



The Work of the Spirit

In the name of him who sends us the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: It's said that you never fully learn to appreciate something until you have to do without it for a while. And I think we all recognize the truth of that statement. We have a tendency to take the things in our lives for granted; and it's only when they're missing or taken away for some period, when you are forced to do without whatever it is, when there is a hole left behind by its absence, that you become aware of how much it means to you. This is true of our possessions, the people in our lives – those whom we love; and it's especially true of our natural abilities. If you break your leg, say, and can't walk for a while, or if you scratch your eyes and have to wear a bandage over them while they heal, it's then that you learn just how much you value the gift of being able to walk or to see.

But what if you never had the ability to begin with? If you were born blind, for example, you wouldn't miss the gift of sight, would you? It would be hard even to imagine what being able to see would be like. You'd hear people talking about it – how this or that looks – but you'd have nothing to compare it to, no way to "visualize" it (literally). When it came to discussions of matters of sight, it would almost be like people were speaking a foreign language. Oh, you'd understand the words all right; it's just that they'd have no meaning to you. I mean, how could a person born blind understand a concept like color? Words like red, green, blue, yellow ... they'd be empty. In the same way, how could a person born deaf understand properties like tone and pitch, or the difference in the quality of the sound when the same note is played on a flute and a saxophone? If a person never had the sense of taste, how could they understand someone describing the exquisite flavor of a fresh, ripe strawberry? They couldn't, could they? They'd be completely left out of the conversation. It wouldn't make any sense to them.

And so it is also with matters of the Spirit. The Holy Scriptures tell us that without the Spirit of God, no one can understand the things that come from God. The Christian faith we cherish, the simple truths of the Gospel, our understanding of who Jesus is and what he's done for us and for our salvation ... these are foolishness to people who do not have the Holy Spirit. They cannot understand. They can't understand the truths of God because their minds are closed to such things. Without the Holy Spirit they are in a spiritual sense blind, deaf, and completely unresponsive. And when they hear faithful Christians discussing their trust in Christ and his Gospel, it falls on their ears like so much gibberish. It's not that they don't understand the words; it's that they can't process or relate to them. They have no point of personal reference to make any sense of them.

But this is what the work of the Holy Spirit is all about, as we see in today's reading from Acts. It's the account of the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And what we see is that the Spirit of God is the great revealer: the one who opens closed hearts and illumines dark minds in order that the truths of Jesus the Savior are understood and received in faith. And we see the progression too: the Spirit falls first upon the disciples. He fills them with his presence, which is manifested visibly by the tongues of fire that appear and rest upon their heads. It's like their lights have been turned on. And having been illumined they are given the power and boldness to speak – to bear witness of Christ – to declare the truths of God in languages they've never learned, because what's going on is that the Spirit is speaking directly to people's hearts in their own languages through the mouths of the Apostles. And the Spirit who accompanies – *who is in* – the very words they speak, is entering the astonished hearers through their ears and

turning on their spiritual lights too. It's the miracle of the creation of faith in Jesus where there was none before. And it is indeed a miracle.

But before I go on, there may be someone thinking, "I just don't understand what he's talking about. I've believed in Jesus – I've trusted him for forgiveness and for my salvation – for as long as I can remember. And I don't recall that it was all that difficult. My parents, my Sunday school teachers, other people, they told me about Jesus and I believed it. There was no stunning miracle, no flames appeared over anyone's head, no one was speaking in languages they'd never learned. I simply heard and believed. What's the big deal?"

