

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate a principal festival within the church's liturgical year known as the Feast of Pentecost. Today marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples exactly fifty days after Easter. And as the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples, we hear in our first lesson from Acts that the Holy Spirit also descends upon all the people of different ethnicities from various cultures, and regions. We then hear in this same reading that Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and began preaching to the gathering. Peter then concludes his preaching with the Good News of the promise of Jesus Christ, that sins are forgiven and that God will call these different people in the mentioned gathering into His eternal kingdom. And we know and believe through the Holy Spirit that this truth still holds true to this very day. When Peter closes his sermon, we then hear that 3,000 converts were baptized on this same day we know as Pentecost.

Some might argue that Christianity began with the birth, the death, and the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. But this Day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit entered into this gathering is the start of Christianity and this Day is the day we call the birthday of the church. All these people of different ethnicities from various cultures, and regions, all speaking in their own native languages...were amazed and astonished that they were all heard in their own native languages. This entire diverse gathering was heard by God...who then poured out the Holy Spirit upon them. We hear Luke telling us in this passage that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved and there is NO reference to any particular language, NO reference to any particular ethnicity, or any particular culture within this entire chapter explaining the Holy Spirit igniting the church...all have the Holy Spirit poured out upon them and none are favored nor denied.

Stepping back and looking at the bigger picture, we can see by Luke's description of this event that diversity of race, ethnicity, and language are what make up the Christian church; it is the ethos of our One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. One could only hope and pray that this history would become our fate...but it has not. Unfortunately, as I pointed out last week, we have used our church like our faith, to guard and protect ourselves from the culture and to fight our battles with culture and society from within our church. We assume we are safe within the church from all the things we dislike about our society. In this, we must ask, is our church being true to the diverse image we have before us today in our first lesson, or have we simply become a country club that will only allow a likeminded select few like us to join. If this is to be our fate then we are not being led by the Holy Spirit, we are being led by our own human fears, hardheartedness and our human brokenness.

Stanley Hauerwas, an American theologian and former professor of theological ethics at Duke University and considered by many to be one of the world's most influential living theologians, has studied and written about a constructive Christian Social ethic. Christian Social ethics are defined as the study of the way of life that conforms to the will of God. Christian Social ethics focus on the likes of our personal virtues and our interpersonal relationships with others as well as the social structures of human beings...social structures and institutions such as the family, civil government, and the visible church...things we set in place to better us and our way of life together. Hauerwas makes this claim:

No society can be just or good that is built on falsehood. The first task of Christian social ethics, therefore, is not make the “world” better or more just, but to help Christian people form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ...¹

It seems to me that when we hear something like this through the filter of today’s culture, especially our political culture we quickly claim we, the church, are ethically correct and true, and those out there in the world need to jump on board and be like us, live like us, and think like us, and things would be much better. Or there becomes the claim that, if we had a Christian government, we would be much better off. The reality of what Hauerwas is challenging us, the church, is to ask, are we as a church living up to the moral and ethical standard, we want the world to live up to...in other words can we as Christians live according the judgments and standards we hold up to the world and culture? Hauerwas goes on to point out that:

The church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.²

Hauerwas seems to be saying the same thing St. Paul wrote to the Church in Rome:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Today in the first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is telling of the start of Christianity as well as the make up of the assembly that becomes the church. But is the diversity that Luke is pointing out within that assembly on the day of Pentecost so long ago, is that the church assembly we see today? We would like to think it is, but sadly, it’s not.

The church is filled with divisive rhetoric in order to combat the social media misinformation that only serves to heighten our judgment of those out there...leading us in here to fear and hatred of others. Likewise, the segregating walls of fear and racism that divided this nation and continues to divide us still today only serve to weaken our faith. On April 17, 1960 Meet the Press aired the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called out the divisiveness of our church and culture when he said:

“I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation...one of the shameful tragedies that eleven o’clock on a Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours...if not the most segregated hours in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian Church should be integrated and any church that stands against integration...that has a segregated body is standing against the Spirit and the teaching of Jesus Christ...and it fails to be a true witness.”

Unfortunately, this was not the makeup of the gathering we hear about in our first lesson but the segregation remains relative in our churches today. And as much as we may not like it, look around the church right now and you can physically see that it continues to be true.

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley, *A Community of Character, toward a constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. Opening Chapter, “Narrative Character of Christian Social Ethic, Page 10

² Ibid. Page 12.

And while the church remains segregated and centered on our sense of self, and our self-defining-righteousness, our fears and divisions grow much broader and more diverse and become much more insidious. This only leaves some in our society to feel afraid, hurt, judged, and unworthy of Jesus Christ.

The reality of our Gospel lesson today reminds us that the “advocate” is sent by Christ to walk NOT just with us but with all. The “advocate,” or the “paraclete” is what Jesus sends to us, to move us all to know and to have faith in the promise of grace, the promise of forgiveness, and the promise of new life in Jesus Christ...the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us to open our hearts and our minds to invite us to see and to know that the promise of God is not exclusive to us...it is a promise for all. But when we fear and judge the world out there and assume there is no hope out there and when we assume they will be condemned for their way of life...we only doubt the promise God makes to us through Jesus Christ...because if God’s promise is NOT out there, it’s not in here either.

Jesus is addressing this very thing within his Farewell Discourse in the Gospel lesson today. We hear Jesus say:

⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.
(John 16:5-7)

Luther explains this passage from John this way:

But special emphasis and meaning are attached to the words “where I am going,” as if He were saying, “You are so completely stunned and frightened by these words which you hear – that I shall no longer be with you – that you do not remember or have the heart to question Me further about where I am really going. For if you knew my destination, you would not be so dejected and frightened. But now, when you know nothing about this, you do not ask it either, although you really should ask about My departure and search for what it means, in order that you may be able to take comfort in it and not worry about the fact that I am going away.”³

It was to us all, our advantage that Jesus went away, because then we see the fulfillment of the law and the forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ not just for us but for all. When Jesus goes away...rather, when Jesus returns to the Father, we see the resurrection of new life from death and had he not returned to the Father, God’s promise would be a lie and we all would die. Furthermore, we confess the advantage we have when Jesus returns to the Father every week when we gather with these words of the Nicene Creed:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the virgin Mary,
and was made man.

³ Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Luther's Works Volume 24, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961. Luther’s commentary on verses 5, 6, & 7 of John’s Gospel chapter 16. Page 333.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

Our advantage is because Jesus goes away, or returns to the Father and we see this through his death and resurrection the promise of forgiveness and new life that is extended to us through faith that comes from the Holy Spirit that is poured out upon us.

I mention all of this from Hauerwas and Luther because they seem to be saying that when we do not fully understand what it is to be the church or we assume things and mold the church according to our assumptions and our sensitivities we merely use the church to hide behind and we become blind to the power and the work that the Holy Spirit reveals to us through Jesus Christ. We hold dearly to ourselves and our understandings that become manifest in our false notion of the will of God, a false notion of church and a false notion of who we think Jesus is and not who Jesus really is. We then use the church to hide from the world...instead of being a refuge for the world.

In writing to the church in Ephesus, St. Paul is informing the church about remaining true, pure, and holy, NOT self-righteous and judgmental, rather genuine in the love we share with others...to genuinely walk in the love Christ has given us, to be true in welcoming with the very love that welcomes each of us, and to truly live a Christ-inspired life. St. Paul writes:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

This is the glorious day that God has poured out the Holy Spirit upon this assembly of Holy believers called the church and because Jesus Christ has gone away, through our faith we no longer ask, we know that because of the death that takes Jesus away we have the assurance that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and we will join Him in his kingdom that will have no end.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen