

## Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly

3 June 2017

John 7:37-39

Grace to you and peace from God – our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

A kindergarten teacher gave each student in her class a clean sheet of paper. She told her class to create a picture on the paper with their crayons. Their pictures could be of anything they wanted and the teacher would display them on the classroom walls for the upcoming parent-teacher conferences. As the teacher walked through the classroom she stopped to admire the picture one of her students was drawing. “That’s a lovely picture,” she complimented. “What are you making picture of?” The student said, “I’m making a picture of God.” The teacher said, “But no one knows what God looks like,” to which the student replied, “They will when I’m done.”

What does God look like? I’m sure we’ve all seen different images of God that different people have imagined. For example, when Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he envisioned God as a white man with long, flowing gray hair and a gray beard. In William P. Young’s book “The Shack,” God is encountered as an African-American woman. And the Bible doesn’t give us much help in picturing the Almighty One. God appeared in a burning bush that greeted Moses. God appeared to the ancient Israelites sometimes as a column of fire and sometimes as a column of cloud. In John’s gospel, Jesus himself told the disciple Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). And St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). And, of course, everyone knows what Jesus looks like.

A more challenging question for this Pentecost might be, what does the Holy Spirit look like? John the Baptist testified that when he baptized Jesus, “I saw the

Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him” (John 1:32). If you were to search the internet for images of the Holy Spirit, the majority of the images that come up are of a dove. In the story of Pentecost that Lana just read from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts, the Spirit was described as “divided tongues, as of fire,” which appeared among the disciples and “rested on each of them.” It’s this image of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire that has inspired the church to adopt the color red as the liturgical color for the day of Pentecost.

But I think just as important is how the Spirit appears among us – not physically but rather, how the Spirit moves within and among us in the church, how the Spirit leads and guides each one of us to help bring about God’s reign here on earth, or to use words that might better fit our 2017 Synod Assembly, how the Spirit unleashes us to do God’s work with our hands.

One way the Spirit has been made known is through the hard work and the tremendous sacrifice of people like Luke Swanson, whom we met via Skype at last night’s banquet. Like other Young Adults in Global Mission, Luke felt the Spirit move him to venture far outside of what would otherwise be his normal comfort zone in order to serve God in a faraway, foreign country, Argentina. My own daughter and son-in-law were similarly moved and are completing a mission trip in Nome, Alaska, another faraway place. Surely, the Spirit has unleashed these and many other young people to get out there and make a difference in the lives of others.

Another way the Spirit is made known is simply by everyone’s presence here at this assembly. You might remember studying Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* back in confirmation. Our keynote speaker talked about Luther’s *Small Catechism* at length yesterday. Luther wrote that the Holy Spirit (*say it with me*) “calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth ...” Each of us is here this morning through the movement, the “pushing,” if you will, of

God's Holy Spirit, who has called us through the gospel, enlightened each of us with gifts of the Spirit, made each of us holy, and kept each of us in the true faith. It was mentioned yesterday that the Spirit is a common thread that weaves its way through everything we say, see, and do here – from people walking through the hallways and experiencing what it's like to carry a heavy container of water, to the enthusiasm with which we sang the music at yesterday afternoon's Communion service ... most of it without written words, without written music, without printed bulletins.

Another example: one of my colleagues described how during yesterday's lunch break, the Kalahari's Marrakech Market was swamped by swarms of Lutherans looking for a quick bite. The woman working behind the counter could have become impatient with so many customers demanding her attention. Instead, she remained poised, she remained professional, she remained polite as she took care of her customers and wished each person a blessed day at the end of each transaction. That, to me, is clear evidence of the Spirit at work.

Admittedly, not all of the Spirit's actions are so noticeable. I believe that the Spirit may also become apparent in that still, small voice we know to be our conscience. The more we grow in our Christian faith, the more the Spirit will whisper to us through our conscience – or maybe I should say the more we will listen to our conscience and follow the Spirit's leading.

At his trial before the Holy Roman Emperor in Worms, Germany in 1521, Luther stated, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." On the one hand, you could say that Luther's conscience was leashed to the Word of God. And yet, Luther's epiphany of God's unlimited, unending grace that comes to us through our faith in Christ alone unleashed Luther from his fear and unleashed him to reform the church.

Finally, during the early days of the Reformation and for much of these past 500 years, Christians of different traditions have differed vehemently, sometimes violently over issues of doctrine and practice. As our Moravian pastor said at last night's banquet, 500 years ago, it would have been impossible for clergy and congregations from the Moravian tradition, the Episcopal tradition, the Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and other traditions to worship together, break bread together, even share pastors with each other. Impossible. Out of the question. Even as recently as 20 years ago, such ecumenism would have been thought to be ... well, maybe possible someday. Today, sisters and brothers, it's a reality! And if that weren't enough, the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church are commemorating together the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. Our repentance, our reconciliation, and our commitment to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ is all striking evidence of the power and the presence of God's Holy Spirit at work.

In some ways, it's a scary time to be the church. It sometimes feels like change is swirling all around us. It sometimes it feels like we're in a small boat that's being beaten and battered by the waves of an angry sea. We sometimes want to shout out along with the disciples, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!" But you don't have to look far to see that we are not alone in our boats and we are not perishing. God's Holy Spirit is with us, sometimes leading us, sometimes pushing us ... and sometimes changing us ... but always empowering us and encouraging us and accompanying us in this adventure we call faith. For me, it's an exciting time to be the church. I can't wait to see where the Spirit of God will lead us today. Amen.