

Pentecost Sunday

A sermon based on John 14-16

On this festival Sunday, we often use the texts from John 14-16 because they deal most extensively with the Holy Spirit (also called the Paraclete, the Counselor, the Advocate).

A few years ago, the then Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Frank Griswold, announced that the Holy Spirit was leading his church into new truths (John 16:13). Some say you know truth because you experience it. You will have these experiences, and this is the Holy Spirit leading you. Griswold said that is the Holy Spirit, but Lutherans say: No. For Episcopalians, however, bishops have special grace from the Holy Spirit to guard the truth.

At the first Vatican Council in 1870, Roman Catholic bishops promulgated the dogma that when the Pope declares something on faith and morals for the universal church, his decision is infallible because the Holy Spirit guards the Pope when he is doing that.

The Mormons have twelve apostles to lead their church and guard truth. Their chief apostle, like the Pope, can have new revelations.

In their Brooklyn, New York headquarters the Jehovah's Witnesses have a group of about twenty-five leaders who are able to guard the truth because the Spirit of God is with them.

We also have among us those who say: **I have** the Spirit. **I have** a particular experience. **I have** the gift of tongues (although tongues are found in Islam and Hinduism).

Most of all **I know** because **I can experience it**.

The question is: Who is right? How does one sort out where the Spirit is, and where the Spirit is not? In the Old Testament this is the very familiar and frequent question of true and false prophesy. In Deuteronomy 18:22 this is taken up: How do you know the difference between truth and false prophesy? True prophesy is the one which comes true. You can tell afterward.

Then in the New Testament 1 John 4:1-4 reads: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits." Paul reminds us in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even the devil appears as an angel of light."

Therefore when we come to these remarkable chapters (John 14-16), it is important to see how it helps us. What it does is to be sorted out in a couple of points.

First of all, what is truth? In John 14:6 Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Truth is Jesus. The Gospel of John also has Jesus saying in 8:31-32: "If you continue in my words, the truth will make you free." Obviously when it says "my word" here it is not referring to the New Testament, which hadn't been written yet. But he is the Word. In John 4:23-24, when Jesus is talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says: "The hour is coming, and is now, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." "Truth" means Jesus Christ. And "spirit" means the spirit who points to Jesus Christ. These chapters help us keep our focus.

We read in John 14:17: "The Father will send you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive." What is this "truth"? It goes right on in 14:26: "But the

Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you.” The job of the Holy Spirit is to recall, to re-present what Jesus has said. The same thing is said again in John 15:26: “. . . the Counselor . . . from the Father . . . even the spirit of Truth . . .” John 14:26 and 15:26 are alike. And then in chapter 16:13-14 reads:

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

What the Spirit does is take what Jesus has said and bring it back, to apply it.

Right in the middle of these verses, 16:13 states: “the things that are to come.” We might say: What about the future? But this is not talking about the future. It is talking about what the Spirit does in the future. And in this very passage 16:8-11 reads:

“And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged.”

Notice it is not talking about some future kind of truth but applying what Jesus has done to the future situation.

Truth is summed up in the cross. And truth is summed up in Jesus Christ. Therefore revelation is finished. Revelation is finished when Jesus on the cross says: “It is finished.” (John 19:30).

Back in the 1980’s Gerhard Forde, seminary professor, walked by some seminary students standing on the sidewalk and said in a rather gruff way: “Hello” and walked on. But then he turned around, came back to them and said: “Remember you don’t have to do anything.”

Christ has done it all. There is not something more. Not some added new revelation. It is awfully tempting to say: The cross isn’t enough. The cross, but not the cross alone. If one does say the cross plus something more (a decision for Christ, a conversion experience, a special feeling in your heart, a particular priesthood or church, certain good works), then you have left the Lutherans and gone into something else – the Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, whatever.

There is a lot of confusion today about the Holy Spirit because of confusion about the Trinity. We think God the Father is 1/3, and God the Son is the second 1/3, and God the Holy Spirit is the third 1/3. That’s not true. There is one God, not three Gods.

Or, then we mistakenly think there are three phases. The Old Testament is the first phase. The New Testament is the second phase, and the church is the third phase. No....! There are three persons, and if you think you understand this, then you have it wrong, because that is the very business of what the Trinity is about. It is that which tells us; we do not discern and determine it.

How does that apply to you and me in our situation? There is a perfume called Charisma. It says in the New Testament that you have a gift. The word there is “charism.” It goes on to say some have the particular gift to do this, and another has a gift to do that. That is misleading. What Paul is saying is not that you have a gift but you are a gift. Each one of you is a sweet fragrance in the nostrils of the Lord (2

Cor 2:15). What the Lord wants you to be is what you are, and he has placed you there as this gift, this charism. This is spelled out very clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Or is there something more? People say: Well, some people have more of the Spirit. No, the Spirit is not divided. When that little infant receives the Holy Spirit in baptism, the child doesn't receive 20% or 50%. The baby receives the fullness of the Holy Spirit. I don't have more of the Spirit than you do. Some say: But you're a minister! No, everybody is given the fullness of the Spirit in baptism.

There gets to be a dispute about this because people then say to me: You don't know your Bible! The place these people refer to is Ephesians 5:18-19: "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart." Even in the RSV this is mistranslated. What it says in the original Greek is "being filled with the Spirit" is singing songs and praising with psalms, rejoicing in the Lord and being thankful (there are four participles in a row). There is no increase of the Spirit. Baptism is not a kickstart to get you going, and then you really have to be awakened and make it real. Rather, everybody has the fullness of the Spirit. Everybody has the fullness of Jesus Christ. I am in Christ and he is in me because he has made me his own, not because I've done it.

Then comes the question that occurs all the way from Matthew through the Book of Revelation: What about these early Christian prophets? That is a fun subject because sometimes when the clergy need each other they say to their colleague in another congregation: You're the prophet from Phoenix. Or: You're the prophet from Nashville. When it talks about prophecy in the New Testament, it means what we mean by preachers. Preachers are those who take the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ who died for you and me on the cross and apply it to the time and place where they are. Not some other kind of prophecy. That is what it means. One of the places where this is done this is Matthew 7:20, where we usually think about the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7 it says: Remember, by their fruits you shall know them. It is talking about these preachers. It's not talking about some general principle. It's talking about the fact that some of these preachers are rascals and are abusing their ministry. We also know from a contemporary document known as the Didache, written about 110, the same thing is true elsewhere, not just in the book we call the New Testament. There were all kinds of problems with these preachers because they made a good thing out of it and abused it.

How do we know where the Holy Spirit is? The Holy Spirit is the one who points to the cross. If it doesn't point to Christ and the cross, we have to raise the question: Is that of the Spirit or not?

It is not because you and I have an experience. We have all kinds of experiences, and you remember in John 14:27 it says: "Not as the world gives." Not those experiences that you and I have that are "spiritual." It is something else, and the test is whether it points to Christ on the cross.

In that remarkable passage in Third Article of the Creed of the Small Catechism, we have what Luther wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe." The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies. He does it all.