

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

John 14:23-31

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil, 1523

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Before we explain this Gospel lesson we must first say a few words about the festival of Pentecost and its history, or the event we celebrate on this day. St. Luke records it in the Acts of the Apostles, second chapter, verses 1-41, in the following words: "***And when the day of Pentecost was now come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.***

"Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound was heard, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speaking in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying, Behold, are not all these that speak Galileans? And how hear we, every man in our own language wherein we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, in Judea and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, in Phrygia and Pamphylia, in Egypt and the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and sojourners from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God. And they were all amazed, and were perplexed, saying one to another, What meaneth this? But others mocking said, They are filled with new wine.

"But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and spake forth unto them, saying:

"Ye men of Judea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and give ear unto my words. For these are not drunken, as ye suppose; seeing it is but the third hour of the day; but this is that which hath been spoken through the prophet Joel:

***And it shall be in the last days, saith God,
I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh:
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,
And your old men shall dream dreams:
Yea and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days
Will I pour forth of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heaven above,
And signs on the earth beneath;
Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke:
The sun shall be turned into darkness
And the moon into blood,
Before the day of the Lord come,***

*That great and notable day:
And it shall be, that whosoever shall call on the name of the
Lord shall be saved.*

"Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know; him, being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay: whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David saith concerning him,

*I beheld the Lord always before my face;
For he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved:
Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
Moreover my flesh also shall dwell in hope:
Because thou wilt not leave my soul unto Hades,
Neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption.
Thou madest known unto me the ways of life;
Thou shalt make me full of gladness with thy countenance.*

"Brethren, I may say unto you freely of the patriarch David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us unto this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins he would set one upon his throne; he foreseeing this spake of the resurrection of the Christ, that neither was he left unto Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus did God raise up, whereof we all are witnesses.

"Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath poured forth this, which ye see and hear. For David ascended not into the heavens: but he saith himself,

*The Lord said unto my Lord,
Sit thou on my right hand,
Till I make thine enemies the footstool of thy feet.*

Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified.

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him. And with many other words he testified, and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation. They then that received his Word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers."

This is the history of the day. The festival we call Pentecost originated thus: When God led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he had them to celebrate the Easter festival the same night, and commanded them to

celebrate it annually, as a memorial of their exodus out of Egypt. Counting from that day, they journeyed in the desert for fifty days, to Mount Sinai, where the Law was given to them by God, through Moses. Hence they celebrated the festival we call Pentecost. For the little word "Pentecost" is derived from the Greek *Pentecostes*, signifying the fiftieth day; the Saxons say *Pingsten*. It is to this festival that Luke has reference. When the fifty days after Easter were past and the disciples had celebrated the event of God's having given the people the Law on Mount Sinai, then the Holy Spirit came and gave them a different law. We celebrate the festival, not because of the old, but because of the new event, because of the sending of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we must offer a little explanation and show the difference between our Pentecost and the Jews' Pentecost.

In the first place, the Jews celebrated the festival because the Law had been given them in writing; but we ought to celebrate it because God's Law is given to us spiritually. St. Paul aims to make this plain. In the second Epistle to the Corinthians, chapters 3 and 4, he speaks of two kinds of preaching. And just as there are two kinds of preaching, so also there are two kinds of people.

First, the written Law is that which God has commanded and embodied in writing. It is called "written" because it proceeds no further and does not enter the heart, nor do any works follow, except mere hypocritical works; the Law has only an outward significance. The people also, in this sense, remain altogether written. Since the Law has existed only in writing, in letters, it has been dead, and its influence has been deadening. It has ruled a dead people, for the hearts were dead which did not willingly do God's commandment. If every man were allowed his own free will, to do as he pleased without fear of punishment, none would be found who would not rejoice in exemption from the Law.

Man's nature is to follow his desire, but he is compelled to do otherwise. He thinks: God will punish me and cast me into hell if I do not keep his commandment. Since it is his nature to obey reluctantly and with displeasure when his will is opposed, man becomes hostile to God because of the penalty; he knows that he is a sinner and not in harmony with God, that he does not love God, yea, rather he would there were no God. Such hatred of God is hidden in the heart, no matter how finely nature adorns herself outwardly. Hence we see that the Law, as long as it is merely written, a Law in letters, makes no one righteous, for it enters not the heart. On this theme we have preached and written a great deal.

