

“Fill us with your Spirit to establish our faith in truth”¹
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Law, Gospel and the Holy Spirit
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15 If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. John 14:15-17

6 “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. 7 There are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. 1John 5:6-7

*O Holy Spirit, enter in,
And in our hearts your work begin,
And make our hearts your dwelling.
Sun of the soul, O Light divine,
Around and in us brightly shine,
Your strength in us upwelling.
In your radiance
Life from heaven,
Now is given
Overflowing,
Gifts of gifts beyond all knowing.²*

The task given for this lecture was discerning the Spirit in the double-life of the Congregation. *Gift of gifts beyond all knowing*. I read the title and I started to laugh, because in 30+years of serving as pastor in parish, campus and seminary communities, I believe that I have

¹ Apostolic Tradition, Prayer of Hippolytus, Eucharistic Prayer IV, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 226.

² Text: Michael Schirmer; tr. Catherine Winkworth; Tune: Philipp Nicolai, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), Hymn 459, vs. 1.

encountered not simply the double-life, but more than 50 shades of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Double-life doesn't even touch it. I've even served multiple point parishes where one congregation was all sweetness and light (well, almost all) but their yoked partner truly resembled an evil twin. (This was most evident when one church council met on Tuesday evening and the other, on Wednesday.) Yet in every assembly, baptisms were performed, sins were confessed, Scripture was studied, preaching was heard, and an epicletic word was prayed at the Eucharist. Jesus kept putting his life into ours.

Congregational cultures are forged over time. Multiple generations are sometimes led by lay leaders or a succession of long-term pastors who may have ruled with an iron fist. Whether you're in a small town or a large city, your congregation has a culture, a way of doing things that carries remnant of its history and relationships (either by subconscious agreement or in conscious rebellion). 40 years in a wilderness seems like a mere breath compared to 80 years bent-over by hearing someone's misinterpretation of a law that neither you nor even Jesus could fulfill. Faith becomes the parched hunger of one on a desert march, the slow death between just enough hope, and a despair that is unacceptable to express in public. And now in more recent times, I have also encountered an anger born of fear that runs like an apocalyptic undercurrent, that somehow, someone, some force was going to take this congregational culture away, and in taking it away, the church would no longer exist. At the very bottom of that fear was threat of both collective and individual abandonment that would end with death

having the final word, for abandonment is the foretaste of a life that is the dust of the grave.

There are a variety of reactions to such a deadly spiral in many parts of the American church context, some which de-center the apostolic witness in favor of 'enlightened,' non-hierarchical sociological principles of democracy, in which almost every voice heard is equal (I say almost because it is a selective diversity); and the obverse reaction (a modern equivalent of Rome's bread and circuses) that projects the same fear onto those who are moving the culture of the political arena to a particular brand of "left," and in response provide a Sunday morning entertainment industry with enough fodder to numb the mind 24/7 through radio, cable, so-called "felt-need" bible studies, and the ever-ubiquitous internet. You can sing upbeat "Christian" songs 'til the cows come home, and then when your voice gives out you can just post your favorite slogans on Facebook to let your world know your brand of Christian identity.

While no congregation is immune to these forces, the church is still alive. In the warp and woof, the cultural and ecclesiastical yin and yang that pulls and tears a fabric to shreds, and in spite of all the ways that any expression of the church can go astray, there are yet faithful people hidden within the love that heals, carried in the Holy Breath of the One God who brings all things to life, witnessing to a mercy so great that stones are rolled away. Folks who really are holding on to life by a thread are held in that gorgeous embrace of prayer and love—those

sighs too deep for words. And being upheld in ways which the world can neither measure nor contain, they discover whom God created them to be. *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.* I think back to my own life as a college student, when I had the self-esteem of a flea, yet the people in a little Lutheran campus congregation saw in me the person whom God intended for me to be, and treated me as such. Their quiet, actions, unnoticed by the world, were a catechesis of love, and lo, and behold, I came to life. I grew into the person whom God had created me to be through their love, and I began to speak, to bear witness to the incarnate God, who had been made present to me in their voices and their hearts. Through the years folks have occasionally asked me to describe what grace is, and while the thickness of meaning has grown, my answer has never changed from those early days: Grace is breathing after death. Grace is breathing after death.

Such life in the Spirit is deeply hidden. It is impossibly hard for the world to see, because like a seed that falls into the ground, it is only known when it bears fruit. And given all the visible divisions, all the enmity between peoples within and without the church, from congregational squabbles to ecclesiastical sabotage, the world cannot see any unity, nor on its own is it capable of receiving a taste of the church's good fruit.

