

## Sermon for Pentecost: John 14:23-26

Grace, mercy and peace from him who is and who was and who is coming. Amen.

Husbands are often accused of forgetting some very important dates, like wedding anniversaries, dentists' appointments, or their wife's birthday. Sometimes the accusation is justified. Sometimes we do manage to forget some very important things. One thing that the Lutheran church is often accused of is forgetting the Holy Spirit. Sure, they say, Lutherans preach Christ, and they preach justification by grace through faith, and Augburg Confession article 4; yes, Lutherans seem to know all about God the Father and they keep talking about Jesus, but the Holy Spirit they forget. Is this true? Have we Lutherans forgotten the Holy Spirit? Is that a justified accusation?

Today we celebrate the festival of Pentecost. It's called Pentecost because Pentecost means "50" and it was celebrated on the 50th day after the Sabbath of the Passover; in other words, the events of Pentecost happened 49 days after Christ's resurrection. We read about those events in Acts 2: A violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where the 12 apostles were gathered. What looked like tongues of fire appeared on their heads, and we're told that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, that is in other languages, languages that they had never learnt to speak before. Peter got up and preached to the crowd and showed them that this was the fulfilment of a prophecy made by the prophet Joel already in the Old Testament. Peter preached to them about the life and death and resurrection of Christ and told them to repent and be baptised, and so 3,000 people became Christians that day.

Some people look at those events and make what is descriptive, prescriptive. They say: "Aha, so that's who the Holy Spirit is! The Holy Spirit comes to Christians like a violent wind! The Holy Spirit fills people and makes them speak in tongues. The Holy

Spirit moves people to be caught up and to speak and act almost as if they're drunk! That's the litmus test! When the Holy Spirit comes, you'll know it. You'll feel it!"

Then the next step logically follows: "If you don't feel that, then the Holy Spirit is not there. If you don't experience that violent wind, if you don't speak in tongues, if you aren't caught up and start acting irrationally, if you can't feel it – then it follows the Holy Spirit is not there. Then you must have neglected the Holy Spirit, lost the Holy Spirit, forgotten the Holy Spirit."

So the question stands: Have we forgotten the Holy Spirit? When you look around a Lutheran church on a Sunday morning, you will most likely not see people speaking in tongues. Most likely, you will experience no violent wind. You will most likely see people who are composed and acting quite rationally. Does it follow then that we've forgotten the Holy Spirit? Is it true?

When our Lord Christ promises his disciples the Holy Spirit here in the Gospel of John, he paints a different picture. He says: "The Father will send the Holy Spirit in my name." First of all, we must know that the Holy Spirit never preaches himself. The third person of the Trinity comes in Christ's name, and that means that the Holy Spirit comes not to glorify himself, but to glorify Christ. He acts as Jesus' agent and representative. He is called the Spirit of Christ, for he pleads Christ's cause, and does Christ's work. The Holy Spirit preaches Christ. The crucified Christ. The Holy Spirit's intent and purpose is not first and foremost to give worshippers ecstatic feelings, extraordinary abilities, and euphoric experiences at all, but to glorify Christ.

Even the events of Pentecost, which at first glance seem to be all about ecstatic behaviour and emotional turmoil, lead very specifically and straight to Peter's sermon on Jesus. The visible signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit provide the setting for Peter to preach Christ, Christ crucified, and repentance and forgiveness in His name. That's what Pentecost was about – about the preaching of Christ, and

about the fulfilment of God's Word, and about the gift of repentance and baptism, of faith in Christ. The essential Pentecost event was not the wind, not the tongues, not the irrational behaviour, but the Word of the crucified Christ, and Holy Baptism. It was through the Word of Christ that the Holy Spirit converted 3000 people that day.

Our tendency is to always look for the out of the ordinary. We get bored with things that seem mundane to us, and so we look for something different, something out of the ordinary. We look for something exciting. And we feel very sophisticated when we do this. We want to feel caught up in it all, we want to experience speaking in tongues, we want to feel emotional highs. And when we do that it is so easy, so very easy to forget what is truly essential.

When our Lord Christ promises his disciples the Holy Spirit, he talks about what is essential. What is essential, he says, is the close connection God wants to have with his people. Jesus says: Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, 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. What Jesus highlights, what Jesus underscores, what Jesus emphasises is the Father's love, God coming to us and living in us. What Jesus stresses is the close connection between loving Christ and obeying his teaching. If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word....Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.

So how do we stand on that? Have we forgotten to obey Christ's Word? Jesus says: "Whoever loves me will keep my words." Keeping his words means knowing and hearing his Word. Keeping his words means celebrating our salvation through Christ's life and death, our salvation by grace. It means continually living with God, receiving strength from him through regular use of the Lord's Supper and regular attendance of the fellowship of our church. It means supporting the proclamation of

Christ through regular tithing and regular witnessing about Christ. It means being at one with our God, living with God, and God living in us. Jesus says: "Whoever loves me will keep my words." Not "might keep my Word." Not "will try to keep my Word." Whoever loves me will keep my Word. This is the language of grace, the language of God's guarantee despite our sinful failures. It is the promise of Christ.

We can only keep Christ's words through the Holy Spirit. Jesus says: The Holy Spirit will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. The Holy Spirit is crucial to the life of the church. The Holy Spirit has called me to faith by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. And he does the same for all Christians. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

Maybe we'd prefer it to experience the action of the Holy Spirit visibly all the time. But the visible phenomena of the Holy Spirit's action may never be made a necessity. Ecstatic actions and people having extraordinary gifts do not decide whether the Spirit is active among us or not. Pentecost does not mean the same as Pentecostal. The litmus test for the Holy Spirit is Christ and the words of Christ.

Where the Word and Sacraments are taught and administered in truth and purity, the Holy Spirit acts every Sunday – sometimes in a visible way, sometimes not. What is essential is that the Holy Spirit is active where Jesus says he'll be, that is, where God's Word is preached and taught in purity. The Holy Spirit acts where the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are administered in purity. Through these things the Holy Spirit works repentance in you, giving you God's forgiveness. Let us not forget that.

When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize he was asked the question, "What made it possible for the Russian Revolution to take place and for Communism to rise to power?" Solzhenitsyn's reply was simple and direct: "Men

forgot God.” What tragedies occur when nations forget God. What tragedies occur when the church forgets God. And history teaches us how easily that happens. Let us not forget God! Let us seek him where he may be found. Let us seek him where he said he will be.

Being sober and self-controlled is also one of the good gifts the Holy Spirit gives (1 Thess. 5:6; 8; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:8; 5:8). Let us pray for a proper and sober understanding of how the Holy Spirit acts. We might be amazed at what God the Holy Spirit is doing in His church. You might be amazed at what God the Holy Spirit is doing in your life. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Karl Böhmer, Pretoria 2015