

1 June 2003
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

“The Word of Truth”

Text: John 17:11b-19 (Acts 1:15-26; 1 John 4:13-21)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The first reading that we heard tonight, from the book of Acts, is an interesting one, because the Church is at a unique time in its history – it is *after* the Ascension of Jesus, yet *before* the day of Pentecost. It is an “in between” time, these ten days, when the apostles and believers might very well have been wondering, “What shall we do?” Jesus has ascended, but we’ve not yet received the promised Spirit . . . “What shall we do?”

That question, and these verses, are important for us because our situation is somewhat similar. We too are living in an “in between” time – the time between Jesus’ first coming and the time of His second coming. And like the apostles and believers that we heard about, many today are wondering, “What shall we do? What shall the Church be about? How do we face and address the questions facing us in our day and age today?” And those are good and important questions.

So returning to the reading from Acts, how did the church then decide what to do? They went to the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. Peter stands up and quotes from the Psalms. For them, there was only one place to go; one source of truth; one font of direction and guidance, and that was the Word, the Holy Scriptures. And on the basis of God’s Word, they acted – they appointed an apostle to take the place of Judas . . . a process, by the way, which probably did not take only five minutes, but more likely a few days, as they deliberated and prayed.

But in turning to the Christian Church in the world today, unfortunately, this example of going to the Word of God for truth, for direction, and guidance is – as strange as it sounds! – not what we see. No, instead, Christians and Churches *in increasing number* are turning not to the Word, but to themselves, to determine “What shall we do?” It is not to the Word, but to our hearts, our emotions, our wisdom, our opinions – these are the things that guide and direct many today. And so instead of hearing people ask “What does the Word say?” . . . and instead of hearing “Thus saith the Lord!” . . . it is far more common to hear asked, “What do you think? What would you do?”

I ran across a couple of examples of this just this week. There was a church just outside

Minneapolis who installed a lesbian woman as their new pastor. And the rationale, or justification, given for this was, “we finally listened to our hearts.” . . . Next there was an Anglican Bishop in Vancouver who, after some deliberation and self-examination, decided that it was his “Christian duty” to begin to bless same-sex unions. . . . And then I read this week of a pastor who participated in a funeral, co-officiating with a Hindu priest, because he *felt* the family needed him to do so. . . . And notice, in all of these examples, where is the objective truth of the Word of God? What has nudged it aside? What has replaced it?

Now, on the one hand, we should not be surprised by this turn of events. Reverence for the Word of God has been in decline for some time now, with many no longer believing that the Scriptures are actually the Word of God, and many now believing that the Scriptures contain errors and that we must sort out what in the Bible to keep and what to lay aside as irrelevant and out-of-date. And that being the case, what has then rushed in to fill the vacuum, what has replaced the Word of God as the source of truth, is what many would call “*sanctified reason.*” And a verse that might be quoted to support this view is one that we heard in the Epistle from First John, which said: “***By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.***” And so, the thinking goes, “we have the Spirit speaking to us, inside of us, to our hearts” . . . because we live after Pentecost and the Spirit is living in us, the thoughts of our hearts and minds and emotions must therefore be guided by Him, and therefore be “sanctified,” or made holy, by Him, and therefore must be right. . . . Isn’t that what guided that church outside Minneapolis? And the Bishop in Vancouver? And the pastor at the funeral?

But this is dangerous ground! And what makes this kind of thinking so dangerous is that there is a nugget of truth in it! The Holy Spirit *has* indeed been given to us, and He *does* live in us, and He *is* guiding us – that’s true! But that fact *doesn’t* make all our thoughts and opinions and emotions God pleasing! You know that, and I know that. There is still sin living in each of us. We still struggle to do what is right and avoid what is wrong, and we often fail in that struggle. We are, as St. Paul so aptly describes in Romans 7, simultaneously saints and sinners. And so we simply cannot depend on what comes out of our hearts and minds, because as the Scriptures say in Matthew 15, “***For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.***” And as you look in your heart you know that’s true, and so do I.