In the United States alone we are now culturally divided into 11 geographic/sociological regions from 'Yankeedom' to the Left Coast to

the Tidewaters to the Midlands.³ People are desperate for an identity. Within each of these “existential” regions (regions with which people’s identities are formed and normed) are economic variants, age variants, political variants, religious variants, educational variants, and cultural, historically ethnic, and racial variants. The continuum of rural, small town, suburban, an urban dwelling places means that children born the same day in two different places within the same country, and maybe even to parents within the same church body, may grow up to hate each other, or just as deadly, be apathetic towards one another, having no recognition that this is my neighbor.

What is so spectacular, however, is that underneath every fad and every division, every “ism” and every little tad of self-righteousness, every fear and every failure, every hushed duplicity and every false bravado, every wrong decision and every haughty glance, He who created us in his image and likeness is still at work in us, breathing us into the future that he is binding and knitting together through our sacramental life. For while the Old Adam/Old Eve in each of us is still looking to go astray, He who is life itself is bringing goodness where we on our own could never even imagine it.

The church is hidden in, with, and under this mix of peoples who make up a nation and who, for all intensive purposes, have no unifying meta-narrative. As a nation we are a people without a sense that what is true for me is also true for you. The church herself, which has a meta-

³ <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-11-nations-of-the-united-states-2015-7>

narrative, (God ruling by his Word) becomes increasingly hidden in this multivalent context, for the layers of human brokenness and division are like scales seared on our eyes, keeping us from seeing who we really are together as God's beloved creation. Until, like St. Paul, we are led by God's grace to a dirt-filled Damascus street where there a faithful, unassuming brother of the church prays, so that we may regain our true sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 9:17) Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit, this is the work of God when murderers (as we all are) die to ourselves and come to proclaim the sovereignty of Jesus, *He is the Son of God*. For until this world tastes death, it cannot hear such love.⁴

Alexander Schmemmann, the great Orthodox theologian states it clearly, *The world rejected Christ by killing him, and by doing so rejected its own destiny and fulfillment. Therefore if the basis for all Christian worship is the Incarnation, its true content is always the Cross and the resurrection. Through these events the new life in Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is "hid with Christ in God," and made into a life "not of this world." The world which rejected Christ must itself die in man if it is to become again means of communion, a means of participation in the life which shone forth from the grave, in the kingdom which is not "of this world," and which in terms of this world is still to come.*⁵

As in the world before ultrasound, when we could not see the details of a child in the womb that was coming into this world, we receive our Lord in an incarnate promise: a promise that holds the power of life

⁴ "The point of [the law/gospel] distinction is once again the making public of the divine deed, making it hearable in a world that will not hear it. The distinction is made so that a new kind of speaking might be heard in this world: gospel speaking...Proclamation, shaped by the theology of the cross, is governed by the distinction between law and gospel. This distinction comprehends the fact that publication of the electing deed cannot proceed directly to the world that crucified Jesus, but must bring it to an end." Gerhard Forde, "Called and Ordained," in Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden, eds., *Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 122, 128.

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 122.

eternal, a promise that will crush the serpent's head, a promise that is hidden in the life of the baptized, a promise that the light will shatter the darkness, a promise that the leprosy that infects the human heart will be washed clean, until that great day comes when we sing with all the saints in glory, the resurrection song. And what is so stunning is that people who do evil to one another still are given this vision of the good, calling them to live in the light, to live as the light. *Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

This is the work of the Spirit, a ministry of reconciliation, where words of forgiveness break through that boulder stuck in our throats (that stone, too, needs to be rolled away), where we give not only the outgrown and outdated clothes to the Salvation Army, but we spend hours in what the world calls "leisure time" building furniture for the local homeless shelter or quilting for 1 of 19 million refugees. Where we step out beyond our fear to see someone of a different race or socio-economic class, or even a different religion, as a beloved child of God as we are. Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit: It's all at work here when we are faced with both our finitude and our complicity in another human beings pain and sorrow. And then...and then from our knees, we begin to love. Then we can participate in myriad expressions of service to the neighbor, joyfully—not because we have to, but because we want to. And where in our everyday vocational callings, that which world calls our "professions," we work in personal and collective ways to treat everyone, absolutely everyone, with the dignity and respect befitting a

child of God. Some of us may also do the most hidden work of renewing and creating systems that make life more joyous for people we will never meet. Your incarnate witness will serve as a word of law to those who don't care for their neighbor, and an embodied grace to those who receive it. Giving glory to our Father in heaven is always the work of the Spirit.

Such a life does not call attention to itself and has no need to mimic a world that needs to name its company on its polo shirts and its favorite quarterback on its jerseys. Such a life has no need to succumb to a tribalism that seeks to destroy our true identity, the identity given to us when the water was poured and the word spoken—*one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one God and Father of us all.* (Ephesians 4:5) For such a life does not easily fall prey for those devilish forces that divide brother from brother, sisters and mothers, fathers and cousins all.

What does it mean for the baptized to live this life filled with the Spirit? To live the Truth that is known by the Spirit, by the water and by the blood?

