

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord with all your graces now outpoured. Amen.

Christians celebrate three major festivals. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus's birth. Easter is the celebration of Jesus's resurrection. Today's festival is Pentecost. It doesn't get the hype that the other two get. Christians usually have a good grasp of the importance of Christmas and Easter; less so with Pentecost. So today we will speak about the importance of Pentecost, but before that we should speak about what happened.

We will begin with Good Friday and Easter. Jesus's death on Good Friday and his Resurrection on Easter changed everything. Jesus died for sin and was raised with power. The Gospels describe how things were with Jesus after the resurrection, and things were a bit strange. Oftentimes people did not immediately recognize who Jesus was. Mary Magdalene didn't immediately recognize Jesus on Easter morning at the tomb. On Easter evening the disciples who were traveling to the village of Emmaus didn't immediately recognize him.

In addition to Jesus not being immediately recognized, he would do things with his body that he hadn't done before. He suddenly disappeared from the Emmaus disciples after they recognized him. He suddenly appeared to the disciples in the upper room, even though the doors were locked. Jesus made these different appearances, speaking somewhat briefly—it seems—to his disciples, but the things he would say during these appearances were extremely important.

In Matthew 28 he appeared to his disciples and told them to make disciples of all nations. Christians should baptize, teach what Jesus taught, and Jesus would be with them until the end of the age. In John chapter 20, in that upper room, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "**Receive the Holy Spirit. Whosoever's sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Whosoever's sins you retain, they are retained.**" With those words Jesus commanded his Christians to forgive the sins of all who repent, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant so long as they do not repent. These are extremely important instructions that continue to be carried out in the Christian Church.

Jesus appeared and spoke with his disciples, here and there, over the course of 40 days. Then Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. We had a church service to commemorate that ten days ago, on a Thursday evening. Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father to reign and rule over all things. The way that he reigns and rules in his spiritual kingdom is through his Christian disciples. Jesus's disciples continue to do what Jesus commanded them before he ascended into heaven. Christians baptize, forgive and retain sins, teach, have the Lord's Supper together and so on. Through these things sinners who otherwise believe in false gods are turned to the true God, which is our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is nothing more important than believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and this is where Pentecost comes in with its great importance. About 50 days after Easter and 10 days after Jesus's Ascension, the Jews were gathered together for one of their Old Testament harvest festivals. While they were gathered together there was the sound of a mighty rushing wind, tongues of flame appeared over the disciples, and the disciples spoke with their fellow Jews about the mighty works of God. Some of these Jews came from far flung places and spoke different languages.

Our reading from Acts gives us the first part of Peter's speaking to those who were gathered. He speaks with courage and enthusiasm about Jesus Christ being Lord. He vigorously argues that Jesus is the fulfillment of what was prophesied in the Old Testament. Jesus is God's Son, and they had crucified him! But he concluded his message in this inclusive way: **"Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** He assures them that despite their murdering of God's own Son that the promise was for them and for their children. It was for those who were near and for those who were far off. It was for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. Those who believed that day were baptized, and 3,000 souls were added.

The most important thing that happened on Pentecost was the work of the Holy Spirit. People repented of all that was false, and believed the truth: Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners. Faith in Jesus is what makes a person a Christian. Faith in Jesus is the sole and indispensable requirement for being a member of the Holy Christian Church. It doesn't matter where a person comes from. They could be from Mesopotamia, Judea or Cappadocia. They could be of any race, any skin color. They could be poor or rich, well dressed or poorly dressed. They could come from any background—they could have been wild, inhabited by many demons, or they could be stuck-up Pharisees. Everyone who believes in Jesus the Christ turns away from their false and worthless ways and embraces the forgiveness, life, and salvation that come from Jesus.

Pentecost is a festival about the Holy Spirit, who creates faith. Pentecost is also a festival about the Christian Church. It is the beginning of the Christian Church, so to speak, because from Pentecost onward the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, spread. Those who heard the Gospel believed it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Since they believed it, they also spoke it. Since they spoke it, still more believed it.

There is a direct line from Pentecost to us being gathered here today. This is not some accident of history. God the Holy Spirit has been at work creating faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus causes those who believe in him to speak the Gospel.

But as we consider that direct line from Pentecost to today, we might want to ask ourselves, "Are we still speaking the Gospel?" Before we answer too quickly with a, "Well of course we are still preaching the Gospel!" we might want to consider something. Jesus tells all those who want to be his disciples that they must bear the cross. The cross means to suffer and to sacrifice. Speaking the Gospel will always carry with it suffering and sacrifice.

Even on Pentecost there was suffering. The Christians were made fun of. Some bystanders laughed at them and said that they had gotten drunk on grape juice. Already at Pentecost there was sacrifice. Immediately after Pentecost the book of Acts tells us that the Christians sold what they had so that they could provide for whoever was in need. The story of suffering and sacrifice is repeated over and over in the book of Acts. Wherever the Gospel went it caused trouble. Paul was kicked out of one town after another until he was finally carted off to Rome in chains. According to legend, eleven out of the twelve apostles were violently put to death.

So, again, we might ask, "Are we still speaking the Gospel?" It seems to me that we are in trouble, and we've been in trouble for a long time. The trouble we have is that we want to come up with a Gospel that doesn't require suffering and sacrifice. We don't want to live how Jesus commanded and as the book of Acts puts on display. We want a Christian life where we get to live just like the rest of the world with all their selfishness, comfort, and ease, but we like to believe that we won't go to hell for it. We'll get a free pass. Why will we get a free pass? Maybe because we went to church all the time. Maybe we even gave a lot of money in offerings. That's not a bad deal is it?

It's also not the Gospel. It is a false Gospel that pretends to be the true Gospel. This false Gospel was identified by the Lutheran Reformers. The Catholic Church is as good at this false Gospel as anybody is. They had figured out a way for Christians to have their cake and eat it too. All that was really necessary to be a good Catholic was to show up at church and give them some money. Depending on how much you gave it might even make you down right exemplary.

Luther saw through this comfortable and convenient Christianity. It was, in fact, a cheap Christianity even if millions were given in offerings because it laid no claim on the person. As we all know it is not hard for those who are wealthy to write a check. Eventually those who are so filthy rich that they don't know what to do with all of their money start to write checks without even being asked. They want this or that building to be named after them.

Christianity is much deeper than that. It requires much more suffering and sacrifice than that. Luther learned this from Jesus and he preached it. The very first of Luther's 95 theses from October 31, 1517 said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Another way of saying this is that if you do not want to repent, then you do not want to be a Christian. Repentance is hard! It requires humility. A life of repentance and faith will be one of suffering and sacrifice according to Jesus's own words.

Why should anyone live this life? We naturally don't like to suffer or sacrifice. The answer is that loving to the point of suffering and sacrifice is beautiful and divine. Such a life is good and beautiful like Jesus's life was good and beautiful with his suffering and his sacrificing.

Now you might think, "I can't do that." I'm glad that you are honest enough to admit that. I can't do it either. So also neither you nor I can raise ourselves from the dead can we? But today is Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is God. When a person is converted, and reconverted, and converted yet again to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit is given to that person. The Holy Spirit dwells in us.

Furthermore, Jesus is Lord. He reigns and rules in his kingdom and we are following his lead. He is on the warpath, beating back the devil, sin, death, selfishness, apathy, strife, and whatever else is evil.

Repent, believe, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the Gospel. It was the Gospel at Pentecost. It is the Gospel that gives eternal life today.

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord, with all your graces now outpoured. Amen.