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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/24/2015, Pentecost Sunday/Confirmation Sunday
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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

Bishop Rimbo, brothers and sisters in Christ, and our dear Confirmands:
Greetings in the name of Jesus.

Today is Pentecost Sunday — the great festival of the Holy Spirit. But today is also Confirmation Sunday, and I have some things I want especially to say for our Confirmands. (Here they are, sitting right here before me in the first pew.)

Let me start with some opening thoughts about our Gospel Lesson, from John 16. Jesus is comforting his disciples. It is his Farewell Discourse with them. His betrayal and passion are soon upon him. Now, while he can, he tries to encourage and prepare his disciples to carry on once he has left them. Among many things Jesus says to his disciples, he includes this thought, so packed with promise:

...it is to your *advantage* that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I *will* send him to you. (John 16:7, RSV)

Ten days ago, in my sermon for Ascension Eve, I lifted up one good aspect of our Lord's Ascension: Jesus has ascended into heaven, but he has not ascended into heaven in order to be idle there. Rather, he has ascended into heaven so that he can intercede for us and for our poor earth. No winds push against him there, no clouds overshadow him, no fatigue weighs him down, no opponents cross him and kill him. He gets to labor on joyfully and without hindrance, with the goal that is dear to his heart: you and me and our world, that we might be saved.

So, then I was emphasizing our ascended Lord Jesus as the Church's Great Intercessor. Mother and father might pray for us, sister and brother and friend too might pray for us. But it is bracing to think that Jesus also prays for us. He never goes on sabbatical, nor on vacation, nor does his attention to us flag for even a moment. He knows us through and through and prays for us continually. That is one good thing about our Lord's Ascension.

Now, let's dwell on this second good thing: The Ascension of Jesus into heaven permits him to send us the Holy Spirit. The name for the Holy Spirit can be translated various ways: Jesus sends the "Comforter," the "Advocate," the "Counselor," the "Spirit of truth." One way or another, our resurrected Lord Jesus has bestowed a spiritual benefit on each of us, if we be baptized.

Having the Holy Spirit means that we have permission and freedom from God to aim for a very high life. I mean a Christ-like life. Pentecost means go for it! It is not futile for any of us. As you go forth from this church, go meaning to be like Jesus in the individual circumstances of your life. Let his image, his life, take

more and more form in you. Let the world see something of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ through you and your manner of life.

If you and I had been alive back in the days when Jesus walked the roads and entered the villages of Galilee, it would have been a great blessing for us to have met the Man. But if our luck had been bad, we might have missed him too. We might have been at the forge in our blacksmith shop when Jesus came into town, and Jesus might have come and gone without us knowing about it. Now, there is no need for us to miss him. The choice is ours. If we will, Jesus can be close to each of us in our earthly life in the form of the Holy Spirit.

HOLY CONFIRMATION

That is what we are going to pray for this morning when our young people are Confirmed. We are going to pray that Jesus will be powerful in these young folks — powerful, like the Spirit swooping down on Samson, bursting the ropes that held him as if they were flax that has caught fire (Judges 15)...powerful, like the word of the Lord swooping down on a herdsman named Amos and changing the man into a mighty prophet (Amos 7:14-15)...powerful, like ordinary fishermen from the marshes and coastlands of the sea, changing them into fishers of humanity and benefactors of the whole world. Oh! It is a mighty prayer we are going to pray later this morning. We are going to pray that the Holy Spirit will be so stirred up in our young people that they will be extraordinary people on this earth — strong blessings for our earth. And while we are at it, let us pray for ourselves too, that the Holy Spirit Jesus promised to send will rouse itself in us too, stir itself into action, and permit us to live some extraordinary lives along with our young ones.

LIKE JESUS

And when that happens, to our Confirmands and to ourselves, then this earth is going to be blessed with some folks who put them in mind of Jesus. For the Holy Spirit is not going to lead us away from Jesus, but conform us to him. When the Holy Spirit is stirring in a human life, then at last the earth has a chance to meet a Christ-like person.

What higher ambition could we have for our Confirmands or for ourselves? When we pray for the stirring up of the Holy Spirit, we are praying that one of our post-Communion prayers will become true in us — even in us!

Ⓐ Almighty God, you gave your Son both as a sacrifice for sin and a model of the godly life. Enable us to receive him always with thanksgiving, and to *conform our lives to his*; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ⓒ Amen

Now, let's try imagining what that would be like. Let me begin by speaking of Neil Young — yeah, the old rocker, the songwriter Neil Young. (You Confirmands are too young to recognize that name, I bet, but some of us older ones will.) There is an amusing passage in his recent autobiography in which he is talking about the song “A Horse With No Name.” That's *not* his song. It was a song by the group *America*. So, it's not his song, but it sure sounds a lot like him. Anyway, there's a little passage in Neil Young's autobiography in which Neil reports that even his own father thought he had written the song, “A Horse With No Name.” Then, in parentheses, Neil writes “Hey, wait a minute! Was that me? Okay. Fine. I am back now. That was close!”¹

I think that's pretty cool — that a song could be so similar to Neil Young that for an instant, even Neil Young could not remember whether he had written the song or not.

