

Pentecost 2006
Text: John 14:23-31
Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you laugh at those builders of the Tower of Babel in today's Old Testament lesson? Do you think they were ridiculous primitives who thought that they could storm heaven with a tower built by hands? Perhaps they were foolish – but do not laugh so hastily for you may find in them a mirror for your own soul. For what they were trying to do with that tower was protect themselves from God. They were going to build it high and coat it with tar to waterproof it – for it was only in their grandfathers' time that the world had been destroyed by a flood; they remembered the stories. But now they would be prepared. Now they would build their tower high and cover it well with tar. Now they would be safe. Now God could not touch them.

And thus have you tried to protect yourself. When God demands your perfect obedience, you throw up your walls of defense against him: I'm not as bad as some people, or it wasn't my fault, or I didn't really mean it. Have you not found yourself on your knees in a crisis trying to cut a deal with God, to tame him? If only you will do this, O Lord, then I will promise never, ever to do that again, or I will promise to do that other thing I should do. As if God could be bribed and as if he didn't already have your best interest at heart. At least a tower built to the sky has some weight and heft to it unlike these flimsy excuses and self-justifications.

So repent. Acknowledge that you are one with your ancestors at Babel. Admit that your self-built safety nets will not hold you. Turn away from trying to cut a deal with God on your own terms and you will find that the deal he offers is better than you would have expected. For behold! It is Pentecost and the curse of Babel is undone.

In their pride and self-confidence the people of Babel had to be scattered to the four winds. This was the beginning of nations and ethnicities and disunity and wars in the human race. But today rejoice! For on Pentecost that curse is overturned as the Apostles are given the ability to speak all the languages that had their start on that fateful day in the plain of Shinar. Jesus has fulfilled his purpose:

he has died for the sins of the whole world, risen from the dead for the world's salvation, and ascended on high to rule the world as God and man. He has taken upon himself the pride and pettiness of tower-builders and deal-cutters, the faithless and the cowards. The ridiculousness of our sins is laid upon him.

For it is ridiculous to try to ascend to heaven in a skyscraper – just as it ridiculous and pitiful to try to ascend to heaven on a ladder built of human works and self-made righteousness, which always stinks as filthy rags before the Holy God. But all that sad folly is atoned for now. Jesus took it with him to the grave – and the devil laughed at what he thought was God's foolishness: that God would die for humanity. But it is our Lord who has the last laugh as he rises from the dead victorious and demonstrating that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men or devils.

For this is God's grace: to save those who have gone astray, even those who strayed to the ends of the earth and forgot the true God of their father Noah. The curse of Babel will be undone now that Jesus has united all humanity again in himself and calls all humanity to repentance and faith in him. For not only all Israel but even all humanity is reduced again to one man, the second Adam, who undoes the fall of the the first Adam. Where he and his offspring failed, Jesus succeeds. And now the Body of humanity will be built together again as the Body of Christ: one flock, one shepherd; one body, one head; one Lord, one Church. And it all gets started on Pentecost when Babel is undone, when the tongues of men are united again as a sign that the old has passed and the new has come. There is no Jew or Greek here, no German or Swede, no Hutu or Tutsi: all are one in Christ because all are baptized into the one Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit by the washing of rebirth and renewal in the waters sanctified by the work of the Spirit who is sent by the Son from the Father.

And this gift is yours, dear Christian. Cherish it. In our Gospel lesson today Jesus promises you this Spirit, this Comforter and Helper who guides you into all truth. How does the Spirit do this? At the end of Acts chapter 2 we read this description of the concluding events of Pentecost day: “³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." ⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

There you have it. That's the Church: the place where the Spirit works

through Baptism, the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread – that is the Lord's Supper – and “the prayers.” The Spirit regenerates us and makes us reborn in Baptism – for Jesus says in John 3, “No one shall enter the kingdom of heaven unless born again of water and the Spirit.” The Spirit leads us with the words of the Apostles – that is, the Scriptures read and preached – for Jesus promised these Apostles that the Spirit would lead them into all truth and remind them of what Jesus had said. The Spirit feeds us with Jesus in the Lord's Supper – for Jesus is the God who calls what is not into being, he is the same God who said, Let there be light and there was light, - thus in the breaking of what appears to the eyes to be bread we know that we have what Jesus promises: “Take eat, THIS IS MY BODY.....THIS IS MY BLOOD given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.”

And note well the last item on the list of how the Church lives as the Church: they are devoted to “the prayers.” Note well that St. Luke does not say that they are just devoted to “prayer” but to “the prayers.” The Church doesn't just gather together to have a time of free form prayer – no, the Church gathers around the Apostles' Teaching, and the Spirit's Baptism, and the Son's Supper, all the while saying “the prayers” the Father gives us: the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, the canticles given to us in the Scriptures like the Kyrie – Lord have mercy; the Sanctus – Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of Sabaoth; the Nunc Dimittis – Lord lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; the Agnus Dei – O Christ, Thou Lamb of God. . .And so on and so on.

In other words, the Church lives from the Word of God. God breathes into her with the breath of his Spirit from the Words of Scripture and the Church breathes back out what God has given her to breathe. This is how the Divine Service, the Liturgy, grew up in the Church in a natural progression from “the prayers.” This is why we worship how we worship: we're simply living out what the Apostles gave us to do. You can look back to the earliest liturgies we have from the Church of the second and third centuries and still hear the same Scriptural prayers leading the baptized to the same Sacrament of the Altar. You can travel around the world and just as on Pentecost hear the same words in all the languages of men.

The Spirit sent by the Son from the Father – rebirth in Holy Baptism – forgiveness and strength in the Lord's Supper – enlightenment from the Word of the Apostles read and preached – praying back to God the prayers he has given us to pray together as one body: this is the picture of the Church we receive on this first Pentecost. And it is still the same today. Cherish your place in it. Know that you are the baptized, forgiven child of God. Know that the Spirit dwells in you, that your body is now the temple of God. Know that you are intimately connected to your Lord Jesus in soul and body as he feeds you with his true flesh and blood to incorporate you into his mystical body, the Church. Know that the day is coming

when the promise of Pentecost will finally and fully be fulfilled, when there shall be complete unity in the Lord when he returns to complete our salvation in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. Know all this and rejoice this Pentecost day. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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