

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Pentecost ✠

May 27, 2007

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. 27 And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”

John 15:26-27

I need be honest with you this morning. The verse of the day today is not from the Bible. And our Psalm refrain is not from the Psalms. Those same words were used in the Prayer of the Day and the hymn we just sang; it's on the altar and on the banner, but it's not in the Bible. “Come Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.” Why would we say it and sing it and pray it if it's not in the Bible?

The truth is that this prayer is an ancient liturgical response that goes back to the 11th century. It was used in a service the night before Pentecost. “Come, Holy Spirit, renew our hearts and kindle in us the fire of your love.” Why? Because in the Gospel for today, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit. Because we're asking Jesus to fulfill his promise to us that he fulfilled for his disciples on the day of Pentecost and that he has fulfilled ever since. That's why Christians have prayed this prayer for a thousand years. That's why we pray, even today: Come, Holy Spirit. And do what Jesus promised you would do. Testify to us. And testify through us.

For the past three weeks, the Gospel lessons have all been taken from Jesus' words to his disciples on Maundy Thursday. These are Jesus' parting words to his disciples before he goes on to suffer and die at the hands of his enemies. Jesus was preparing his disciples for life on their own, life without him visibly among them. He was preparing them for life when they would no longer follow Jesus around Galilee. Now they would follow him by faith. He was preparing them for the time when others around them would not understand their faith and would even attack them for their faith. He was preparing them for the time when they would be persecuted, tempted to deny him, hide their faith or be wishy-washy in their confession.

Basically, he was preparing his disciples for what we live with everyday of our lives. We don't have Jesus' visible presence among us. What we have is the very thing that Jesus' disciples had after he ascended into heaven. We have his promises – promises of things that are unseen. So that makes these words of Jesus apply to us today.

Jesus says to his disciples, **“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”** Isn't that exactly what happened on Pentecost? Ten days after Jesus left his disciples, when they were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival, we are told the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. The Holy Spirit came as the Spirit of truth and testified about Jesus. By a mighty and mysterious miracle, we hear that the disciples were able to speak to all the foreigners present in Jerusalem, **“declaring the wonders of God in [their] own tongues.”**

And then Peter, of all people stands up and defends the disciples and boldly confesses his faith. He has the nerve to tell the Jews that their unbelief put Jesus to death. He has the boldness to tell them to their face that they were wrong and called upon them to repent. Remember this is

Peter, the one who just 53 days earlier cursed and swore, trying to keep his relationship with Jesus a secret. Now he announces it publicly before thousands of people.

How could he do that? Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to fill the hearts of Peter and the disciples, to testify to them about Jesus.

Now here we are on Pentecost Sunday, often called the birthday of the Christian church, years after Jesus sent his Spirit to Peter and the apostles and we still pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, testify to us." Why?

Well, what's changed? Not much. Oh, any world history student could tell you that lots has changed since the first Pentecost. But have things really changed? Is the world of today any more anti-Christian than the world of the early church? Is it any more immoral, or blasphemous, or self-indulgent? Was Satan more or less active then as he is now? Even if he may have changed tactics somewhat, is his desire to destroy you any less of a threat than it was to Peter and the apostles? How about your own sinful nature? Is it any different than that of a tax collector like Matthew, a doubter like Thomas, or one who denied the Savior like Peter? Do we need what Jesus promises any less than Jesus' disciples on Pentecost? No.

So we pray, "Come Holy Spirit. Testify to us about Jesus. Tell us about him. Tell us how much we needed a Savior. In God's holy law, convict our hearts of the sin that we have done and said and thought. Then empty our hearts. Empty them of all our pride and arrogance and any notion that we could possibly do this on our own. Come, Holy Spirit, stand by us and fill our hearts with the love of God. Fill our hearts with the love of God who just could not stand to see us perish and so he sent his one and only Son. Fill our hearts with the love of Jesus who willingly came and lived for us and died for us and rose for us. Fill our hearts with your love, O Holy Spirit, as you funnel all the gifts of God to us in the means of grace."

That is exactly what the Holy Spirit does. Every time we open the pages of the Bible, the Holy Spirit testifies to us about Jesus. Every time we come to worship, the Holy Spirit testifies to us in the liturgy and lessons, in the songs and the sermon and the supper. Every year that we follow this cycle called the church year, is our way of saying, "Come, Holy Spirit, testify to us about the one who comes in Advent, the one who was born a true human being at Christmas, the one who showed himself to be true God in Epiphany, who was tempted and tried during lent, who died on Good Friday, rose on Easter Sunday, ascended to heaven 40 days later and then sent his Holy Spirit on Pentecost." And then when we are (where we are today) then, Holy Spirit, not only testify to us, but also testify through us.

Jesus also said, "**And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.**" Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he very clearly told his disciples, "**You will be my witnesses.**" Those who are eyewitnesses are expected to tell others what they have seen and heard. And boy, oh boy, had the disciples seen a lot. For those three years they followed Jesus, they saw Jesus heal the sick, feed the hungry, walk on water, calm the storms, even raise the dead. They had even seen him dead and then alive again. They were eyewitnesses.

But we're not, right? We weren't there. We weren't with Jesus from the beginning – during his earthly ministry. We didn't see him with the nail marks in his hands and feet or put our fingers into his side. So we're not witnesses and we must therefore be excused from testifying about Jesus, right?

If we are tempted to think that somehow Jesus is not speaking to us here, but only to his disciples, let me ask you this question again. Has anything changed? Is the world in which we live any less in need of the testimony about Jesus? Does God love this world any less today than he

did when he sent his Son? And will the people of this world today ever know about God's love in Jesus Christ unless someone testifies to them? No.

But you are witnesses. And you will testify. A witness in court can't tell something they don't know. They can't guess. They can't make something up. They can only speak what they know. When Jesus calls us to testify, he calls us to speak what we know and believe. **"You have been with me from the beginning,"** he told his disciples. You were not with him for three years. You may not have been a Christian all your life; or you may not know everything you feel you should know. But you know God and the love he has for you in Christ. That is, you've heard the Spirit's testimony to you, and now Jesus says you too will testify.

This does not mean that each of you will suddenly stand and become fluent in another language. It also doesn't mean that you will suddenly become something or someone that you are not. But you will testify, and that is why we pray again and again, "Come Holy Spirit, testify through us." Because that is what Jesus has promised. In fact, he has even promised to give the very words we will speak. Jesus told his disciples, **"you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."**

Have you ever heard the story of the man who was stranded on deserted island and who prayed for God for rescue. But he never got off the island; he died and when he gets to heaven he asks God why he didn't rescue him. But God replies, "I sent a boat and helicopter to rescue you. I thought you would take the hint."

We pray, "Come Holy Spirit." We're praying that God the Holy Spirit would come to us to strengthen us in faith and help us to speak the faith to others. But how many times do we let the boat go by as we ignore the Holy Spirit's testimony, saying, "It's not for me"? I'll ask God to strengthen my faith but keep his Word a closed book 6 days out of 7, or 13 out of 14. I'll ask God for the strength and wisdom to confess my faith to a friend, but I'll allow nearly every opportunity I have to study God's Word with my fellow Christians pass by. Or do we forget that Bible studies – like the half-dozen or so studies that happen here – are golden opportunities for us to listen to the Spirit's testimony and practice our own testimony in the presence of people who know us and love us? So that when we stand in the world, among people who perhaps aren't so understanding, that we will have the courage to speak?

Jesus told his disciples, you will testify, but it is only through the Spirit's testimony in Word and Sacrament that we can also testify to others.

Did you know that in the Bible (that I know of) there is never an example of a prayer directed specifically to the Holy Spirit? (If you find one, let me know) I find that very interesting, but I think that explains why most of the time, our prayers are directed to God the Father or God the Son. Except this one. But if we're going to pray one prayer to the Holy Spirit, this is the prayer to pray. Because basically we pray that this Holy Spirit will do exactly what he is promised to do. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. That is, testify to us in the Word of God that speaks to us about Jesus, and then allow us also to speak, to speak words that are really not our own, but the words of the Spirit, who testifies through us. Amen.