

Pentecost Sunday

A sermon based on John 14-16.

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

What is the Holy Spirit about? We know that there are competing claims about where Holy Spirit is and how the Holy Spirit works.

At the First Vatican Council in 1870, Roman Catholic bishops voted to confirm (promulgated the dogma) that when the Pope declares (using the words: "I declare") something on faith and morals for the universal church, his decision is infallible because the Holy Spirit is believed to guard the Pope when he is doing that.

In the Anglican or Episcopal tradition, it is understood that the bishops, by virtue of a special grace given them in ordination, have the power when making decisions together to guard "the truth."

The Mormons have twelve apostles who lead their church and guard "the truth." Their chief apostle can also have what amount to new revelations about "the truth" (similar to the Pope and Marian dogmas).

In their New York headquarters, the Jehovah's Witnesses have a group of about twenty-five leaders who guard "the truth" because they teach that the Spirit of God is with that body of leaders.

There are also Pentecostal Christians who say that because they speak in tongues that have the Holy Spirit with them. However, as we know, speaking in tongues is found also in Islam, Hinduism, and especially in communities in times of intense conflict and stress.

And in every generation, there are those who claim to have directly experienced the Holy Spirit in a dramatic event or even in a dream.

How do we sort this out? How does the Holy Spirit work?

In the Old Testament this is the familiar and frequent question of true and false prophecy. In Deuteronomy 18:22 this is taken up: How do you know the difference between truth and false prophecy? True prophecy is the one which comes true. You can tell afterward.

In the New Testament 1 John 4:1 says: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God." Paul reminds us in 2 Cor 11:14 that: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

Therefore, when we come to these remarkable chapters of John 14-16, it is a relief to see how these chapters help us sort out what the Holy Spirit is about.

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 not a doctrine; rather, truth is a person. Truth is Jesus.

In the Gospel of John Jesus says in 8:31-32: "If you continue in my word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Obviously, when it says "my word" here, it is not referring to the New Testament, because the books and letters found there had not been written yet.

Rather, 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. All these verses in the Gospel of John point us to Christ and him crucified.

Then in John 14:17 it says: "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 represent 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 John 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 Holy Spirit does is take the victory that is Christ's and claim it for you.

John 16:13 refers to: "the things that are to come." What about the future? It's important to see that this text is not in fact predicting future events. Rather, it is talking about what the Holy Spirit does in the future. John 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 alleged new truths revealed in the future, but rather 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. As Jesus says on the cross: "It is finished." (John 19:30).

There is not something more. Not some added new revelations coming at church conventions or new revelations for each of us individually. It is awfully tempting to say: "The cross, yes, but not the cross alone."

There is a lot of confusion today about the Holy Spirit because of confusion about the Trinity. What is this three-in-one? Is God 1/3 God the Father, 1/3 God the Son, and 1/3 God the Holy Spirit? No, that's not it. There is one God, not three Gods.

Or, then we mistakenly think there are three phases to God. The Old Testament is the first phase. The New Testament is the second phase, and the church is the third phase. But, no, that's not it either.

There are three persons, and if you think you understand this, then you have it wrong, because the Trinity is not a puzzle to be figured out. The Trinity is the Holy One who is beyond us and who determines what is and is not; we do not discern and determine the Trinity.

How does that help us today? In the New Testament it says that you have a gift, a "charism." It goes on to say some have a particular gift to do this, and another has a gift to do that. This, however, is misleading.

What Paul is really saying is not that you have a gift but that you are a gift. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:14-15: "Thanks be to God who . . . through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere."

That's an unusual image of the Christian life: Each one of us is a sweet fragrance of God, spreading the knowledge of Christ near and far.

What the Lord wants you to be is what you are, and he has placed you where you are as this gift, this charism. This is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Or is there more of the Spirit that we should aspire to? After all, some Christians say that they have more of the Spirit than others do. But no, the Spirit is parceled out in doses. Nor do pastors have more of the Spirit than laity do.

Some will dispute this, saying: “You don’t know your Bible!”—because Ephesians 5:18-19 says: “Be filled with the Spirit—which implies that some are less than filled with the Spirit.

But the text goes on to say what “being filled with the Spirit” means. It is this: Singing hymns and giving thanks to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are not degrees of the Spirit, such that some have less and others more.

Everybody is given the fullness of the Spirit in Baptism. When that little infant receives the Holy Spirit in Baptism, the child does not receive 10% of the Holy Spirit, a kickstart, so to speak, and then it’s up to the child to get more of the Spirit later in life. No, the tiny baby receives the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Rather, every baptized Christian has the fullness of the Spirit. I am in Christ and he in me because he has made me his own.

Then comes the question that occurs all the way from Matthew through the Book of Revelation: What about those early Christian prophets?

When the New Testament talks about prophets, it means what we mean by preachers.

One of the places where this is done this is in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7 where it warns: Beware false prophets, it says: “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). You will know the good preachers from the hucksters by their fruits. Some of those preachers were abusing their ministry.

The same happens today. How do we know where the Holy Spirit is? Where there are those pastors (and people) who are pointing to the cross because that’s what the Holy Spirit does. “You will know them by their fruits.”

This means, too, that Christian ministry and life is not about producing certain kinds of feelings and experiences. We each have all kinds of experiences and feelings. It’s about pointing to Christ.

What the Holy Spirit gives and produces is an assurance that comes in spite of whatever we experience and feel today or any day.

As Jesus says in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

That's what Holy Spirit does.

As Luther writes (Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism, paraphrase): I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe . . . but the Holy Spirit has taken care of that. He has called me, enlightened, sanctified, and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Amen