

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

Acts 2:1-21; Galatians 5:16-24

Today we celebrate the birth of the holy Christian church. Not that there weren't Christians *before* Pentecost. A Christian is anyone who faithfully believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the world's only Savior. That would include Old Testament believers as well as New, people like Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Elijah—anyone who looked forward in faith to the promise of the Messiah, God's Anointed.

But today, fifty days after our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and ten days after He ascended, marks the beginning of the gathering of God's people around the gifts of Jesus made present by the Holy Spirit. That's what the word *church* means; it means "gathering." You could even say that Pentecost was the occasion of the first Divine Service, since we read in Acts 2 that the multitude of Jews dwelling in Jerusalem *came together* at the sound of the mighty rushing wind (v. 6). They heard the apostles tell in their own languages the mighty works of God (v. 11), and through Peter's preaching in particular were cut to the heart, God granting them repentance, and many, about three thousand souls in all, were saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit in Baptism (Titus 3:5). And from that point on, it says, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), just as we and Christians around the world do to this day.

So, Happy Birthday, Church! And don't worry if you didn't get Her anything. That's not what this is about. It's more like one of those parties where the invitation says, "No gifts, please." Because all the gifts are *God's* to give. Last week, Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4). That promise was the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father sent in Jesus' name on Pentecost. It was a *gift*. And yeah, the whole tongues-of-fire-on-the-head thing was neat, but the *best* part of receiving this gift was the boldness and confidence it gave the apostles to confess the Word of God *without fear*. A later, we find them arrested and brought before the Jewish council, the same council that tried and sentenced Jesus to death, the same Jews from which they had been hiding on Easter Sunday, and when charged to stop teaching in Jesus' name, they bravely answer, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). And even when they are beaten and threatened to keep quiet, they leave the council, *rejoicing* that they have been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for Jesus' name. Most of them went on to be martyrs, bearing witness to their Lord to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:4).

And thanks be to God, for without the apostles' preaching there would *be* no church. For, we read in Paul's letter to the Romans (10:13-15), "'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" We believe, not by our own reason or strength, but by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word. Someone was sent to preach the good news to us. By grace, we heard that good news and believed. Believing, we call on the name of Jesus Christ to save us. "For the promise is for you," Peter preached to the crowds on Pentecost, "and for your children, *everyone* whom the Lord our God calls to Himself" (Acts 2:39).

But just like the apostles, once you receive this gift, that doesn't mean your troubles are over. If anything, it *stirs up* conflict. Paul talks about this in Romans 7, saying, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (Romans 7:21-23). There's a battle now, a tug of war, between your old sinful nature and the new man, the new creation, that you have become in Christ. "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh," Paul writes in Galatians 5, "for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (5:17). You, like the rest of mankind, were conceived and born sinful, and you would be lost forever, unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. And so, God has started a *war* in you. He has given you His Holy Spirit, in order to wake you up, to show you the danger, and to help you fight against the powers of darkness.

Continuing in Galatians, Paul says, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not satisfy the desires of the flesh" (5:16). And what he means is, "By the Spirit battle against the flesh and follow the Word and will of God." Are we forgiven? Yes. Has Christ delivered up for our treasuries and raised for our justification? This is most certainly true. But we are still corrupted by evil desire. We still sin every day with our thoughts, words, and actions. And sin is dangerous. It's lethal. It's *not on your side*. So, Paul tells us to *fight*. "Don't give in," he says. "Don't surrender to temptation, but take up arms and walk by the Spirit you've been given."

And let's just get straight here that this is not a sign of weakness. There are some who teach that if you struggle with sin then you are not a "good" Christian. In fact, you may not even be a Christian at all. But it's just the opposite. If you *don't* struggle with sin, then there's a good chance you're not aware of it. And if you're not aware of it, then

you probably haven't received the Spirit of truth (John 16:13). For such a thing is spiritually discerned. You cannot reason your way even into repentance. But the fact that you're *fighting*, that you're *aware* of your sin and want to do better, means that you're on the right track, that you know your enemy, and that all is not lost for you. It is a sure sign that the Helper is *with* you, teaching you to *recognize* your sinful desires, that you might not give in to them or gratify them.

Speaking of which, Paul goes on, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). Persistence is the worst sin of all. You see, Paul's not talking about those who stumble on occasion, losing a skirmish with sin here and there. He's talking about those who *refuse* to fight, who make a *practice* of sinning, letting it rule over them. Such a person will not inherit the kingdom of God, because such a person has *rejected Christ*, taking the cross for granted. He has blasphemed the Holy Spirit, calling His truth a lie. His heart clings to something else, some other god, which cannot save him. So David prays in Psalm 19 (v. 13a), "Keep Your servant...from willful sins; may they not rule over me."

The desires of the Spirit are wholly different. You may even know them by heart: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). There is no law, because these are *holy* desires, *opposed* to the desires of the flesh: love versus enmity; peace versus dissensions; gentleness versus fits of anger. As Christians, *this* is what we want to be doing, not sinning that grace may abound, but following the Holy Spirit, even if it means tribulation for us in the world. Love is not love, but the fulfilling of the Law. Goodness is not always what the world calls "good."

And yet, it is not this outward righteousness that makes us acceptable in God's sight. It is the righteousness of *faith*, which clings to Christ alone, who is our righteousness. The Law shows our sin; Jesus is our Savior. "And those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24). They have *died* to sin, because they trust in Jesus' death for them.

Which is why Paul refers to these holy desires not as "works" of the Spirit but as *fruit*. Evil works originate in ourselves alone, as Christ says in Mark 7 (vv. 21-23): "What comes *out* of a person is what defiles him. For from *within*, out of the *heart* of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery," and many of the same things Paul mentions in Galatians. But *good* works require something more, something from *outside* of ourselves. For, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).

And where there is faith, there is also *fruit*, i.e., peace, patience, kindness, etc. The Holy Spirit is the *root* of these good things. He's like the Gift that keeps on giving. Those who have received Him *will* bear fruit. It may not happen all at once. The change may be *imperceptible*—fruit takes a while to grow. But it will grow. And it will be to the glory of God.

And, again, such fruit is not the *source* of our salvation but merely “the proof that faith is living” (LSB 555:9). You cannot give God anything, for “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). There is nothing you have that He does not already possess, that He hasn't Himself *given to you*. (“No gifts, please,” remember?) He has given His Son to die for you. He has given you His Holy Spirit. He has given you faith and the forgiveness of sins. He gives, and He gives, and He gives, and the giving has only just begun. When the war is over, when the dust settles, and we all meet again in the Resurrection on the Last Day, He will give us life everlasting with Him. That's why He started this war in the first place. The only thing He desired to have was you. So He gave you to Himself, that you might be His forever. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

So, walk by the Spirit. Fight the good fight. You have been crucified with Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. Be bold to confess the Word without fear. The Lord, He is God, and this is His Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria