. I am grateful that you focused on the idea of *trusting* the Lord. I think that your point is a good one: if we trust the Lord, then we have good reason to obey the other nine Commandments.

Annie Scherba is going to make a similar point in her sermon. She is going to talk about the Creed. The idea that she is going to preach is the great idea that there is a connection between the Creed and the Ten Commandments: the Creed teaches us that our Commander, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, loves us and

therefore it is rational for us to obey his Commandments, even if we are weary or tempted. Annie, I'm weary! Could you take over the preaching for a while?

[Annie Scherba preaches:]

When first looking at the Apostles' Creed, I, as well as my parents, thought it was written by the Apostles for the Apostles. But after learning more about it, I realized it was written by the Apostles to represent the Christian Church as a whole and its beliefs. The Apostles are twelve followers of Jesus that spread his word. As Martin Luther states in the *Large Catechism* "it is all that we must expect and receive from God and teaches us how to know him perfectly." He also writes "it is given in order *to help us do* what the Ten Commandments require of us." The Creed is a response and confession of Christians based on the First Commandment.

The first article of the Creed says "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Here we are told who God is, and what he has done and what he has done is great! He has created us, saved us through Jesus, and makes us holy.

But we then think about God and who this great figure is and how we can become one with him. The Apostles' Creed helps us think about our sins and the forgiveness of them and the story of God. The Creed, gives us reasons for thanking God for everything he has given us, just like Martin Luther says in the *Small Catechism*: "he provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil."

Since we know who this great being is, God, and how good he is, it makes us sense that we should trust him and *go ahead and obey his commandments*. By following the Creed and the Ten Commandments we can understand what God wants from us on a day to day basis. Thanks to God, we are all here on this planet and here right now, living life the way God would like us to just like the Apostles' Creed says.

Thank you, Annie.

Next we come to the Prayer -- a great tool of the Holy Spirit for helping to make us holy. Luther's idea about Prayer is that we live in a world that tempts us, vexes us, harasses us and distracts us away from faith. And when we forget our faith in the God who loves us, then it becomes hard for us to obey the Commandments and to live holy lives. So, the Spirit puts us in the lap of the Church and teaches us how to pray. Especially the Spirit teaches us the Lord's Prayer that we might use it to help bring us back to faith. Bobby, I'd be grateful if you would do the preaching for a while:

[Bobby Franzese preaches:]

It [the Lord's Prayer] is something said every week by us here, in church. Yet have you ever stepped back to look at what you're actually saying? Martin Luther, in his explanation of the second commandment, states that we are to call on God in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. That is, in essence, what the Lord's Prayer is all about.

In this world that we live in, we are all tempted constantly to stray from God's word. There are many people and organizations preaching a very different idea of what is right, and many of these ideas are not how the Bible teaches us to live. When caught in the midst of this, it can be hard to remain true to the Word of the Lord. Prayer in general is our way of fighting our way back to God, as well as the way of life he wants for us. The Lord's Prayer is a way to begin that fight, and leads to your own prayer. This in itself helps you adhere to the 2nd commandment, and, since prayer puts you closer to God, it makes it easier to follow all of the commandments.

One part of the prayer, in particular, stands out to me. It's the fifth petition, where we ask of the Lord; "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." I love this part because it shows clearly that we both give and receive. God expects all people to adhere to His word, but he also protects all and forgives those who stray.

Thank you, Bobby.

These three young Pentecost preachers are now going to be Confirmed. They are good young people and they want to live good and holy lives going forward. For their encouragement in this, I want to tell them this: Whenever the Lord calls you to a great step in life, he promises to be with you in that great step. That is what we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit. The shepherd boy David, for example, fought with the mighty giant Goliath and defeated that man. But before David ever fought the giant, the Lord had already poured out his Spirit upon the lad. We read about that in First Samuel 16. And before Jeremiah ever preached his mighty sermons, the Lord promises to be with him. Jeremiah would face opposition, yet what is that, if the Lord is with you?

And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the LORD, to deliver thee. (Jeremiah 1:19, KJV)

And before our Lord Jesus went out into the wilderness to do battle with Satan and his temptations, he first received the Holy Spirit in his baptism, in the form of a dove alighting on him -- same as you received the Holy Spirit in your baptisms.

And now, as you affirm your baptisms and make solemn promises to follow Christ, the Bishop is going to lay his hands on you and pray for the stirring up of the Spirit in you. You are going to promise to live an extraordinary life of

goodness, but the Lord himself, the Maker of heaven and earth, is going to promise to be with you in that good life.

So, whatever good lies at hand, do it with all your might, and all your strength, in the name of your Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.