

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2017

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 225, 230, 227, 234, 231.

Lessons: Genesis 1:1-2, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 3:1-21.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 3:16.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Now that we have looked at the first two persons of the Triune God, let's turn to the Third Article in the Creed. The Second Article told us how salvation was prepared and earned for us and the Third Article tells us how it is given to us. Jesus Christ's work of redemption is finished. The work of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, that is, the work of sanctification, goes on to the end of time.

So today we look briefly at our confession that

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST, THE HOLY SPIRIT

- 1. The third Person of the Triune God has worked faith in us,**
- 2. Because we cannot come to Jesus by ourselves.**

Throughout these sermons we will use the words Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit interchangeably. They are the same person of the Triune God. Other names Scripture uses for him are "Spirit of the Lord", Comforter, the Spirit and "Spirit of God". The Holy Spirit appeared as a dove at Jesus' baptism, and made his presence known at Pentecost through the sound of a mighty wind and the gift of speaking in foreign tongues, foreign languages.

The Holy Ghost is the Third Person in the Holy Trinity, true God with the Father and the Son. Scripture places him on the same level with the Father and the Son, and so he is not the mere power or energy of God, but a distinct Person. We confess and believe that the Holy Ghost is true God because the Scriptures ascribe to him divine names, divine attributes, divine works, and divine honor and glory.

The work of the Holy Ghost is sanctification. That means that he makes me holy, by bringing me to faith in Christ and by giving to me the blessings of redemption. Sanctification in the wider sense includes everything that the Holy Ghost does in me. Luther describes this as calling someone out of the unbelieving world to be holy by bringing that person to faith in Christ, enlightening him, and keeping him in the faith. Sanctification in the narrower sense means leading a believer to hate sin and be eager to live a holy life filled with good works. Paul in the Scriptures assures us: "***Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.***" 1 Corinthians 12:3 (NIV)

It is absolutely necessary that the Holy Ghost work faith in us because according to the Scriptures all humans are by nature spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. Thus we confess with Luther that "I cannot by my own thinking or choosing – by my own reason or strength – believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." Scripture makes it very clear that "***The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.***" 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV) Why? "***You were dead in your transgressions and sins.***" Ephesians 2:1 (NIV)

Spiritually blind means that the truths concerning our salvation in Christ, have never entered into the heart of man, and if God had not revealed them to us by his Spirit, we could never know them. Because they are revealed in the Gospel, we can by reading and studying the Bible acquire an intellectual knowledge, knowledge of the head, of the truths of the Bible, but since they seem "foolishness" to us, we cannot "receive" them in our

hearts and trust and believe in them. The power to touch and move the heart lies not in our reason, but in the truths of the Gospel, through which the Holy Ghost operates on our hearts and creates faith, by which we "spiritually discern" "the things of the Spirit". Thus the spiritually blind are made spiritually seeing. In their hearts believers now understand, appreciate, and accept the merits of Christ's redemption. These are characteristics of faith. By the mere use of his reason no man can believe in Christ.

Spiritually dead means that every human uses his physical and mental strength only for committing all manner of sins. This very fact shows that his heart has no connection to the Lord; that he is dead to God, spiritually dead, and therefore has no strength to do any God-pleasing act. To come to Christ and to believe in him is not a physical or mental act but an act of the heart, a spiritual act. And because there is nothing in man that might possibly initiate such an act, for **"every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood,"** Genesis 8:21 (NIV) no man can by his own effort and strength come to Christ and believe in him. Just as Lazarus could not come out of his grave by his own strength, but only after the Lord had quickened him, given him life by the power of his Word, so the spiritually dead cannot come to Jesus by their own strength, but they must be spiritually quickened by the Word of God. Paul confesses that **"because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."** Ephesians 2:46 (NIV) The very next verses teach us **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."** Ephesians 2:8 (NIV) This assures us that we are "saved through faith". This salvation is "not of ourselves", "not of works", but a "gift of God". Faith also is a gift of God.

