

*The Spirit's Work; Our Hands*

The church's liturgical calendar of Holy Days and the lectionary of assigned scripture readings for Sundays seems a little backwards to me when we come to this week, Pentecost Sunday, and next week, Trinity Sunday. The focus of the sermon on Pentecost Sunday is usually the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity. The sermon theme on Holy Trinity Sunday is, as its name suggests, the Trinity. Sermons do more than teach, but both Pentecost and Trinity are good days for sermons to teach a bit about the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity, both of which are much misunderstood these days. However, to teach about the Holy Spirit usually presupposes some knowledge of the Holy Trinity, so it might be more logical to have Trinity Sunday before Pentecost. My remedy is to say a little about the Holy Trinity before saying more about the Holy Spirit.

That our God is the Holy Trinity, that He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is absolutely foundational to our Christian faith. That is why I am always shocked when I read books and online articles by supposedly Christian theologians that say things that are absolutely wrong about the Holy Trinity. Just this week I cancelled my subscription to an online service that gives pastors commentary on the Sunday lessons, ostensibly helping them prepare their sermons each week. I un-subscribed because that service was dead wrong in what it had to say about the Holy Trinity and the Holy Spirit. The (Lutheran) college professor who edited that web service should have known better. So what do we correctly believe and teach about the Holy Trinity?

As we will hear next week, we believe in One God in Three Persons. The Father is God; Jesus the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. All three persons in the Trinity are equal to one another; no one of them created the others, they are all eternal. The names the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) aren't just shorthand ways that we, in ignorance of God's true nature, refer to the different things that God does. No name but the Triune Name God Himself revealed to us adequately does Him justice. We cannot and should not try to dream up other names for God than the one name he has revealed to us. Many weeks I prepare the prayers for our Sunday worship by editing the prayers provided by the bulletin service we subscribe to, and the most frequent editing I do is changing the various and sundry names used for God there to something we would all recognize as referring to the Holy Trinity.

The truth about our Triune God is preserved in the Three Creeds our church and all traditional Christian churches hold: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the seldom used Athanasian Creed, that we'll use next Sunday on Trinity Sunday. The Apostles' Creed grew out of the statement of belief adults would make just prior to receiving Holy Baptism in the earliest years of the Christian church. The most widely used creed in the world, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed came out of conflicts in the early centuries of the church when heretics tried to teach lies about the Holy Trinity, especially falsely saying that Jesus was not really God or that he was a lesser god than God the Father.

It's interesting to me that in the creeds God the Father's action of creating is explicitly stated, and some of Jesus the Son's actions are stated clearly, such

as that he died and was buried, was resurrected and ascended, and will come again. But when it comes to the Holy Spirit, the creed merely states that we believe in Him, and then goes on to list other holy things we believe in: the holy catholic church, the communion saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting (Amen). So what can we say today about the Holy Spirit from a traditional, biblical point of view?

The Holy Spirit is responsible for the unity of the church. Church unity is not something we create through dialogues with other denominations or ecumenical agreements between churches. Our unity as Christians is something that is given to us, it is a gift, not something we create or achieve. In fact, church unity is something that is preserved, not made. The Holy Spirit gathers the church around the preaching of the Word, the gospel, and around the administration of the sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. More important than any denominational title such as Lutheran or Roman Catholic or Baptist or whatever, is our Baptism into Christ and our faith in the Triune God.

Therefore, we must be careful to not make decisions regarding church practice that depart too far from our brothers and sisters in faith. No denomination is a law unto itself. We have a responsibility to other Christians, even the Christians of the past. G.K. Chesterton said, "Tradition is the only true form of democracy because it gives your ancestors a vote," and he was right. The church is rightly called the Communion of Saints because we are connected in the Spirit with all Christians, all God's saints, across time and space.

Sometimes today we hear the words “diverse” and “inclusive” to describe the church. And its true that in regard to people, the church is for all people everywhere. But when it comes to our faith, there is but one faith delivered once and to all to the saints. We call that faith “catholic,” with a small “c,” meaning universal. The preservation of that one universal faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. Even though some drift away from the faith, the one faith survives because God wills it to be so.

The faith survives because the Holy Spirit continues Jesus’ ministry on earth. Jesus’ ministry is continued on earth through the Holy Spirit working through people like you and me. Our hands do God’s work. Our voices speak God’s Word just as the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets of old. Perhaps the most profound work we do on God’s behalf is to forgive sins. Sometimes a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ does that; but anyone can speak God’s word of forgiveness to another person. We all are captive sin and cannot free ourselves. The Holy Spirit mediates the atonement Jesus made on the cross to us. The Spirit empowers the sacraments to remove the stain of our sinfulness.

Being forgiven gives us comfort and hope for the future, for a life beyond this life. When we are so beaten by life that we cannot pray for ourselves, the Spirit prays for us and supports us. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus’ resurrection; He is the Spirit that will raise up our mortal bodies when this life is through and make them immortal like Jesus’ resurrected body. The Spirit gives us life.

Our congregation's motto is: Moved by the Spirit. Secure in the truth of the gospel, and confident in our hope of the resurrection, we are empowered by the Spirit to do God's work in this community. We welcome the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Amen.