

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/15/2016, Pentecost Sunday
John 14:8-17, 25-27
The Whispering of the Holy Spirit

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

My Bible text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson, from John 14. Jesus is comforting his disciples. Before long, they will lose him to Calvary's cross. Listen again to what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit:

²⁵These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you.

²⁶But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and *bring to your remembrance* all that I have said to you. (John 14:25-26, RSV)

If the Spirit does this... if the Holy Spirit “brings to our remembrance” all that Jesus has taught, then there is within us a Voice reminding us of Jesus and urging us on toward a good and holy life. My sermon subject, then, is the whispering of the Holy Spirit within us.

The wonder of *Christmas* is that the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, became incarnate as a human being like you and me. He who lived from the most distant ages past, who lived before this old world even came into existence, did on that Christmas morning become an infant, evermore to dwell among us as a human being. We praise Jesus for that and adore him.

But *Pentecost Sunday* has its wonder of wonders too. On this festival, we try to reckon with the idea that the Third Person of the Holy Trinity – the Holy Spirit – has chosen to dwell on earth too. Why, he has chosen to dwell in you and in me! And from within us, he whispers to us. He would lead us into a good and holy life if only we would heed him.

This is a wonder equal to that of Christmas. The blessed Son dwells in a particular human person, Jesus of Nazareth. In his thirty-three years, Jesus was subject to exhaustion, temptation, suffering, and death, as we are, but at least he had control of his own body and his own deeds. He was able to live a sinless life.¹ And we praise him for that. But perhaps we should praise the Holy Spirit too, more than we do, because the Spirit dwells within us who have *not* lived sinless lives. The Spirit takes up residence in souls that have many strange impulses and many sinful deeds in our past. The Spirit is a good and gentle Voice within us, yes, but is a good and gentle Voice *amidst* a whole chaos of voices within us. The

¹ This idea about the Holy Spirit being willing to live in the likes of *us* is made in Spurgeon's great sermon “The First Fruit of the Spirit,” 1884.

Spirit, that is, has some rowdy neighbors within us. Our little boat is blown along by a gale of spirits. Amidst those swirling winds, the Holy Spirit is willing to be found, trying to be heard by us, trying to rise up and be more powerful in us. Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit, for he wants only our good and the good of our world.

The office of the Holy Spirit is to make us holy. That is the good and sensible teaching of Martin Luther in his *Large Catechism*. Luther says that if he were pressed to give a title to the Third Article of the Creed, he would call it “Sanctification”:

I cannot give a better title than “Sanctification.” In it is expressed and portrayed the Holy Spirit and his office, which is that he makes us holy. (Martin Luther, on the Third Article of the Creed, *Large Catechism*, Tappert Edition)

There is a stirring phrase in what is called the “Easter Proclamation” in the glorious Easter Vigil liturgy. For the past two Easter Vigils, we have been blessed to hear Vicar James Miller chant the ancient words of the Easter Proclamation. The stirring phrase there that I want to lift up now speaks of how important it is that we should be redeemed. It is a great line praising our Redeemer, Jesus Christ:

For it would have profited us nothing to be *born* had we also not been *redeemed*.

That makes sense to us, does it not? What good would it be to be born if Satan defeats us time and time again and we end up in hell? Oh, no! We do indeed need a Redeemer – we need Someone whose goodness is so extraordinary that he has the right to save us. We need Jesus.

But on Pentecost Sunday it occurs to me that we can ask a similar question about the Holy Spirit – about how crucial it is that we should have the Third Person of the Holy Trinity fighting on our side. The great declaration, then, would go like this:

For it would have profited us nothing to be *born* and to be *redeemed* had we also not been *sanctified*. For what does it profit a person to go through all eternity as the sinful beings we are?

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to make us better people than we are at present. Some of you are already great people. But the Spirit would be make you even better. Heed him! Heed the Holy Spirit. Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit who whispers to us to become more Christ-like.

So, let us try out some distinctions. We have said that the “office” of the Holy Spirit is to make us “holy.” That is Luther’s point. The goal of the Spirit’s work

with us is to so lead us into goodness that the world will notice and think that there is something heavenly about us – that we show a goodness that cannot entirely be explained in worldly terms. So, that is the “office” or the “goal” of the Holy Spirit: to make us holy.

Now, let’s speak of the Spirit’s “method.” The goal is to make us holy, but what is the divine method for doing this? We find the answer in this morning’s text: The Spirit makes us holy by “bringing to our remembrance” Jesus Christ and his ways. The Spirit speaks of Jesus. In face of temptations, the Spirit whispers, “But what of Jesus? What does he want of us?” In face of discouragement, again the Spirit speaks of Jesus: “You are weary, yes, or you are feeling guilty, and you think that nothing is going to work out well for you. But do not forget Jesus. Bring to mind that you have a Savior. Bring to mind that he will lift you up even if you should fall trying to do good. Bring to mind that your good life and your good deeds shall not be in vain.”

I think we can narrow in a bit on this matter of the Spirit’s method. I have said that the Holy Spirit makes us holy by bringing Jesus into our minds. But I think we can progress a bit farther down the road by speaking of the *love* Jesus taught and lived. It is not just Jesus that the Spirit brings to our minds, but especially his love. Listen to St. Paul on this point. He is talking about what he calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” The first of these fruits is love:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23, RSV)

Do you sometimes have a grouchy spirit? Do you sometimes say to yourself, “I declare that I am going to have nothing more to do with that person?” Well, we might indeed have such a grouchy spirit. But if we be Christians, then we have been given in Baptism the Holy Spirit. The Spirit dwells in us, urging us to become ever more Christ-like. And so, if we will listen, if we will give the Spirit half a chance, we will also find within ourselves a yearning for love – both that we should receive love and that we should give it. It is a voice contending with the grouchy voice that wants to be done with that person. It is a more gentle voice. It is a more peaceful, patient, and kind voice. It is the very Voice of the Holy Spirit in us, calling us to love one another, making us holy by way of a strong life of love. Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit.

So, I have spoken of the office of the Holy Spirit and of the method of the Holy Spirit. Let me conclude by saying a few words about the “tools” of the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit get *into* us? What are his avenues? What are his tools for gaining entrance to our heart.

Here we come to a distinctively Lutheran conviction: We do not simply *find* the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We are not *that* good. Rather, the Holy Spirit enters our heart by way of what the Reformers called “the external means of grace.” The Holy Spirit enters us by way of Word and Sacrament and the holy fellowship of

believers. Not every impulse within the human heart is the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Some impulses come to us by way of romantic novels or the passions of the newspapers or the convictions of teachers. Many of these impulses are good. But the impulses and the whispers of the Holy Spirit are even better, for they are grounded in the Bible and in the experiences of those who have tried to live for Christ as they have understood the Bible. If our hearts incline in a certain direction then, even if all the world approves of that direction, we still should pause and ask ourselves, “How does this measure in comparison to Jesus Christ?” That is the question the Holy Spirit is always pressing upon us, always whispering to us: “But what of Jesus? You bear his name. What, then, of Jesus in your life?”

And so, I make this appeal one last time in this sermon: “Let us not grieve the Holy Spirit with us!” Indeed, let us yield to the Holy Spirit more and more, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of Christ, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.