

THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 15:26-16:15

Second Wednesday in Lent

March 12, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, beginning at chapter 15, verse 26, and reading through chapter 16, verse 15. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 26, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁶ “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

^{16:1} “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

This year, for our midweek Lenten series, we will be considering the person and work of the Holy Spirit. That is, we will consider who he is and what he does. And we will use the catechism as something of a guide or an outline to help organize our thoughts as we consider various different Scriptures concerning the Holy Spirit.

If you've been here for the last several years, you know that my practice is to preach through Luther's *Small Catechism* during Lent. Lent is a season of repentance to prepare our hearts for

Good Friday and the Resurrection of Our Lord. So someone might wonder, *What does the catechism, and more specifically its teaching on the Holy Spirit, have to do with Lent?* Very much, in fact. Some parts of the catechism very obviously guide us in repentance. The Ten Commandments teach us what sins we should confess. The Second Article of the Creed teaches us how Jesus redeemed us through his blood. The section on baptism teaches us about being buried and raised with Christ, as well as living in daily repentance. The section on confession teaches us to confess our sins. And the section on the Lord's Supper teaches us about the body and blood of Jesus that was given and shed for our sins on Good Friday.

So how about the section on the Holy Spirit? How does this fit in with Lent? The Holy Spirit is the person who works repentance in our hearts. He convicts us of our sins through the Law. And, through the Gospel, he teaches our hearts to trust that God forgives us for Christ's sake. Throughout this season of Lent, and throughout our entire lives, we should pray for the Holy Spirit to come and do this work in us. It's why, at the beginning of every Sunday service, "We pray that [God] would open our hearts by [His] Holy Spirit, that through the preaching of [His] Word we may be taught to repent of our sins, to believe on Jesus in life and in death, and to grow day by day in grace and holiness." This is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In short, his work is to bring us to repentance, strengthen us in the Christian faith, and cause us to grow in love for one another. And he does this through the Word of God and the Sacraments.

Since this is the first in the series, I'd like to play a little "Myth Busters." There are several myths about the Holy Spirit that, it seems to me, are rather common today. And, spoiler alert, all of these myths are going to be busted, so there's very little suspense in this game. But I think it will be helpful to name them, so that we can be careful to not fall into them. And the point is not to insult anyone who believes differently than we do, but we need to be clear about what is true. I've seen Christians enticed away from the truth in order to believe some myth about the Holy Spirit. We need to defend the Lutheran teaching on the Holy Spirit from those who would attack us and draw people to follow something that looks appealing, but is ultimately false.

So here's the first myth: Lutherans don't talk much about the Holy Spirit. I've even heard this myth perpetuated among Lutherans. But it's false. Lutherans, if we follow our confessions faithfully, have a lot to say about the Holy Spirit. Pick a random service sometime, and count how many times the Holy Spirit is mentioned, both in the liturgy and in the sermon. I've never done this to myself, actually counted, but I invite you to test me on it.

Furthermore, there are several doctrines that fall under the work of the Holy Spirit, or which the Holy Spirit is involved in. The Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, which we confessed earlier, kind of seems like a random catch-all for the important stuff that didn't get into the first two articles concerning the Father and the Son. But everything in the Third Article is really the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. "The holy Christian Church, The Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body; And the Life everlasting." All of that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Look at Luther's explanation of that article in the catechism:

"The Holy Spirit called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith; in like manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in this Christian Church, He daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead and will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ."

THE HOLY SPIRIT (John 15:26-16:15)

Who created faith in our hearts, so that we would believe the Gospel? The Holy Spirit. Who sanctifies us and preserves us in the faith, so that we do not fall away? The Holy Spirit. Who gathers the Christian Church together? The Holy Spirit brought you here. Who forgives your sins? The Holy Spirit delivers the forgiveness Jesus won at the cross to you. Who will raise you up on the Last Day? The Holy Spirit will breathe life into our dead bodies.

Furthermore, whenever we talk about the Word of God, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, that's the work of the Holy Spirit, because the Word and Sacraments are the tools the Holy Spirit uses to bring us into the faith, strengthen us in the faith, and keep us in the faith. Whenever we open the Scriptures, whether in church or in our homes, we should pray for God to send his Holy Spirit to be our teacher. He inspired the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:21), and so we call upon him to also illuminate our hearts.

In other articles of doctrine, like creation, we see the Holy Spirit at work. In Genesis 1, we read about him "hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). On the fifth and sixth days of creation, God brought forth living creatures in the waters, in the sky, and on the land. The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who brings forth that life. So we confess in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit is "the Lord and Giver of Life." And we will explore many other doctrines throughout this series where Lutherans have much to say about the Holy Spirit.

So why is it that it seems sometimes that Lutherans don't say much about the Holy Spirit? And I should say that it's not just Lutherans, but also some of our Anglican or Reformed friends are accused of the same thing. It's because when we talk about him, we don't really focus on him. Right now, for this series, as we take a peek behind the curtain, we are kind of focusing on him, but we usually don't. We mention him. We say something about him. But we don't often focus on him. Why is that? Well, it's because he doesn't want us to. He's obviously an important piece of the Scriptures, so he also has an essential place in our doctrine, but he's not the person of the Trinity who draws attention to himself.

