

Pentecost A 2017, June 4, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

You meet a friend you haven't seen for a while, maybe on the street, or in a store while shopping. "Hey, it's good to see you. It's been a long time. What have you been up to lately?" Your friend tells you about their kids, or their latest house project, maybe a trip they took to the Grand Canyon. Or maybe they tell you a relative has been sick or there's been a death in the family. After a bit your friend turns it around and says, "How about you? What's been happening with you?" You're catching up. Hearing the latest news. You leave by promising to keep in touch, maybe give a call so you can have coffee together sometime. And then you part ways and go about your business.

So, the question on this Pentecost Sunday might just be, "What is the Holy Spirit up to? What's the Spirit been doing? In the church, and in the world. And in your life? What is the Spirit up to?" It's time to catch up, to hear the Good News of what's been going on between the Holy Spirit and the Church and even you. As with any time Good News is shared within the church we always begin, in good Lutheran fashion, with the Bible. In scripture we are given the touchstone for hearing how the Spirit of God is at work.

Whenever we are listening to how the Spirit is at work it's always good to start at the beginning. Our first reading from the book of Acts sets the scene for us. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. On the Jewish festival of Pentecost they experience something which can only be described in elemental terms; a mighty rushing wind and crackling tongues of fire. The sound drew a curious crowd of onlookers, an internationally diverse group of bystanders who suddenly hear, in their own languages, the story of God's mighty deeds and power. Right from the beginning of the Holy Spirit's works a universal outreach. The followers of Jesus will be sent to the furthest reaches of the world. The Good News of God's power will not be confined to tribal or ethnic faith. This will be a universal and inclusive fellowship. The Holy Spirit draws all people together into true human community. So this is the first thing we can say the Spirit is up to; that the church will be truly inclusive in character. Our fellowship is not based on racial, or ethnic, or national lines. The Holy Spirit calls all people into the life of the church.

The Holy Spirit calls us into the fellowship of the church. But there's more. Much more. We answer that call through faith. Faith is what happens to you when you hear that God loves you for Jesus' sake. Faith is the response of trust when you hear that God adopts you as his child forever. Faith happens to you because the Holy Spirit is already at work in your life turning you towards Jesus and his love. This is what Paul means when he tells the church in Corinth, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." To acknowledge that there is no god higher or more important than Jesus is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe except that the Holy Spirit is already at work in your life creating faith.

It's hard for us to think this way or believe this can even be true. Most of us believe that faith is something we do. That it belongs to us and it's something we can

control. We choose to believe. We make a decision to believe. But that's not the way the Bible speaks about faith. That's not how God speaks about faith. Faith is always an act of the Holy Spirit. So when you meet the Holy Spirit on the street or in a store and you ask the Spirit, "What have you been up to lately?" The answer you're going to hear is "I've at work creating faith in your life. I've been supporting faith in your life." I always like how Martin Luther sums up the work of the Holy Spirit creating faith in his words about the third article to the Apostles' Creed, you know, the part that starts, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." He says, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...made me holy, and kept me in the true faith." How radical can you get? Luther actually denies any power we have to create faith in Jesus within ourselves. We are literally powerless to believe. All faith comes from the Holy Spirit. Our belief in Jesus is sheer, absolute gift of the Spirit.

If faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, this gift of the Spirit always leads us to Jesus. A couple of verses before the one we read this morning Paul writes, "Now concerning spiritual matters, brothers and sisters, I don't want you to be uninformed." (12:1) The Corinthians considered themselves spiritual people. In much the same way most people today consider themselves spiritual in some fashion or another. But we are spiritual by being brought to Jesus and believing that Jesus is Lord and God. There is a concreteness and a rootedness to our spirituality. The Holy Spirit comes upon the church with a mighty wind and tongues of fire, is wild and unpredictable, but never fuzzy or ill-defined. This power of the Holy Spirit always brings us to Jesus, makes Jesus known to us, gives us the strength and power of acknowledging Jesus is Lord.

Creating faith, sustaining faith, strengthening faith in Jesus; this is the first work of the Holy Spirit. But there's more. There's always more. This faith in Jesus as Lord is never a solitary affair. We never believe alone. The risen Jesus has a body, and his risen body is here in the Church. "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Faith in Jesus always brings us to the church, to the body of Christ, the presence of the risen Jesus in the world. We, the church, are not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals, like the Elks Club, or Masons, or the youth soccer league. We, the church, are the body of Christ, the living presence of Jesus in the world. Each of us gifted with different abilities and vocations and talents, but all serving the one body, for one purpose.

So, in our imaginary conversation with the Holy Spirit that's what we hear the Spirit's been up to. Creating faith in Jesus. Faith that is a freely given gift. Faith that acknowledges Jesus is the Lord and there are no others. Creating the church which is Jesus' body in the world. Baptizing us into that body, giving us gifts to serve that body and the body of Christ's mission in the world. That's the what the Holy Spirit's been up to. Amen.