

FESTIVAL OF PENTECOST
Luther's Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed
The Work of the Holy Spirit

Christians will enjoy the greatest joys in heaven. Christians will suffer the worst torments in hell. Both are true, not of believers, but of Christians, that is, those who in this life professed themselves Christians, took vows regarding the Faith. And so the vows you young men take today are serious. And so the vows many of you have taken are serious. And so the vows many of you children will take one day will be serious as well. No one will be blessed by God like the Christian who believes and remains faithful. No one will be cursed by God like the Christian who forsakes the faith through unfaithfulness. Serious stuff. Not just cards and presents and certificates and congratulations, is it? If only we always remembered that.

Today is Pentecost, the Festival of the Holy Spirit. Of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the front man, constantly drawing attention to the Father and the Son, working behind the scenes, but we do well to consider His person and work today on this, His festival.

Do me a favor, and imagine a few scenarios. Imagine a person coming to you and saying, "I just can't understand it. I haven't lost any weight." What might you ask them? "Have you been exercising?" "Have you been watching what you're eating?" In other words, "Have you been trying to lose weight?" What would you think if that person said, "No?" You'd probably think they were a little off their rocker.

Or imagine a person coming up to you and saying, "I just can't understand it. I haven't gotten any better at shooting free throws." What might you ask them? "Have you been practicing free throws?" In other words, "Have you been trying?" What would you think if that person said, "No?" You'd probably ask them, "Well how in the world do you expect to get better, then?"

Or imagine a person coming up to you and saying, "I just can't understand it. I still can't play the piano." What might you ask them? "Have you taken lessons? Have you tried to learn a song?" What would you think if that person said, "No." You might tell them, "I can understand why you still can't play the piano. You haven't made the slightest effort to learn how to do so."

All those things take effort. All those things take concentration. And only those who see the value in achieving them will put that effort concentration in. You see where I'm going with this? If not, don't worry. We'll get there.

Ok, imagine another scenario. Someone comes up to you and says, "I just don't understand it. My faith doesn't seem to be getting any stronger." Or, "I don't feel close to God anymore." What might you ask? "When was the last time you heard the Word preached or opened your Bible?" Or, "When was the last time you took the Lord's Supper?" What would you think if that person said, "Oh, I don't have time for that." They'd be as foolish as the sick person who refused to take his medicine complaining about the doctor who prescribed it. Hopefully, you'd answer, "Make time, because the only way God has promised to create and preserve faith is through Word and Sacrament, as the Spirit works through them. You can't blame God for what you refuse to let Him do." Although we can't believe in God by our own reason or strength, but only through the Spirit's work and empowering, we sure do have a say in what happens to that faith He creates. Will we feed it or starve it, treasure it or take it for granted?

Sometimes I'll have people tell me, "I just don't get anything out of God's service." That can mean several things. Maybe I'm dropping the ball, and not faithfully and straightforwardly preaching the Word. This is always a good thing for me to consider and reexamine. Maybe the services are too

hard to follow. Once again, this is always a good thing for me to consider or reexamine. But there's always the other maybe as well. Maybe, just maybe, once in a great while, the person isn't putting their heart into it, isn't carefully listening and inwardly digesting the lessons and the message, isn't singing the liturgy with an eye towards what is taking place as we do so, or the hymns with careful attention the words dancing on the melody. A lot of maybes, but the point is clear. This takes all we have, both for the preacher and the hearer, the presiding minister and the congregation. Almost everything you do in a day is repetitive and familiar, from driving to brushing your teeth to watching television to playing sports, yet you give it your careful attention. Why shouldn't our time here be the same?

This is serious stuff that takes place here. You wouldn't put a Nerf hoop or a Wii in the surgery room at the hospital and let the fireman have a hose fight while they put out the fire at your house. Some things are too serious to trivialize, too important to play around. This is one of those things. This is coming before the Almighty God of the universe, not Hannah Montana. This is having your sins forgiven, not shopping at Ikea. This is Body and Blood, not pizza and beer. This is the Spirit at work, and He doesn't mess around in your work place, so why should we mess around in His?

Now that's not to say that you can't find some churches that would rival Chucky Cheese. Problem is, I've never had anyone ask me to call Chucky on his or her deathbed. Somehow it's always time for something substantive then. Well, what matters most when dying is what should matter most when living. No father wants to get to know his son when he's about to die. No, he wishes he'd done so earlier. The same is true for the Christian and Christ. Now is the time to get to know each other.

The time may come when I or one of your fellow members may have ask you, "Have you been trying? Have you been faithful in the use of Word and Sacrament?" And you won't be the odd duck. You'll fit in perfectly with the rest of the people in the pews, even with your pastor, because all of us have to be reminded from time to time how the Spirit operates, and where we should seek what we need most. This is our hospital. This is where the Lord puts out the fires of the sinful flesh and of Satan. This is the Spirit's workplace, because this is where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered, not to entertain you, but to sustain you. Things that truly matter don't grab your attention. They demand it.

I have no place calling my mechanic and complaining that my car isn't running well if I haven't been taking it in to him. Cars are supposed to run poorly when they're not maintained. The same is true for the Christian. We are bound to run poorly when our faith is not maintained. Fortunately, your Jesus loves you. He gave Himself for you on the cross to save you from your sins and doubts, laziness and apathy, ungratefulness and wandering. Even more, He still gives Himself to you through the work of the Spirit. Receiving the Lord's Supper is going to seem a big deal to you three today. May it ever remain that, along with the hearing of His Word.

The Spirit we celebrate, praise, and welcome here today is Jesus' Gift to you, working through these Gifts. Don't take that Gift for granted, but take it for all Its worth, which is everything. There are lots of Christians in heaven. There are lots of Christians in hell. You know which one's you want to be, and those are the one's the Spirit makes you. Putting yourself in His care is the smartest thing you could ever do, and that is what you are doing today, for the first time, or for the fortieth. At times what this Spirit does may seem repetitive or familiar, but that doesn't mean it doesn't deserve your full attention. No, sometimes the repetitive and familiar is the most important of all. This is the most important of all. Thankfully, the Spirit has led you here to be part of it. Stay a part of it. Amen.