*Left to ourselves, we surely stray;
Oh, lead us on the narrow way,
With wisest counsel guide us;
And give us steadfastness, that we
May follow you forever free,
No matter who derides us.
Gently heal those hearts now broken;
Give some token You are near us,*

*Whom we trust to light and cheer us.*⁶

What does it mean for the baptized to live filled with the Spirit of truth whom the world neither sees nor recognizes? What does it mean for a congregation, called gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Spirit to discover the shape of a joyful obedience empowered by the Spirit? *Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, that we and all who share in this bread and cup may be united in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, may enter the fullness of the kingdom of heaven, and may receive our inheritance with all your saints in light.*⁷ What does this mean? The Eucharistic epiclesis points us in the right direction.

Now there is a long and rugged history of the role and placement of the epiclesis within the Eucharistic Rite. Sometime the Spirit was called upon the material gifts of bread and wine, sometimes the Spirit was called upon the persons in the assembly, and sometimes the Spirit was ambiguously called upon both. Sometimes the epiclesis preceded the *verba*, sometimes it followed, and sometime there were both.⁸ Sometimes the Spirit was simply understood to be present when the *verba* flowed from the Proper Preface in the act of proclamation.⁹ Yet in

⁶ *LBW*, Hymn 459. vs 2.

⁷ Eucharistic Prayer II, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minister's Desk Edition), 221.

⁸ For a concise history of the epiclesis in Lutheran Eucharistic praying see, Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Church in Act: Lutheran Liturgical Theology in an Ecumenical Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 33-66.

⁹ In Luther's revision of the *Ordo Missae*, the *Formula Missae et Communionis* of 1523, the *verba* is still within an Eucharistic prayer. Senn comments on the *Formula Missae*, "If this text of the institution narrative is compared with the text in the Roman canon, it will be seen that Luther has eliminated all extrabiblical words and phrases...It should be noted that this institution narrative is still included within a Eucharistic prayer, since it is introduced by a dependent Qui-clause. This Eucharistic prayer concluded with the singing of the Sanctus." Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 278.

each case God is still understood as the giver so that the Holy Spirit would *establish our faith in truth*: the truth about who God is, from the beginning, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how he acts; the truth about who we are and how we are called to live; and the truth about this world and the world to come, the truth about eternity, that is, the truth about the resurrection of the dead unto eternal life, that we *may enter* it.

So really, what does it mean for each of you here to live filled with the Spirit of truth whom the world neither sees nor recognizes? What does it mean for your congregation, called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Spirit to discover a joyful obedience empowered by the Spirit? What does it mean for you to receive and to live out the Truth that is known by the Spirit, by the water and by the blood?

Every Lord's Day the baptized come to table and are joined in prayer for the Spirit to come upon these gifts of bread and wine, and to come upon those who have been assembled by the Spirit's own power. Within a continuum of ritual variations our hearts and hands are made open so that we might receive that life that is *the fullness of the kingdom of heaven, and...receive our inheritance with all [the] saints in light*.¹⁰ In some (often hidden) way the Holy Spirit is always directing our attention to Christ, and it is in and through Christ that we are taken to the Father's heart.

The Eucharistic epiclesis is among the most paradigmatic expressions of

¹⁰ Eucharistic Prayer II, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minister's Desk Edition), 221

the life and faith of the baptized. For as Christ himself is hidden in bread and wine, word and water, so the Spirit fills the assembly with the presence of the Triune God wherever that community is gathered: the living room in a house church, a stone and stained glass cathedral, on under-heated city basement, or at the end of a gravel road in white walled church on the open prairie.

The Eucharistic epiclesis, however, does not come without a larger ritual framework. In the liturgical setting of the full Eucharistic Rites of the *LBW*, where the Institution Narrative follows the praise of the Father for creation, salvation history, and for Christ himself, which has already followed the Sanctus, the proper preface and *sursum corda* in which the assembly was called forth to, *Lift up your hearts*, and our very bodies responded, *We lift them up to the Lord*, we come to the remembrance (the *Anamnesis*) that recalls the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, and the hope of Christ's return, *Amen, Come, Lord Jesus*. And so at last we pray, *Send your Holy Spirit*, crying out in faith for what our Lord as already promised, *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you...Amen, Come, Holy Spirit*. And with arms upheld by the Spirit we pray beyond our own needs, beyond our own tribe, beyond our own borders, beyond our own fragmentary existences, and especially beyond our own fears—especially our fear of death by abandonment, to *Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place and*

*unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all. Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.*¹¹ The Holy Spirit has directed our full attention to Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come, and when our attention is taken into to future which he preparing for us, then, and only then, that future, that eternal love, happens now.