But this goes back to my original point: as a rule, we don't miss an ability unless we lose it. And until that happens, we tend to take it for granted. The truth is that most of us have had the Holy Spirit operating in our lives from the very beginning. Like young Dwight here, we received the gift of the Spirit in Holy Baptism while we were still in infancy. It was then we came to faith in Jesus. That's when the miracle happened. And as a result, spiritually speaking, we've never known what it's like to be in the dark. And that's why we tend to take the miracle of faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit for granted.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should try to lose the gift of the Spirit even for a brief period in order that we might learn better to appreciate him. That could be disastrous. But it needs to be said that it's possible. We can through ongoing and unrepentant sin, and by removing ourselves from the means of grace – the Word and Sacraments through which the Spirit works – drive the Spirit out of our lives. And sadly, many people who were once faithful Christians have done just that. Like the rest of the unbelieving world, they are in peril of spending eternity in hell – unless they are reconverted by the work of the Spirit and made believers in Jesus once again. That's a risk I don't advise anyone to take. But on this day of Pentecost, I would like us all to gain a greater appreciation for the person and work of the Spirit – not by having him taken away – but rather by meditating on what Jesus says in today's Gospel is the multi-faceted work of the Spirit in our lives.

So, with this in mind, we're back to the upper room on the evening of Thursday in Holy Week. Jesus is preparing his disciples for all that's about to happen. He tells them that he is going away to the Father. And he tells them that he is going to send the Holy Spirit, whom he refers to as the Helper. In fact, he says it's for their good that he is going away, because unless he goes, the Holy Spirit cannot come. Now, hearing this, and considering where we are in the Church calendar, we might be tempted to think that Jesus is talking about his upcoming ascension into heaven, and that for some strange reason the Spirit cannot come until Jesus is raised in glory to his Father's right hand – like maybe we're only allowed to have one person of the Holy Trinity with us at any given time. But that's not right. You see, in the immediate context, when Jesus talks about going to the Father, he's referring to the cross. He's going to the Father as the sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world by suffering and dying in our place. That's what has to happen before the Holy Spirit of God can descend and dwell within people. The reason is that we are sinful and unclean – our bodies are unfit vessels to contain the Spirit. The holy God cannot dwell within sinners: that would kill us. The holy fire of his presence would burn us up like dry kindling. It's only after the sacrifice of Jesus has been completed and our sins have been atoned for, after we have been washed in his blood and cleansed, as it were, that the Holy Spirit can enter us and make our bodies his living temples.

When that is done, Jesus will send the Spirit. And we see him doing this already when he appears to his disciples on the evening of the first Easter. After he shows them his hands and sides and they are convinced that he has really risen from the dead, we're told that he

breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. And they receive the Spirit they did. The light of true faith finally came on in them. Recall that no matter how many times prior to his crucifixion Jesus told his disciples what he had come to do and what had to happen, they simply didn’t get it. His words about the cross bounced right off them. But now, the sacrifice of Jesus complete and he having been raised from the dead, they are prepared to receive the Spirit. And with the Spirit’s help as Jesus speaks, their minds are opened to understand the Holy Scriptures and what the mission and ministry of Jesus is really all about.

And though they now understood these things with the aid of the Spirit, the full coming of the Spirit and the full empowerment which the Spirit gave them to not only understand but also to testify to the truths of the Gospel—*that’s* what happened at Pentecost. And through their testimony and preaching – by their declaring the Words Jesus gave them to speak – the Holy Spirit was delivered to many who heard them, and these became believers too. Meanwhile others hardened their hearts and persisted in their unbelief by rejecting the gift and the help of the Spirit. They heard the miracle of the tongues like everyone else, but since they couldn’t understand what was being said, they concluded that the disciples must have been drunk – that they were just speaking gibberish—which to them, I suppose they were.

But who we want to focus on are the ones who did end up believing. In today’s Gospel, Jesus explains exactly what Spirit did to them – how the Spirit does his work of creating faith in the Lord Jesus. We want to know because we want to be like them. To be sure, we are like them: we do believe. And we want to go on believing; which is why we want to know how the Spirit works in us so that we will understand how he creates and maintains our hope and trust in Jesus the Savior.