The other Law is spiritual. It is not written with pen and ink, nor spoken by word of mouth like the Law on the stone tablets handled by Moses, but, as we see in Luke's narrative, the Holy Spirit falls from heaven and fills all the company assembled together, manifesting itself upon them in cloven and fiery tongues, causing them to preach boldly and with a power they had not before, so that all the people were pricked in their hearts and marveled. The Holy Spirit streams into the heart and makes a new man, one who now loves God and gladly does his will. Such is the Holy Spirit himself, or rather the work he does in the heart. He writes in fiery flame on the heart and makes it alive, causing it to find expression in fiery tongue and active hand; a new man is made, who is conscious of a reason, heart and mind unlike he formerly had. Everything is now alive: He has a live reason; he has light and courage and a heart which burns with love and delights in whatever pleases God. This is the real difference between the written and the spiritual laws of God; and such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the great art is to preach aright concerning the Holy Spirit. Hitherto it has been preached concerning him that he alone produced and inspired what the councils decreed and what the pope commanded in ecclesiastical law, whereas the whole papistical law is only outward in effect, commands only outward observances and rules in material things. Their claim is simply nonsensical, the reverse of their claim being true. For they turn the work of the Holy Spirit into a written, dead law, whereas it is essentially a spiritual and living law, and they make of him a Moses and a human weakling. The reason is, they do not know what the Holy Spirit is, why he is given, and what his office is. Therefore let us learn and understand well what he is, in order that we may define his office.

Here you learn that he comes down and fills the disciples, who before sat in sorrow and fear, and renders their tongues fiery and cloven; he so kindles them that they grow bold and preach freely to the multitude, and fear nothing. You see very clearly that the Holy Spirit's office is not to write books nor to make laws, but freely to abrogate them; and that he is a God who writes only in the heart, who makes it burn, and creates new courage, so that man grows happy before God, filled with love toward him, and with a happy heart serves the people. When the office of the Holy Spirit is thus represented, it is rightly preached. Do not believe those who picture it otherwise. Now, you perceive that when he comes in this manner he abolishes the letter of the Law and desires to liberate the people from their sins and from the Law; the latter is no more needed, for he, himself, rules inwardly in the heart. They who oppose this doctrine, however, criticize him for compelling the people, like Moses, and above all for making new laws.

What means does he use and what skill does he employ thus to change the heart and make it new? He employs the proclamation and preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ; this Christ declares in John 15:26: ***"But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall bear witness of me."*** Now, we have often heard that the substance of the Gospel is this: God has proclaimed to everyone that no man can become just by means of the Law, but rather is thereby condemned. That therefore he has sent down his dear Son to shed his blood and die, since men could not, by their own power and works, cancel their sins and get rid of them.

But in addition to what is thus preached, something else is needed; for even though I hear the preaching, I do not at once believe. Therefore, God adds his Holy Spirit, who impresses this preaching upon the heart, so that it abides there and lives. It is a faithful saying that Christ has accomplished everything, has removed sin and overcome every enemy, so that through him we are lords over all things. But the treasure lies yet in one pile; it is not yet distributed nor invested. Consequently, if we are to possess it, the Holy Spirit must come and teach our hearts to believe and say: I, too, am one of those who are to have this treasure. When we feel that God has thus helped us and given the treasure to us, everything goes well, and it cannot be otherwise than that man's heart rejoices in God and lifts itself up, saying: Dear Father, if it is thy will to show toward me such great love and faithfulness, which I cannot fully fathom, then will I also love thee with all my heart and be joyful, and cheerfully do what pleases thee. Thus, the heart does not now look at God with evil eyes, does not imagine he will cast us into hell, as it did before the Holy Spirit came, when it felt none of the goodness, love, or faithfulness of God, but only his wrath and disfavor. Since the Holy Spirit has impressed upon the heart that God is kind and gracious toward it, it believes that God can no more be angry, and grows so happy and so bold that, for God's sake, it performs and suffers everything possible to perform and to suffer.