For just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus as he came up from the River Jordan, and just as Jesus unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and just as Jesus breathed peace into the disciples who shivered behind a locked door, and just as you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, so now week after week, Sunday after Sunday, the Holy Spirit, whom you cannot see, but whose works you believe in—the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting—the Holy Spirit, is directing you to a Eucharistic life, a life in which we receive every breath with Thanksgiving. Our Lord Jesus says to us, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* And he has commanded you to, *Do this in remembrance of me.*

All those multiple contexts in which we live and move, but in which we do not have our very being, all those divisions are to be overcome, and indeed are overcome as the Holy Spirit directs us to receive the life of

¹¹ Eucharistic Prayers I and II, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minister’s Desk Edition), 223.

the resurrected Christ into our lives. In the words of St. Leo the Great, *The Spirit of truth breathes where he will, and each nation's own language has become common property in the mouth of the church.*¹² Hidden in the fragmentation of society and invading every sub-culture, the body of Christ sings his resurrection song. Whether we wear the faded scrubs of an orderly at the county nursing home or the sleek Armani pinstripe as CEO of a Fortune 500 company we are owned by neither one, but by Christ. Whether we are cooing homemade melodies of love in a baby's tiny ear or singing lamentations as we caress the dying, it is the Spirit of truth witnessing to the eternal love of God for those whom he has made. Nothing can stop this love, *neither heights nor depths nor angels nor principalities, nor powers*. Nothing can stop this love because *Christ has died. Christ is Risen, Christ will come again*. We who once cried for his crucifixion, murderers all, have now met him at the cross, dragged by the Spirit of truth kicking and screaming in denial of our complicity of our sin, but in a breath—born up as on wings of an eagle by this same Spirit whom the Father has sent to carry us to the empty tomb. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, we are *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies*. (2 Cor. 4:10)

There is however, one place where we all too often painfully see this life being made visible. It's not on the soil of the North American context but on the global horizon, and there we see in graphic and explicit scenes what truth looks like. For the Spirit of truth is made visible for all the

¹² St Leo the Great, Sermons 75.1-3:CCSL 138A, 465-9 in Stephen Mark Holmes, *The Fathers on the Sunday Gospels* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 166.

world to see in martyrdom. 21 Copts beheaded, scores of Nigerian students mowed down, Iraqi Christians kidnapped and tortured, innocent young girls in nation after nation abducted and raped physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and then raped again and again and again: It is destruction and violation, defilement and desecration at every human level, and in this hell on earth these unsuspecting martyrs are speaking the truth, testifying with their whole body to the truth of who God is and whom he has made us to be, *homo adorans*, the worshipping human, trusting his promise, *I am the Lord your God*, obedient to his command, *You shall have no other gods before me*. Animated and empowered by the Spirit who is truth, martyrs incarnately speak his essence, which is truth, *Father forgive them for they know not what they do*. And speaking the truth about who God is, they simultaneously speak the truth about the world that he made, and the truth about those upon whom the Spirit rests, the truth that God's mercy is greater than our damnable ways, his forgiveness greater than any devil's temptation, and his love even deeper than any mass grave. Death has no hold upon those in whom the Spirit rests, for the Spirit is testifying to the truth in the lives of those who look to the Lord for every breath.

*O mighty Rock, O Source of life,
Let your good Word in doubt and strife
be in us strongly burning,
that we be faithful unto death
And live in love and holy faith,
From you true wisdom learning.
Lord, your mercy*

*On us shower;
By your power
Christ confessing,
We will cherish all your blessings.*¹³

It is this vision that the Spirit breathes into the whole church, taking the resurrected life of Christ, and giving to us so that we may live faithfully in any and every context. We cannot fully imagine it, just as a young soldier cannot imagine how he would feel or act when the Stryker in front of him hits an IED and he finds himself hemmed in by enemy fire. None can imagine this, and all of us in some way or another are afraid that our fear would be greater than our faith, that we would be paralyzed, that we would capitulate, that we would submit to the evil that surrounds us, that we would seek to cling to this life more than to the promise of life eternal. But from the testimony of the martyrs we see and hear the same fullness of the Spirit who came to us in the waters, the same fullness of the Spirit, who in the words of the epiclesis attributed to Hippolytus, *blesses us [God's] servants and [his] own gifts of bread and wine, so that we and all who share in the body and blood of his Son may be filled with heavenly peace and joy, and receiving the forgiveness of sins, may be sanctified in soul and body, and have our portion with all God's saints.*¹⁴

God has breathed his Spirit on your hearts so that when faced with the fullness of the law, that is your death, you will be filled with the Spirit's gift of eternal truth, and you will yet proclaim, *All honor and glory are*

¹³ *LBW*, Hymn 459. vs 3.

¹⁴ Eucharistic Prayer IV, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Ministers Desk Edition), 226.

*yours, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in your holy Church, now and forever. Amen.*¹⁵

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.