And when we look at this little story from the other direction, from the direction of the group *America*, we find that when that group was criticized for being “Neil Young wannabes,” they simply answer that they were “honored to be mentioned in the same breath with Neil Young.”

Now, that is the kind of humility that I am commending to our Confirmands and to ourselves. When we pray for the stirring up of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are praying that we will become a more Christ-like people. And if others should criticize us saying, “You are merely a Christ wannabe,” we will answer, “Amen! That's good enough for me. I *am trying* to be a Christ wannabe! And I think that the better I am at it, the better off the world will be for it.” I think that many of us could say, “I am proud to be mentioned in the same breath with Jesus Christ our Savior!”

SOMETIMES A HARD PATH

The problem is, the path might not always be easy. We have no guarantee that burning with the Holy Spirit will be profitable for us in this world. Let me give you an example. Sorry to say, it is a sad and painful story. But it is an important story for imagining what it is like to be stirred up by the Holy Spirit. This is from a sermon by Bishop William Lazareth, of blessed memory.

Bishop Lazareth told the story of a Lutheran pastor he met in Bavaria after the Second World War. That pastor told how his father, a pastor also, was serving near Dachau and began speaking out against what everyone knew was going on inside those razor wire fences. As that pastor's father ascended the pulpit to preach his Easter Sunday sermon the sound of clicking heels could be heard on the stone of the church aisle as the Gestapo and the SS entered the pulpit and arrested the

¹ Neil Young, *Waging Heavy Peace* (Blue Rider Press, New York, NY, 2012), page 124.

pastor's father. As they dragged him down the aisle the father passed his son sitting in the pew. He handed him the Gospel book and said: "I have finished, now you must begin." And as the Gestapo dragged the pastor away, never to be seen or heard from again, the boy stepped into the aisle and began to read the Easter Gospel.²

God willing, such suffering will not come your way, my dear Confirmands. I have prayed for you each one by name that you will have faithful, long, and happy lives. I do not want secret service police to drag you away never to be heard of again. Nonetheless, I think it is instructive to think about that pastor who was dragged away. I think it would be a fair thing to say about the man that the Holy Spirit was alive and stirring in him that day. It does not mean that the pastor had no say in the matter or that he had somehow become a machine. But it does mean that the pastor could throw himself into the arms of Christ as he spoke from the pulpit, as he was dragged away, and as he entrusted the Gospel book to his son. The stirring of the Holy Spirit in the pastor meant that he knew that there is more to this world than the Gestapo and the SS, as horrifying as those realities might be. The man was thinking of Jesus. Of course he was thinking of the men dragging him away and of his likely death. But also he was thinking of his Good Shepherd and his Savior – Someone better and stronger than any other force that threatened him.

This sense that we can do brave and good things *because Jesus lives* – this sense is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. And in this Confirmation liturgy on Pentecost Sunday, we mean to pray for you young ones that the Holy Spirit will be strong in your lives. We mean to pray it for ourselves too. Let the Holy Spirit move through us, like a hurricane, and lift us up to some noble deeds in the name of Jesus.

A GANG

In one of our last Catechism classes, we discussed the story of St. Paul on the road to Damascus – the way the one-time persecutor of the Church was thrown to the ground by a great light and heard the voice of Jesus asking him about his mission of persecution:

And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him,
Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*? (Acts 9:4, KJV)

I asked our students to notice that pronoun "me": ... why persecutest thou *me*?" I told them that this is how personally Jesus cherishes the life of each of us – that if someone hurts us, that one thereby hurts Jesus. And one of our Confirmands

² From the memorial service sermon for Bishop William Lazareth by The Rev. Rodney Eberhardt, April 26, 2008, at St. Matthew Lutheran Church, White Plains, New York.

(young John Wilson, as I recall it) exclaimed, “You mean that to be a Christian means that you join a gang, so that you can say, ‘Mess with me, you mess with Jesus!’” Yes! Yes! That’s what I mean. Mess with me, you mess with Jesus! The one who can say that, when push comes to shove, or even when the Gestapo are advancing toward the pulpit, is the one in whom the Holy Spirit is stirring. Let him stir in you, my students, our Confirmands. And let him stir also in us older ones, to the benefit of our world, and to the glory of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.