In this way you are to become acquainted with the Holy Spirit. You may know to what purpose he is given and what his office is, namely, to invest the treasure--Christ and all he has, who is given to us and proclaimed by the Gospel; the Holy Spirit will give him into your heart so that he may be your own. When he has accomplished this, and when you feel Christ in your heart, you will be constrained to cry: Is this the idea, that my works are of no avail but the Holy Spirit must perform all? Why then do I punish myself with works and the Law? Thus all human works and laws vanish, yea, even the law of Moses; for such a being is superior to all law. The Holy Spirit teaches man better than all the books; he teaches him to understand the Scriptures better than he can understand from the teaching of any other; and of his own accord he does everything God wills he should, so the Law dare make no demands upon him.

Therefore, we need books only for the purpose of demonstrating that it is written even as the Holy Spirit teaches. We must not confine faith to ourselves, but must let it break forth into action; and to confirm and establish it, we must have the Scriptures. Therefore, be very careful to consider the Holy Spirit in no way a law-maker, but as one who abrogates the Law and frees man, so that no written letter remains, or that it remains only for the sake of preaching.

In all this, however, we ought to exercise sense and wisdom, understanding that a man receiving the Holy Spirit is not at once perfect, insensible to the Law and to sin, pure in all respects. For we do not preach, concerning the Holy Spirit and his office, that he has completed and finished his work, but that he has only begun it and is now constantly engaged in it, and that he is ceaselessly progressing; consequently, you will not find a man who is without sin and without sorrow, full of righteousness and full of joy, and so perfect that he is never needlessly concerned about anything, and who serves everybody freely. The Scriptures indeed tell us that the office of the Holy Spirit is to redeem from sin and fear; but that does not say that this is altogether accomplished.

Therefore, a Christian must at times feel his sin and the fear of death, and be concerned about all else that troubles a sinner. Unbelievers may be sunk so deeply in their sins that they do not feel them; but believers do feel them, yet they possess a helper, the Holy Spirit, who comforts and strengthens them. However, if he had finished and made an end of his office, they would experience none of these fears.

Therefore, I say that we must be wise and take care that we do not boast of the Holy Spirit too confidently and joyously, that we may not become too secure and imagine that we are perfect in all respects. For a pious Christian still is flesh and blood like other people, but he fights against sin and evil lust and feels what he would rather not feel--Romans 7:15 ff. The unbelievers are indifferent and make no such fight.

It makes no difference that we feel evil lusts if we only battle against them. Therefore, the Christian must not judge according to his feelings, believing because of them that he is lost, but he must labor all his life with the remaining sin of which he is conscious and must permit the Holy Spirit to work, groaning without ceasing, to be rid of sin. Such groaning never ceases in believers, but is more profound than can be uttered, as St. Paul declares to the Romans (8:26). But there is a precious listener, the Holy Spirit himself, who deeply feels our longing and also comforts our consciences.

The two must always be mingled, in our feelings--the Holy Spirit and our sin and imperfection. Our case must be like that of a sick man who is in the hands of the physician; presently he will be better. Therefore let no one think: Such a one possesses the Holy Spirit, consequently he must be altogether strong, without infirmities, and do only precious works. No, not yet. The Gospel is not a proclamation for everybody. It is a proclamation exceedingly gracious, but a coarse, hard heart may hear it without receiving any good; rather are such made more audacious and careless, imagining they need not war against the flesh, because they do not feel their sin and misery. The Holy Spirit is given to none except to those who are in sorrow and fear; in them it produces good fruit. This gift is so precious and worthy that God does not cast it before dogs. Though the unrepentant discover it themselves, hearing it preached, they devour it and know not what they devour. The hearts which receive it with profit are such as feel their evil lust but are unable to escape from it. There must be struggling if the Holy Spirit is to abide in the heart, and let no one dare think it will be otherwise.

