

## Peter and the Spirit

Ten days or so ago I bought a systematic theology book. In the time since seminary I've read lots of books, besides the Bible – books about the church, various Bible commentaries, books about faith in life, books about the problems in the church and the ideas for solutions.

I've read books on science and theology and on interpreting scripture and the biblical story. I've read books about spirituality and spiritual seeking.

But I've not read any systematic theology since seminary. They're hard. And they can sometimes make the amazing story of God seem very dry.

The book I bought is a Lutheran systematic theology on the Holy Spirit. And it's actually very good and quite readable.

The Lutheran tradition is not known for its contributions to understanding the Holy Spirit. We're all over justification – we are justified by grace through faith and not by our own works.

We are big into baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. In Lutheran theology, our baptism is the daily source of our death to sin and rising to new life.

Although Paul first wrote it, Martin Luther reclaimed a more biblical notion of grace from a system that convinced people frightened of hell that they needed to do certain things to avoid eternal condemnation.

We are saved by Jesus, and not by anything we do. I like that about Lutheran theology.

But then what? What comes after justification? What's our role? What's God's role?

Sometimes Lutherans are so fearful of works righteousness that we don't talk much about what we're supposed to do after we are justified. And yet Jesus' teachings are primarily about how his followers should live in this life.

Simply put, what comes after justification is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. It's usually called sanctification.

Now, first a little note to avoid any heresy related to the trinity – all three persons of the trinity are involved in all three movements of God's work – creation, redemption, and sanctification.

But the star if you will of sanctification is the Holy Spirit.

Even the word sanctification makes some of us tighten up a bit. It means to be made holy. Sanctification to some has meant the absence of sin. It can devolve into a rigid morality that has greatly harmed people who don't fit into a certain mold of morality.

Lutherans are often also suspicious of the Holy Spirit because the traditions that emphasize it the most are the Pentecostals and charismatics. They're the ones who believe in spirit baptism of which the most prominent sign is speaking in tongues. We'll talk more about that later on in this series.

Also later, we'll talk a bit about some other traditions' spirituality. And at some point I'll argue that the work of the holy spirit can happen outside the church. At the whole other end from the Pentecostals are the spiritual but not religious. I believe something important – even holy – is happening there as well. But it's controversial.

To get us started today, first, the Holy Spirit does work for us in redemption – in justification. The Spirit gives us new birth through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

From there, the spirit works in us to help us grow in love and the desire for justice. That's a more positive view of sanctification than simply the absence of sin.

Then the Spirit works through us as we carry that mission of love into the world.

To make it even briefer – the Holy Spirit helps us grow in love and service toward God's creation.

And although we can't do anything to work for our own salvation, what comes after does depend on our cooperation with the Spirit.

Today's reading has a concrete example of how this works...Peter.

Let's set the stage for what we read. Peter and John had gone to the Temple for the hour of prayer. The picture on the bulletin shows the Temple. It might surprise you that they were in the Temple, but remember in the beginning those who would later be called Christians still considered themselves Jewish.

When they got to the Temple, in Solomon's portico, or porch, a crippled beggar asked them for money. Peter looked him in the eye and said I have no money, but in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk.

And he did. This was the first healing noted in the book of Acts.

As you might imagine, a buzz starts running through the gathered crowd and people began running towards Peter and John to see what was going on.

And Peter preached it...he preached Jesus and his crucifixion and what it all meant.

Our reading picks up at the end of the sermon. The gathered crowd has gotten the attention of the Sadducees, the priests, and the Temple captain.

Their objection to the preaching of resurrection is not theological. They are angry because they thought they were done with Jesus. They do not want to believe that resurrection could be a thing because it means they're not.

OK, so let's go back to Peter.

Remember Peter from the gospel. Peter was a fisherman. He was not educated in any classical sense. He struggled to understand what Jesus' mission actually was.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, we saw Peter fall asleep after Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake and wait while he prayed in the garden.

We see him fearfully follow Jesus' interrogation and trial from a distance. And then, we see Peter huddled around a fire in the courtyard. The people with him become suspicious. "You were with him, too. You're one of his followers."

Three times, Peter says, No, I am not. I don't know him.

Then the cock crows. And Peter dies. Maybe not physically but this is the death that happens when he is forced to confront the fact that his fear led him to deny Jesus.

He comes face with his own sin and the implications that has for his friend. And on that cross, a part of Peter dies with Jesus.

But then rises with Jesus. Peter has a new start. His new birth has begun. Like the green blade rising from the buried grain, they who were buried with Christ rise with him.

But there's not much evidence in those first few days after the resurrection that much had really changed.

Then the Holy Spirit entered with a cacophony of wind and flame. And everything changed.

Now, look at Peter. His preaching is so powerful, thousands join the ranks of Jesus' followers when he speaks.

In the name of Jesus, he heals.

Then, he's challenged by the Jewish religious authorities. These are the very ones who plotted to kill Jesus. When Peter cowered in the courtyard, afraid to even admit he knew Jesus, these are the very people he was afraid of!

But look at him now. He doesn't back down. At this point, the authorities have concluded he's too popular to kill. So they tell John and him to shut up.

But there's no stopping them now. Full of the Holy Spirit, they respond: 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; <sup>20</sup>for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

The risk is still there. The authorities found a way to kill Jesus. And eventually the threat will grow for Jesus' disciples.

But Peter is no longer afraid. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other apostles become an unstoppable force in the spread of the gospel message. They're like the invasive mustard plant, sturdy and unstoppable.

That is the power that has been unleashed.

Where is that power working now? It's an important question for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. The church in our time struggles to find its way in a world that is not unlike the world of the first century.

The power of the Spirit is still working in the places where Jesus' disciples step into the flow of that Spirit, even when it is personally risky to do so.

Places where the gospel of peace and love is unpopular, but spoken anyway.

Places where justice for the poor is resisted, but worked for anyway.

Places where people are afraid of those who are different than them but reach out anyway.

Places where the exploitation of creation is resisted.

The Holy Spirit is still working. The Spirit is working continually for us as we die to our unfaithful and ego-driven selves.

The Spirit works in us to help us grow in love and service – to bring us to a place where love comes naturally.

And the spirit works through us to bring that love to the world.

As you go through the coming week, pay attention. Pay attention to where the Spirit might be working. Pay attention to how the Spirit is working, in you.