The alternative, then – the alternative to looking within ourselves for the answers, is to go outside of ourselves. To follow the example of the believers in the book of Acts, and go to the Word. And this is exactly where we are directed to go by Jesus in the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening. Those verses from John 17 are part of Jesus’ prayer on the night when He was betrayed, and notice what they say about *the Word*. First, Jesus prays:

“While I was with them, I kept them in your Name, which you have given me. I have guarded them . . .” While Jesus was in the world, the disciples, the church, were kept in the Word of God by the Word of God made flesh Himself! He kept them, He guarded them, and they knew Christ would not mislead them, but lead them in the way of eternal life. . . . But then next in His prayer, after speaking of His time with His disciples, Jesus then acknowledges that this time is coming to an end. And so He prays, ***“But now I am coming to you . . .”*** and therefore what has Jesus done? ***“I have given them your word. . . Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”***

And so we have a source of truth – *outside of us* – which will not mislead us. A infallible source of truth which will sanctify us. A source of truth which does not come and go, which does not change, which does not depend on our thoughts and emotions or the prevailing opinions of the world. The objective, trans-cultural, timeless and eternal Word of God to now guard and keep us in the truth. The Word through which Christ continues to work through the Spirit He gives through that Word.

Now take note of that last statement: the ongoing work of Christ, by the Spirit, through the Word. That’s terribly important – to know how Christ continues to work among us. For those who try to live by some inner “spiritual voice,” or by their “spirit-sanctified reason” have a problem when they find that their thoughts and reason do not agree with the Word of Christ. They must then, actually, pit what they consider “from the Spirit” against Christ and His Word – or God against God! But that cannot be. *The Spirit is not a substitute for the Word.* No, Christ is working by His Spirit *through* His Word, and the Spirit leads us *into* the Word. They are inseparable. And they cannot contradict one another, for they come from the same source, the same Christ. And so if there is a contradiction between the thoughts and opinions of our hearts and minds – however “sanctified” we think they may be! – and the Word of God, the truth is not what comes from us. As Jesus prayed, ***“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”***

And so by Word and Spirit, Christ still today leads us into the truth, and the Spirit by the Word leads us to Christ. For as we heard in the readings on Thursday night (Lk. 24:44), all the Scriptures speak of Christ and point to Him. And so the Word of God preached and read leads us to the truth of Christ. The Word of God joined with water leads us to Christ and washes us clean with His forgiveness. The Word of God joined with bread and wine leads us to Christ and feeds us with His body and blood. The Word of God leads us to Christ and His life for us – Christ enfleshed for us; Christ at work for us; Christ crucified for us; Christ resurrected and ascended for us; Christ’s ongoing work *through the Spirit* for us. . . .

And the most wonderful thing about all of that is that *none of it* depends on you – what

you may think of yourself, how knowledgeable you are, or whether you *feel* forgiven or holy. It all depends solely on Christ and His work for you. And therefore it is sure, and steady, and reliable. And relying on the Word, and focusing on the Word, and depending on the Word, you will not go wrong. For the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, the Holy Scriptures, will lead you not to yourself, but to your confidence and hope, your life and your Saviour – to Christ, the Word made flesh. And joined to Christ by the Spirit, Christ takes us to the Father. He takes us with Himself through this life, for He too lived this life. He takes us through death, for He went through death. He raises us to life, for He too was raised to life. And He takes us to Heaven, for He ascended into Heaven.

And so having accomplished everything, and having returned to His Father, Christ has given you His Word – to sanctify you in the truth, to guard and keep you in the truth, to give you His Spirit of truth – that you may know the truth, and believing be saved. That is His will for you, and what He has come and accomplished for you.

And so as we live in this “in between” time, know that we have a sure guide and source of truth. In this “in between” time, when we may wonder “What to do,” we know more importantly what Christ has done *for us*, and what He is still doing *for us*. And so joined to Christ, and sanctified by Him, and remaining in the truth of His Word, we will know the truth, and like the disciples, we will know “what we are to do.”

We **repent**, and receive the forgiveness of Christ.

We **forgive**, and proclaim the love of Christ.

We **love**, and speak the truth of Christ, the Word.

And then when this “in between” time will end, and Christ comes again in glory, we will be glorified, with the glory of Christ. For those who live in Him and His forgiveness and truth now, will also live in Him forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.