This is what we find in the narrative before us. The dear disciples sat in fear and terror, and still uncomforted and without courage. They were filled with unbelief and ready to despair, and it was with much effort and labor that Christ cheered and established them again. Their only difficulty was, they were afraid the heavens would fall upon them, and the Lord himself could scarcely comfort them until he said to them: The Holy Spirit shall come upon you from heaven: he will imprint me upon your hearts so that

you will know me, and through me the Father; then will your heart rejoice. And so it happened. When the Holy Spirit came they were comforted and strengthened and full of joy.

Thus I have described to you the Holy Spirit. Now let us see in this Gospel lesson what we have discussed so far. Christ declares:

"If a man love me, he will keep my Word: and my Father will love him."

This text raises a question: Why does Christ speak as though we must be first to love, when it is certain that the opposite is true, that God must first love us? This question I have before solved and in the following manner: Several passages read as if we begin the work and others as if God begins it. Now, God must always lay the first stone. He makes the start, and receives me into his grace, so that I stand in his favor. But it does not follow that I at once feel his work of grace, although it is already there.

We saw that when the Holy Spirit came, he came with a rushing sound, even frightening the disciples until they knew not whither to go. But when he comes in this manner he is very near, and then he kindles the heart so that it feels love; when it feels love, it also begins to love. This is what Christ means. He is speaking not of our beginning the work, but of what we afterwards feel, and of the love that follows feeling. The import of his words is: If a man love me, he will keep my Word, and my Father will love him; that is, when I have caused a man to feel my love, he will begin to love me in return etc. Therefore, the words refer to the realization of love, not to the beginning of love. Now, if a man love me, says Christ, he will keep my Word, and my Father will love him; that is, he will feel that he loves me and will do everything that pleases me, and he will perceive how I and the Father come to him and dwell with him. And, furthermore, Christ declares:

"He that loveth me not keepeth not my Words."

Here we see it is plainly declared that they who have not the Holy Spirit do not keep one letter of the Law. Therefore I say, if all the preachers arise and preach the Law, attempting thereby to make people godly, what do they accomplish? They accomplish nothing. For, briefly, there must first be love in the heart, otherwise nothing is accomplished in keeping the Law. Do you accordingly teach first of all how to obtain love, then men will be able to keep the Law. The Holy Spirit is given, as we have stated, for the purpose of abrogating the Law. Hence, Christians are not to be governed by laws. Those, however, who are not Christians must be controlled by laws, and be subjected to executioners and governed by the sword, in order that they be compelled not to do evil with the hand, although they are thereby not made better in heart. Now, Christ does not want us to keep his Word with outward observance, like a finite law, but with the heart, with joy and love. But who will give us this joy and love? The Holy Spirit gives it, and no one else. Now, the next words read:

"These things have I spoken unto you, while yet abiding with you. But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you."

Here Christ calls the Holy Spirit a Comforter. If the Holy Spirit is to retain this name he must exercise his office only where there is no comfort and where comfort is needed and desired. Consequently, he cannot comfort the hard heads and audacious hearts, for these have not tasted of struggle and despair, and have never been in distress; he can accomplish nothing except with sorrowful, comfortless and discouraged hearts.

What, however, is he to do? He is to teach and bring to remembrance. Here our learned men have come and declared: All that we are to believe, to do and omit to do is not in the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit is to teach us many things which Christ did not teach. Such declaration is altogether contrary to the Holy Spirit, and even contradictory. For Christ says: "He shall teach you and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you;" that is, he will beautifully explain (glorify) what I now say to you, better than I am able to teach with words, so that you will need no further words. You are to know it now beforehand and have a sign, so that when it comes to pass you may believe it the more fully. Now the learned men declare, He shall not say what Christ says. How can we suffer the pope and the bishop to proceed with their declaration that the Holy Spirit teaches what they determine? We here see that Christ wants to establish his Word with the Holy Spirit, who is with us, for the purpose of bearing witness to Christ and of reviving in our hearts what he has taught, that we may understand and believe it. Therefore, wherever anyone teaches otherwise than the things Christ taught, or wants to direct you to another comfort than he speaks of, do not believe that it is the Holy Spirit. Now, the Lord says furthermore:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth give I unto you."

