

19 May 2013
The Feast of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our Babel Undone”

Text: John 14:23-31; Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

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

We are living in a very spiritual world. Yes, there are a small minority of people who claim to be atheist, but the large majority of people believe in God, or gods, or at least some kind of supreme being; in some kind of life after death, either here or in another world; and that there are things that happen in this world that cannot be seen and cannot be explained by science or the laws of nature.

Now, just that description alone reveals that while we are living in a very spiritual world, it is a very *confused* spirituality. There are many opinions, many claims of truth. Because the spiritual is different than the physical. It cannot be seen, it cannot be touched. For that reason, some say it is not real, or it is not important. But others will say it is real and very important because though I cannot see it or touch it, I can feel it.

And so the truth for many, when it comes to things spiritual, is what they feel in their heart. This is what folks mean when they say things like: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” Or, “That may be true for you but not for me.” But if the basis of truth, the foundation of spirituality, is what you feel in your heart, then there are as many truths and as many spiritualities as there are people in the world. And what is believed, therefore, cannot be criticized or corrected. There are no standards, no right or wrong, if what is true is what I feel.

This confused spirituality, I would suggest, is the end result of God’s scattering of the people who were building the Tower of Babel. For though God stopped the building of the Tower by confusing the languages of the people, the people did not stop building - they just stopped building with bricks, and they stopped building *together*. People are now building lots of individual towers, their own spiritual paths to God. People are still trying to make names for themselves that will live forever. But people are confused, scattered. Many want to be spiritual, but don’t quite know how. Many want to forge their own way, but don’t quite know where to go.

So you could say that the spirituality of the world today is quite a Babel. Lots of

voices, lots of advice, lots of truths, that is all very confused and confusing.

But what if the spiritual was not like that? What if the spiritual *could* be seen, *could* be touched? What if we didn't have to make our own way to God, but God would come down to us? What if what is true isn't what I feel, what comes from me, but a word that comes from outside of me and is given to me? That would be a game-changer, wouldn't it? **And that game-changer was named Jesus.** True God become true man. The spiritual become physical. God come to us that we may be with Him. To cut through the confusion and give us the truth. To cut through our death and give us life. To bring together the scattered by His Word.

The spiritual made physical. This is what we need because we are not only physical or only spiritual beings - we are both. And uniquely so. Animals are physical but not spiritual and angels are spiritual but not physical, but men and women are both. And even though we sometimes act like animals and some want to be angels, that is not who we are. We are men and women uniquely created in the image and likeness of God. Uniquely created with that glory and honor and majesty as the crowning achievement of God's good creation. But sadly it's a crown, a glory, an honor, and a majesty thrown away in sin. When our first parents tried to be what they were not, and so became what they did not want to be. A situation not so unlike what happened at Babel.

But it was not only because of sin that the spiritual is made physical for us. Even before that, beginning with the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the spiritual is made physical for us. Life and death given through the physical, through touching, through eating. And then through circumcision and the sacrifices and eating of the Tabernacle and the Temple - life and death are attached to the physical.

And then, of course, God Himself became flesh in the mystery of the incarnation. He came into our world not only to show us the way, but to BE the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). To defeat the death that had overcome us, and give us the life we had lost. To teach us the truth about both what can be seen and what cannot be seen. And to give us what we do not have and cannot get for ourselves - peace with God in the forgiveness of our sins.

And having accomplished that through His life, His death, and His resurrection, and having ascended into heaven (to prepare a place for us), He sends us what we are celebrating this day - the gift of His Holy Spirit. For while we are living in a very spiritual world, not all spirits are good and holy. Many are evil and demonic and working to mislead us and deceive us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice (Expl. to the Sixth Petition, Small Catechism). Only the Holy Spirit is given to make us holy. That we have the spirituality we were created to have and be. And so

we prayed for this earlier. We prayed: ***Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Your love*** (Introit Antiphon).

But wait a second, Pastor! Fill the hearts . . . fire of Your love . . . don't those words direct us to our hearts and feelings where you said before all this confused spirituality comes from? . . . Well, no - though I admit it may sound like it. For still today, the spiritual is connected to the physical. That didn't change from the Old Testament to the New, from the Temple to the Church, once Jesus came. For on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was connected to and came in the physical - fire and wind, and today He comes in the physical - water and words. *Same Spirit*. And He comes not to point us inward, to our hearts, to judge our spirituality by what we feel, but to point us outside of ourselves; to point us to Jesus; to point us to His cross and to point us to where Jesus comes now for us in the spiritual made physical - in His Word and in His Sacraments. And so the Holy Spirit comes to us and turns us - from Babel to the cross, from ourselves to God, from inward to outward, from what I think and feel to the truth of God's Word. To rely on our Saviour and what He has done, and not on me and what I can do.

That's the Holy Spirit's job, and so what Pentecost is really all about. It's not really about cool tongues of fire and fishermen being able to speak in foreign languages - this day is about the Holy Spirit being our Helper, our Comforter, by pointing us to Jesus. By pointing us to the spiritual made physical; to the Word of the Word made flesh! - who says: I put my Spirit here for you, my forgiveness here for you, my life here for you. I achieved it, I accomplished it all on the cross - but I put it *here* for you. The spiritual made physical, so that you don't have to wonder where it is, but you can see it, touch it, taste it, receive it.

And so are Jesus' words fulfilled. For He said: ***If anyone loves me, he will keep my word***. "Keep" there doesn't just mean to obey (as it is sometimes translated). It is a much bigger word than that. It means to guard, to treasure, to keep as of great importance. For through that very Word the Holy Spirit comes to us and connects us to Jesus, our Saviour. And connected to Jesus you are children of the Father and at home with Him. Connected to Jesus you have the peace of the forgiveness of your sins, and the peace of knowing that death is not the end for you. A peace the world cannot give. A peace that your heart cannot give. But a peace that Jesus can and does give. To you.

And so Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to reverse our Babel. To cut through all the spiritual clutter and confusion of this world and be our Helper, our Comforter. That we know the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). That, as you will hear once again this day after receiving the spiritual made physical, the Body and Blood of our Lord and His forgiveness, life, and salvation, that you *depart in peace*. *Both* depart this altar and go out into the world in peace, *and* depart this world - whenever that may be -

in peace. For just as Jesus said to His disciples: ***Rise, let us go from here***, so He will speak those same words to you, when you die and when you rise, to be with Him forever.

But until then, we have a whole lot of living to do, in a world that is not always easy to live in. Where sin tramples us and our sin tramples others. Where troubles challenge us, situations change, and worries and doubts can overwhelm. And we need a God who's not just out there, spiritually, *somewhere*, and who I *hope* sees me and I *hope* knows what I'm going through and I *hope* helps, though I really don't know if any of that's the case. We need a God who's not just a cheerleader, or waiting for us at the finish line, or a coach yelling at us to keep going. We need a God who's here to help; who's here to forgive, who's here to save. Who knows need, who knows sadness, who knows temptation, who knows death, who knows the clutter and confusion of life in this world.

And we have such a God. Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit coming to you and pointing you to that God - to Jesus on the cross and pointing to the empty grave and saying: **peace**. Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit coming to you and pointing you to that God - Jesus in the font and on the altar and saying: **peace**. Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit coming to you and pointing to that God - the Jesus who came for you and says to you: **I got it**. Your sin? I got it. Your life? I got it. Your need? I got it. The God you need is the God you have. Here. A flesh and blood Saviour, for flesh and blood you. So go and live. Not in sin, but in Him. The spiritual made physical in you, for His Spirit lives in you.

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 through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.