

## **Pentecost Sunday**

John 15:2-27; 16:4b-15

A Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

Some years ago, a missionary to New Guinea returned to his home congregation in the US and said to his pastor that the big challenge on the mission field was the problem of spirituality.

That missionary's question goes to the heart of Pentecost Sunday. In order to get at this question of "spirit" and spirituality, it is helpful to go back to the Reformation itself.

The Reformation is important because it was the rediscovery of the Gospel. Both Pentecost Sunday and Reformation Sunday are Sundays where we lift up the Holy Spirit and use the color red.

What happened at the time of the Reformation? You call that in 1517 Luther raised the question of indulgences. The problem was that people, by doing certain things, were able to do something about their sins, not only past sins, but present and future ones, too.

Luther said this is wrong. (By the way, this Roman Catholic practice of indulgences continues today, even though that is not widely known.)

Not only in 1517, but throughout his career, Luther talked about the antichrist. That's tough language. In those early years Luther used the language of the antichrist against the Pope. But there was also something else that Luther fought, especially in the second half of his career. He battled something called enthusiasm, in German, the Schwärmer, the spiritualists.

In fact, in his great commentary on the Book of Galatians, there in the last two pages (LW 27:149), he says:

"The papists do not stop urging works and the worthiness of person even today in opposition to grace, giving powerful help to their brethren, the spiritualists (Anabaptists). These wolves are joined at the tail, even though they have different heads. They pretend to be fierce enemies publicly; but inwardly they actually believe, teach, and defend the same doctrine, in opposition to Christ, the only Savior, who is our only righteousness."

He's saying they're both the same thing. That again is tough language. They are both antichrists.

What is the New Testament source of this kind of language of the antichrist? We commonly confuse this with what is said in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation when it talks about the beast. There it talks about this figure, and how his number 666. The

important thing about the antichrist is he is not a recognizable monster. Quite the opposite. Rather, the antichrist is so much like the Christ that most people are deceived. The evil one does all kinds of signs and miracles, and people are deceived.

The language about the antichrist is found in the letters we call First, Second, and Third John. There in four different places it talks about the antichrist, the spirit of the antichrist and it even talks about many antichrists. Then of course, it asks: How do we sort that out? The answer comes in 1 John 4:1-4: "Test the spirits."

The same is true for today. When we encounter claims for spirituality, we have to test the spirits, that is, ask ourselves what spirit is this? Is this the Spirit of Truth or another spirit that seems so harmless and nice but is a spirit of error, remembering 2 Cor 11:14 where Paul writes: "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." We can be deceived and we are.

About twenty years ago, when the mainline Christian churches were starting to blessing same-sex and multi-partner unions, bishops and church leaders said: "We are led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is leading us to new things; the Holy Spirit is leadin us to do this."

To be sure, there were and are some Christian leaders in the West and many in Africa, standing up to all that and saying: "We no longer care to be in fellowship with those Christians who do these things. We're done and no longer making decisions together." These battles are serious and real.

At the same time, we can be caught by these flagrant, public embarrassments, just as we are caught in thinking that the Reformation was only about the papacy, and then we lose sight of an equal problem, as great, if not greater, which is the whole problem of spirituality, enthusiasm, spiritual practices, whatever we want to call it. This is just as much the antichrist as the error of the papacy.

In order to help us we can talk about the word, "spiritual." It's actually rather new in English but much older in Latin and French. When we use the word "spiritual," what are we talking about?

When you look up the word "spirituality," the results are less than helpful. One definition says "spiritual" means "being spiritual." Another contrasts "spiritual with "physical." There are other such contrasts such as worldly or unworldly, earthly or heavenly, this solid concrete life or something ethereal.

Sometimes what is spiritual is put this way: "We want to be spiritual but not religious." Then we begin to sort this out. There's something about certain practices – meditation, doing Yoga, chanting, waving hands in the air while praying, walking a labyrinth, reading tarot cards, consulting a psychic, journaling. On and on it goes.

The basic point that comes through in all of what is said is that this is what is really real, and all the rest of it is just trappings. Such practices are the kernel, and the rest is husk. All these church institutions, well, they're not the kernel, they're the husk. It's that you've got to be spiritual, to make it real, and you do that by cultivating the spark of divinity within you by engaging in some sort of "spiritual" practice.

One way to get a handle on this is to ask: What's not being said in all of this? It is not talking about the Spirit of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins and the problem of death death. That's not anywhere. Rather, the impression is given that life a journey, and you are on your journey, on your pilgrimage. You're seekers.

This kind of thinking has, of course, infected the churches. At a large Lutheran gathering, the keynote speaker gave a moving address building to this conclusion: "What's important is not what you say, it's what you do."

If only someone would have stood up and said: "You have just sold out the Reformation!"

This is precisely what Luther is talking about. If it depends on us, on what we do or have done. If it depends on whether we are seekers or not, we're lost. Because none of us is able to stand on the basis of our own practice, or experience, or whatever thoughts, words, or deeds one might look to.

The message that was rediscovered in 1517 and following is the message that is specifically pointed out in Paul and John and throughout the New Testament: In spite of the fact that we are lost in sin and death, the Lord has come and saves us. He saves us now and he saves us forever. And it's not a matter of any kind of spirituality or spiritual practices. It's a matter of what he has done.

There's a world of difference between these two. And the message of Pentecost is that in this time between his Ascension and when he is coming again, there is the Holy Spirit, the one who comes and re-presents Christ. The Holy Spirit has one job and this is it. It is pointed out in three chapters of the Gospel of John, chapters 14, 15, and 16. The Holy Spirit re-presents Christ and continues to save us in spite of ourselves.

Pentecost and Reformation go together. They are both "red," as an old gospel song goes: "Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, filled with the Holy Ghost I am. All my sins are washed away, I've been redeemed."

He did it, outside of us, in spite of us, and therefore, we are free.

Amen