Here we see clearly the Holy Spirit's office, that he is bestowed only upon those who are sunk in affliction and misery. For this is the import of the words when he declares: You must not think that I give you peace such as the world gives. The world considers that peace means the removal of trouble or affliction. For instance, when one is in poverty he esteems it a great affliction, and seeks to be rid of it, fancying that riches means peace. Likewise, one who feels death near thinks: If I could live, and vanquish death, I would have peace.

Such peace, however, Christ does not give. He allows the affliction to remain and to oppress; yet he employs different tactics to bestow peace: he changes the heart, removing it from the affliction, not the affliction from the heart. This is the way it is done: When you are sunk in affliction he so turns your mind from it and gives you such consolation that you imagine you are dwelling in a garden of roses. Thus, in the midst of dying is life; and in the midst of trouble, peace and joy. This is why it is, as St. Paul declares to the Philippians (4:7), a peace which passeth all understanding. This art no man can achieve with his understanding, nor fathom with his senses. Christ alone bestows it. He says to you: just pass down into the valley of death; there shall the Holy Spirit come to you and make you so courageous and joyful that you will not know death, yea, it will be sweet to you. The reason for this peace is that the Holy Spirit teaches one to know the great goodness and grace of Christ, making those who believe in him lords, like himself, over sin, death and all things. Therefore a Christian must possess the ability to be joyful in good or in evil fortune, whether it be sweet or bitter. Some possess it in greater degree than others, for we are not all perfect, yea, none will become so perfect as never again to experience a struggle.

I speak of the office of the Holy Spirit, what he is to do and how he is constantly to continue what he has begun, so that you may now begin to despise death. But you must continue and abide in this confidence, and work on, that you may constantly have less fear. You are not to be discouraged though you still shudder at death, and are not to think: I am told that the Holy Spirit makes the heart joyful so that it does not feel death, yet I am frightened at it; consequently I see plainly he is not in me. Other thoughts of this kind may come to your mind. All these thoughts we must drive away, despising them. For the Holy Spirit's office is not one that is finished, but is in process of fulfillment from day to day, and continues as long as we live, in such manner that sorrow is ever mingled with peace. If there were no sorrow, the Holy Spirit could not comfort us. The closing words of this Gospel lesson are especially comforting:

"Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful."

These words give further hint of the work of the Holy Spirit. Again we see with whom the Holy Spirit deals, namely, they who are filled with sorrow and affliction. Because of the fear and trouble which oppressed the disciples, Christ made effort to comfort them, although the moment when they should fully realize his comfort had not yet arrived. In effect he declares: I say to you now, with words, that you are not to be troubled, but this does not as yet help you; you do not now rejoice. I tell it to you, however, that when the Holy Spirit comes and comforts you, then you may realize my comfort and be glad. He concludes by declaring:

"Ye heard how I said to you, I go away, and I come unto you. If ye loved me, ye would have rejoiced, because I go unto the Father: for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe."

I am human, he says, and shall now die; but I come to you again, through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if you loved me you would rejoice that I go to the Father. To love Christ is to love in him the humanity obedient to the sacred cross and which speaks only of suffering. No one can do this until the Holy Spirit comes; he alone creates this love in the heart. Christ's meaning is: When the Holy Spirit comes you will be glad that I went to the Father. Now you cannot understand my sacrifice and therefore you cannot appreciate it; but when I go to the Father, you will love me because I have ascended to the Father and have given you the great blessing of the Holy Spirit, My suffering and death will be comforting to you when you see that I live again and that I come to help you and to make you partakers of all the treasures I have. Therefore, we Christians are to become lords over all God's creation, and to boastfully say of Christ: My Lord Christ., who takes my part, is lord over all things; what shall harm me? For the Father in his infinite power has made him lord over all creatures, and all things must lie at his feet.

Thus you perceive how this Gospel lesson constantly refers to the office of the Holy Spirit, in order that we may rightly understand that he is given to us to comfort us and to bring us to love Christ. See, then, that you do not permit yourself to be deceived and to receive other teaching concerning the Holy Spirit than you have here heard.