This miraculous work of the Spirit is threefold. Jesus said that when the Spirit comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Concerning sin, Jesus explains, because they do not believe in me. Unbelief, of course, is the source of all sin. If we truly believed the Words and Promises of God, we would never sin. But more to the point Jesus is making, the initial reason people reject and refuse to believe in him is that they don’t think they need saving. They think that they’re reasonably good all by themselves; that if there’s a God (and most people do believe that much) they think he ought to be fairly pleased with them because, by and large, they try to do what’s right. In the end they believe they will be rewarded by a happy and grateful God with eternal life. What they don’t want to hear is that they are sinners in need of a Savior. This is true of the sinful nature in all of us: we don’t like hearing how evil we really are. This is why too that Jesus was persecuted not by atheists or pagans during his earthly ministry, but by the very people who had God’s commands and thought that they were doing his will. So the first thing the Spirit must do is convict the sinful heart that it is indeed sinful. The Spirit does this with the Law of God. He shows us just how far we fall short of God’s perfect standard in order that we will understand that we richly deserve – that we have earned by our thoughts, words, and actions – not praise and reward from the Lord, but rather his everlasting condemnation. Only then can we despair of ourselves and see the need for a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son.

Then we’re ready for the next step. Jesus said that the Spirit would convict the world concerning righteousness because he (Jesus) was going to the Father and we would see him no longer. Here Jesus speaks of the righteousness he earned for us by his suffering and dying on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins. It’s not what we do to be righteous; it’s what he did for us by giving his perfect life so that God could reckon us righteous through faith in him. And that’s key: this righteousness is ours through faith, which is why we can see him no longer – or at least for the time being. If we could see him now in exalted glory, we wouldn’t need to have

faith in him, we'd know for certain. But God has chosen to save us by grace through faith – and faith is hope and trust in things that are not seen. And having convicted us of our sins, the Spirit works through the words of Christ's Gospel – the story of what he did for us – to create in our hearts faith in Jesus in order that we too will be counted righteous in him.

And then comes the third step of the Spirit's work. Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. He means Satan, the prince of this fallen world. His name means "accuser" or "adversary". He wants nothing more than to shake the hope and confidence you have in Christ. He wants you to go back to trusting in your own goodness for salvation, or to imagine that Christ's sacrifice on your behalf was not enough – that you have to add to it by the way you live your new reformed life. If that doesn't work, then Satan would try to get you to believe that you are somehow too sinful to be forgiven by God, that your sins are too terrible or too many for even God to forgive. But the Spirit is the one who works in us the confidence to say to Satan, "No. You're wrong. Yes it's true I'm sinful. And yes, I still continue to sin. Every day. Much. But God has given me a Savior who is even greater than my sin. And for his sake and while I trust in him I am a forgiven child of God. I'm not condemned, Satan; you are. You are like a condemned man facing final sentencing. And when Christ the judge appears you get your just punishment; but I will rise and live with my Savior in glory forever." It's the Spirit who gives us the confidence to believe that no matter what happens, and no matter what deceptions or what hurdles Satan throws our way.

And we need to understand that this threefold work of the Spirit is an ongoing thing. As Jesus told his disciples, he had other truths to reveal to them that they could not bear at that time. So it is also with us. We can't take in all that Jesus has to say to us in one sitting, or in twenty sittings, or even in an entire lifetime of sitting at his feet listening to his Words. But through the words of Jesus, the words he gave to his disciples, and the words that he by the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Gospels and the Epistles and all the rest of the books of the Bible to set down for us on paper – through these words and the power of the Spirit, he continues to convict us of sin and righteousness and judgment in order that the ongoing miracle of faith will burn brightly within us, that we too will believe and be saved, and that we will be equipped and inspired to bear witness to others of the truths of Christ.

Therefore in confidence and thanksgiving we pray: "Come Holy Spirit. Enlighten us with the truth. Convict us daily of sin and righteousness and judgment. Testify to us of Jesus. Work in our hearts great trust in him. Grant that we be guided by his Word in all that we think, say, and do. And give us the grace also to testify of him that through our words and your power, many more may come to saving faith. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Soli Deo Gloria!