Think about the three members of the Trinity and how they present themselves in the Scriptures. Does God the Father ever appear saying, "Hey! Look at me!"? No. He says, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). Does the Holy Spirit ever draw attention to himself? No. He appears. He makes his presence known. But it is always to draw attention to Jesus. In the gospel lesson we read from John, Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, "**He will bear witness about me**" (John 15:26). Does Jesus ever draw attention to himself? You bet he does, over and over again. Pretty much everything he does in the gospels is to draw attention to himself. He even says, "**I ... will draw all people to myself**" (John 12:32). And it's not because Jesus is a narcissist; it's because he is the only way to be saved. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). And that even includes the names of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Faith in the Father does not save you. Faith in the Holy Spirit does not save you. Only faith in Jesus saves you. And the Holy Spirit knows this. That's why he draws attention to Jesus, and not to himself. Of course, trust in Jesus extends also to the Father and the Holy Spirit. But we can have no trust in them without trust in Jesus.

So the Holy Spirit is sometimes called "The shy member of the Trinity." And that's sort of right in the sense that he doesn't talk much about himself. But he is really the talkative member of the Trinity. He inspired all of the Scriptures; he obviously has a lot to say. But he is always drawing our attention to Jesus. Even in the book of Acts, where we read about miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit, the purpose and the result of his activity is always that people would believe in Jesus and be saved. That is always the point of his work. So the first mark of a

THE HOLY SPIRIT (John 15:26-16:15)

Spirit-filled Christian or a Spirit-filled church will always be that they speak often about Jesus and the redemption we have through his death and resurrection.

You might observe a church that is eager for manifestations of the Holy Spirit, like speaking in tongues or healings—and if the Holy Spirit wants to do those things, he will—but if their primary focus is not on the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, they cannot truly be filled with the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is all about forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. And if we ever get off on something else, like self-help, political causes, or personal transformation, then we are not being led by the Holy Spirit either. There are many things the Church needs to talk about, because the Scriptures speak to our entire lives, so we don't reduce the Bible just to Jesus. But we teach the Scriptures with Jesus as the center of it. He needs to be the center of our lives. That is the will of the Spirit, and we should allow him to draw us there.

So that's one myth busted, and we spent most of our time on that. But that's the big one.

Next myth: The Holy Spirit is an impersonal force, like in Star Wars. False. The Holy Spirit is a person, not in the sense that he is human, but in the same sense as the Father. Also, the appropriate pronoun for him is not "it." The Scriptures always call him "he" or "him."

Next myth: Some Christians have more of the Holy Spirit than others. False. Our charismatic friends will talk about an additional blessing of the Holy Spirit or being filled with the Holy Spirit. And the Bible does talk about being filled with the Holy Spirit, but this does not mean that some Christians get this filling and others don't. This is a bad teaching that sets up different levels of Christians. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:7). Then he goes on to speak of how each member of a congregation is gifted in different ways, but not all have the same gifts, and all gifts are given for building up the congregation. We'll talk about that more in a few weeks. But no gift makes one Christian more spiritual than another.

Here's a related myth: There is a baptism of the Holy Spirit in addition to water Baptism. False. Because Paul declares, "There is ... one baptism" (Eph. 4:4-5). John the Baptizer taught that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:17). Jesus taught us to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). At Pentecost, Peter promised the Holy Spirit to all who were baptized (Acts 2:38). Everyone who is baptized and remains in that faith has the Holy Spirit.

Next myth: The Holy Spirit comes and goes, and we can kind of feel it when he does. This is false. The Holy Spirit is always with Jesus' saints. And the Holy Spirit is especially active when we gather around the Word of God, because that's what he uses to sanctify our hearts. And his presence is certain, whether we feel something or not. In some settings, worship leaders will talk about feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit. But that's just a feeling. And there are a lot of things you can do to make people feel a certain way. I used to be a worship leader, back in my Bible camp days. I was never anywhere near as good as the pros. But I learned that if you can drive away the Holy Spirit by your guitar being out of tune, that wasn't the Holy Spirit.

Now please don't misunderstand me. It is good to do our best and strive for excellence in everything we do. And it is good and right to feel something when we worship God. When we sing a beautiful hymn with a rich, biblical text, we should feel an appreciation for that. On Christmas Eve we even darken the room and sing by candlelight. That's for emotional effect. We should feel something for the gentle humility of Christ's birth. The beauty of music and art can communicate something of God to us in a way that words do not. But it should never be manipulative. And it should never make us think that the Holy Spirit comes and goes. He is

THE HOLY SPIRIT (John 15:26-16:15)

always present with God's children, and he always attends to the Word of God and the Sacraments. This is why, contrary to the accusations made against us, I actually think that Lutherans have the most robust and comforting doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

So I want to encourage you with this tonight. This should be profoundly encouraging to us. God has given you his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells within your heart. And he does not come and go. When you feel great appreciation for the grace of God, the Holy Spirit is there. And, perhaps more significantly, when you don't, the Holy Spirit is there. When life just feels mundane, the Holy Spirit is there. When you're sinning—and you can think of whatever sin that might be—the Holy Spirit is there, not to shame you, but to convict you of that sin and draw you in faith to confess that sin. And he always forgives you. We recite this, and it is such a good thing to memorize these words: “He daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all believers.”

Our hearts are prone to wander. And we would. We all would, if not for the work of the Holy Spirit. He draws our hearts, over and over again, all throughout our lives, to Christ, so that we would have forgiveness and eternal life in him.

So praise God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for his many gifts of grace to us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.