

“We Do Not Lose Heart”

In the name of him who for us crushed the serpent’s head, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We’re still quite early in the Pentecost season of the church year, a time in which we turn our attention the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the lives of the people of God. Two weeks back when we celebrated the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, we saw that his primary role in our sanctification is to work saving faith in our hearts. That is to say the Christian Gospel is this: the Father in love sends his Son to redeem the world. The Son in love takes on our flesh and blood, lives a perfect human life on our behalf, gives that life as a sacrifice for our sins, and then rises again on the third day to demonstrate that by his passion and death all sins have been atoned for. That’s the Gospel. That’s the truth that saves. But it wouldn’t do any of us a lick of good without the Holy Spirit doing his part, which is to work in us the faith to believe it. To illustrate with the imagery of the Parable of the Sower, if we are the soil, and the Gospel message is the good seed that the Sower sows, then the Holy Spirit is the water without which the seed cannot germinate and grow. And that’s an especially fitting picture because the Holy Spirit is often described in the Scripture as life-giving water. He’s even said to be poured out upon people. Why, it’s almost baptismal! No, I take that back. It *is* baptismal.

But today we want to go beyond that. In us the Seed of Christ’s saving truth has been sown. The Spirit has caused it to germinate and take root in our hearts. Our plants of faith are growing. What’s next? Well, the reason God has planted in us saving faith in Christ is so that we may bear fruit. What kind of fruit? There are many answers to that question. The Lord wants to produce in us *all* the fruit of the Spirit, things like love, kindness, gentleness, patience, peace, and so on; but today we want to start with the very first fruit that the Spirit produces in those who believe. And for some insight on that we turn to today’s Epistle lesson.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Christian congregation at Corinth, a church he himself planted several years earlier. So he knows most of these believers. And he also knows that since his departure to continue his work of evangelism in other places the congregation at Corinth has experienced a lot of problems. There are open conflicts and divisions among the members. There are misunderstandings concerning some basic Christian doctrines. Some of them are engaged in highly inappropriate behaviors. And in at least some of the members there is simmering anger and resentment toward Paul. Paul addressed most of these issues in his first letter to the church at Corinth. That today’s text comes from the second letter he sent to them to straighten them out tells us that despite his prior counsel and instruction, they were still in many ways a pretty dysfunctional group.

Nevertheless, even with all their problems, they were still a Christian church. The Gospel of truth was being proclaimed in their midst. And where the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from death is being proclaimed and heard, there the Holy Spirit is working saving faith in peoples’ hearts. And that inevitably leads to the first fruit of the Spirit, which is confession. Thus Paul writes, “Since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what has been written, ‘I believed, and so I spoke’, we also believe and so we speak.”

This is important. It’s a fruit of the Spirit that we often overlook because it seems so obvious or trivial perhaps, but the Christian church is above all a confessing church. We speak what we believe. We hear the truths of God’s Word, by the power of the Spirit we apprehend these truths with our minds and hearts, and then we speak them back aloud. And in this we are

saved, as Paul writes elsewhere in his letter to the church at Rome, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

This is why we have one of the three ecumenical creeds as a regular part of our services, so we can with the whole church speak the faith in Christ that we believe. This is why when someone becomes a member of the church we have them stand up before the congregation and answer questions about their faith so that they can say and we can all hear what they believe. This is why at the Baptism of an infant we have the parents and sponsors respond to questions, so that they can speak on behalf of the child the faith the Holy Spirit is at that moment working in the baby’s tiny heart. This is why we have Confirmation. It’s the occasion at which those who have been baptized and taught publically confess for themselves the faith that was confessed for them when they were too young to articulate it. And this is why in the church we respond to statements and proclamations of God’s Word with the expression “Amen”. It means, “Yes. I agree. That’s true.” We believe, and so we speak.

It’s always been this way for those who believe the truths of the Gospel. In writing this, Paul is quoting from the 116th Psalm in which David declares, “I believed, and so I spoke.” And what Paul is saying is that we have the same spirit of faith that he did. What David believed and spoke, so also we believe and confess. This is what unites the church of all ages. This is what binds us together into one body of believers: those who have gone before us, those living now, and those yet to come, all by the same Spirit believe and confess the same truths about Jesus – and in this we are saved. As Paul goes on to say, “We know that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring you with us into his presence.”

This necessary speaking of what we believe is more than just a witness within the church. It is inherently evangelistic. We speak the faith so that others who do not know Christ may hear and believe. The Holy Spirit works through our words, the faith we confess, to reach others and make them believers too. In this way the grace of God in Christ extends to more and more people as the Holy Spirit who, through the mouths of believers, propagates in all the world the church that confesses Christ – resulting in increased thanksgiving and glory to God as he brings more souls to salvation through knowledge of the truth.

And it also results in increased opposition. It’s inevitable. The world is by nature hostile to the truths of the Gospel. People are in rebellion against God. They don’t want to submit to his rule. They are deceived by the lies of Satan. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing and it’s an offense to those who seek a way of salvation that comes of their own works and worthiness. So when God’s people speak the truths they believe, they can expect to encounter a backlash.

We see this in today’s Gospel in which Jesus encounters hostility for his teaching. And note where it’s coming from. It’s not rank pagans and idol worshippers who are opposing him as you would expect. No, he gets it from his own family. They think he’s gone off the deep end, that he’s lost his mind. He also receives opposition from the scribes and religious leaders. They accuse Jesus of being possessed by demons and of performing exorcisms by the power of Satan.

Paul too encountered plenty of opposition whenever he spoke the truth of the Gospel of Christ. It was his practice when coming to a new city to proclaim Jesus to begin at the Jewish synagogue if they had one. These were, after all, the people who were expecting the Lord’s Messiah to appear. They’d have the background to know what Paul was talking about when he explained that Jesus is the One they were waiting for. And typically what would happen is that

some of those who heard Paul would believe. The Holy Spirit would work in them the gift of faith. And they'd confess the truth. They'd be saved. But others would not believe. They'd resist the work of the Spirit. They'd become angry. And very often they became violent – both to Paul and to those who believed him. Congregations and families were torn apart as those who rejected the Gospel turned on those who believed.

Widespread persecutions were to follow. For the first three hundred years of the Christian era the Christian faith was an illegal religion. You could be killed for confessing Christ. And many believers were killed, some in horrible ways. Those who weren't killed suffered in other ways: beaten, forced to flee their homes, exiled, imprisoned, their property confiscated.

Paul experienced a lot of it firsthand even before the general persecutions of Christians began. He and his companions were at times publically flogged, cast into prison, threatened and beaten by mobs; one time he was stoned and left for dead. Ultimately he would be executed by having his head cut off.

And yet, in spite of all these adversities he faced because he believed and spoke the Gospel, he writes, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Yes, the truth of Christ we believe, the truth of Christ we confess, is going to put us at odds with the world we live in. And we can expect to suffer on account of it. With the rise of radical Islam abroad and with some of the cultural developments that are taking place in our own country, we're likely to see more of it than we have in the recent past. So what? The truth we confess is that this world and everything in it is passing away. It's not going to last. The Christian faith is that Jesus died for us and rose again, and that he is going to raise us on the Last Day and give us an eternal inheritance that will never spoil or fade. The glory that will be revealed to us then far, far outstrips whatever troubles we encounter because we confess Christ as our Savior. In the end we will see that it was all worth it. We'll even see that the Lord used our afflictions to hold us close to himself, to draw us ever deeper into his Word, so that by the Spirit our faith would be strengthened and purified. We will see then what we believe now, that all things work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.

This we believe. So this we confess. And knowing for certain what wondrous glories will be ours in the age to come, we do not lose heart. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!