The fact that we – all mankind – are by nature enemies of God means that natural man is carnally minded, fleshly minded. His mind is set on sinful things, which God hates. Because of this fact his mind is set against God and is **"enmity against God"** Romans 8:7 (KJV) and of himself he cannot change this enmity into love. As a result of this, he does not want to come to Christ and believe in him. There is nothing in his natural makeup that could possibly bring about a change of mind. Only some powerful influence from outside him can change this attitude. That outside influence is exerted on man by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel. Therefore no man can say that Jesus is his Lord unless the Holy Ghost works this faith in him.

Faith is the work of man only in the sense that he does the act of believing; for it is man who believes. God does not believe for him. But faith is not a work of man in the sense that he by his own reason, strength, and will produces this faith. As an example, we may say that **"I live, but it is God who gives and sustains my physical life."** So I believe, but it is God who creates and preserves this spiritual life in my heart. Conversion is essentially this that faith or spiritual life is created in the heart of man, and it is evident that natural man can as little convert himself or assist in bringing about his conversion, as he can create his own physical life.

Scripture calls this act of bringing me to faith conversion, regeneration or rebirth and quickening, that is, making alive. Man is passive in his conversion as we read in Jeremiah 31: **"turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God."** Jeremiah 31:18 (KJV)

The Gospel is the means by which the Holy Ghost offers us the blessings of Christ and works in our hearts that faith by which we accept Christ and his salvation. We speak of the "means of grace". The written and spoken Word of the Gospel and the Sacraments are the means of grace, the ways or means by which God delivers his grace, that is, his undeserved love and mercy, to mankind.

The Holy Ghost brings us to Christ. In doing this, he is not moved by any merit or worthiness in us. Those whom he brings to Christ and leads to heaven are, of themselves, not better than those who refuse to come and are lost. God does not owe it to any man that he should convert and save him. God would be perfectly just if he let us all die in our sins. But he didn't. **"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."** John 3:16-18 (NIV) As a result, we should certainly thank him that he has brought us to the knowledge of our Savior.

Just as God employs means to give and sustain our physical life, so he uses means to create and preserve our spiritual life, our faith. He first uses the Law to lead us to know our sins and to feel sorry for them. But in order to get us to trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, he employs the means of grace, that is, the Gospel and the Sacraments. This is critically important to us. If God is to draw our hearts in faith to Christ, we may not ignore or reject these means, as King Saul and the Pharisees did, but we must diligently use them. While God has not bound himself to the use of these means, he has bound us to them, and we have no promise that he will work on us without them. And if we wish to bring others to the knowledge of Christ, we cannot do this by means of human wisdom, or commandments of men, or worldly knowledge, but solely by teaching them the Word of God in its truth and purity. Jesus plainly teaches us ***“to obey everything I have commanded you.”*** Matthew 28:20 (NIV)

To be saved we need neither for ourselves nor for others any other means and methods than the old-fashioned Gospel. The Gospel is not merely the story of our redemption, telling us how forgiveness was procured, but it proclaims and offers grace and forgiveness to all that hear it. For this reason it is called the ***“Gospel of the grace of God”***. Acts 20:24 (KJV) This Gospel promise is free and unconditional, and through it the Holy Ghost brings such influence to bear on the penitent heart that it turns in confidence to Christ. Thus through the Gospel the Holy Ghost works faith, by which we accept and receive all the benefits of Christ's redemption. Therefore let us not be ashamed of this Gospel, ***“because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”*** Romans 1:16 (NIV)

What has the Holy Ghost done to bring you to Christ and to sanctify you? We confess with Luther that “the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

It is a joy to us sitting here that the Holy Ghost has done these things, not only for us but for the entire Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. He does that through the Gospel, which we are not to hoard for ourselves, but to share with the whole world. May God lead us to reach out so that others may come to know Jesus Christ as their only Savior! Amen.