

The Lord's Spirit on Us All

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament lesson finds Moses dealing with a particularly troublesome situation. The Children of Israel in the wilderness are acting like that child in the grocery store whose mother refuses to buy the coveted package of candy cunningly placed at a three-year-old's eye level near the checkout counter. It's a full-blown temper tantrum on a national scale. What's the cause of their outrage? They're tired of the manna the Lord provides to sustain them on the way. They remember the more varied diet they had while slaves in Egypt, which considering the fact that they were slaves and therefore quite low on the food chain, probably wasn't nearly as good as they describe it. No matter; it's what they crave. They stand at the opening of their tents and wail.

Moses too snaps. He complains bitterly to the Lord about having to play nursemaid to some two million whining babies. He prays, "Lord, if you care for me at all, then go ahead and kill me right now. I'm sick to death of this."

The Lord doesn't kill Moses. He acts in mercy instead. He alleviates some of the burden of leadership that Moses bears. He takes some of the Holy Spirit that rests on Moses and distributes him to seventy of Israel's elders. This equips and enables them to assist Moses in providing spiritual direction and guidance to the Lord's people – which clearly, they need. As a sign of Spirit's presence with them, each of these elders is briefly granted the gift of prophecy. They speak forth the oracles of the Lord. And when word comes that two of the elders who had stayed back in the camp were also prophesying, Joshua, Moses' aide-de-camp, is offended. He tells Moses to command them to stop. Stop them? Moses replies. Why would I want to do that? I would rather the Lord place his Spirit on *all* his people!

Friends, we live in the time Moses could only hope for. Ever since the outpouring on the first Day of Pentecost following our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit indwells all of the Lord's faithful people. Indeed, it's by the Spirit that we are convicted of our sins and believe the good news of how Christ saved us by his passion, death, and resurrection. If you believe, you have the Spirit. And you receive more of the Spirit as you continue to hear and abide in God's Word and you receive Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar. By these means, the Spirit sustains and strengthens your faith, and also equips you with spiritual gifts that enable you to serve your brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

Now, to the best of my knowledge, none of us has been granted what we normally think of as the gift of prophecy. That is to say, no one these days is speaking forth new revelations from the Lord. But then, we're told that the days of new prophecy would end. And they have. With the end of the apostolic age and the closing of the canon of Scripture, we have received the complete revelation the Lord intended to give us. It's the Bible. So, there is a sense in which any one of us can prophesy. You have simply to speak the words of Scripture and you are uttering forth the oracles of the Lord. And so we do to encourage each other, to comfort each other, to strengthen one another's faith, and to provide direction and guidance from the Lord.

Obviously the better you are acquainted with the contents of the Scripture, the better you will be able to serve your fellow members of the Body of Christ in these capacities. That's why I want to stress again the need for ongoing Bible study both on your own in your personal

devotions and in a group with a qualified instructor or reliable study guide. The speaker at the pastors' conference I attended earlier this week has made a career of reconciling conflicted congregations. He recently completed a study in which he found that the number one contributor to a congregation's overall spiritual health was the percentage of adult members in regular Bible study above and beyond the Sunday worship service. Congregations with low percentages tended to have all kinds of problems, while those with high percentages simply got along better and accomplished more. Which only makes sense: those being shaped by the Word and Spirit are going to live more in the Word and Spirit. So dare I say it? Yes. Sunday School ain't just for the kids. To be better equipped to serve each other with the gift of prophecy, we need to spend more time reading, learning, and inwardly digesting God's Holy Word. We owe it to each other.

And since we're speaking of what we who share the same Spirit owe to each other, today's readings raise several more responsibilities that we have as members of the Body of Christ. The first is that we not impede or try to stop any genuine work of the Spirit – as Joshua wanted to do with the two elders who prophesied in the camp or that some of the disciples tried to do with a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. The thought behind this is we are the officially authorized group and anyone who isn't with us isn't allowed to operate in the Spirit. This is nonsense. The Spirit is a whole lot bigger than any one particular group, and he can do his work wherever and with whomever he pleases. Where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, where people are being baptized in the name of the Triune God, there the Spirit is at work – and we should be thankful for it. Do we denounce the errors taught by heterodox churches? Do we look for opportunities for discussion to make corrections? Sure. But it's not our job to shut them down or try to silence them. To the extent that they teach Christ and him crucified and bring sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus, we praise the Lord.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus mentions another way in which we want to avoid hindering the work of the Spirit. It's being the cause of a fellow believer's fall into sin. That it is better to be tied to a millstone and chucked into the sea for a one-way trip to the bottom tells us that the Lord takes an extremely dim view of those who do this thing. But you say, "How can I be responsible for causing someone else to sin?" There are many ways. It may be by direct temptation. You entice someone into an adulterous affair, say, or deliver some juicy gossip to someone who is especially susceptible to this sin against the eighth command knowing full well that they won't be able to contain it. That's just two examples; I'll bet you can think of many more. Then again, if you are someone in a position of authority, say a parent of a child, you may cause others to sin by your lack of correction. Any bad behavior you permit, you endorse. You approve. And finally, you can cause another to fall into sin by your example. If I see you doing whatever it is, I'm inclined to think it's okay for me to do it too – possibly to my eternal destruction (and your deep swim in the sea). Straight across the board then, we need to be more conscious of how our words and actions (or lack of them) may be influencing others to fall into temptation and sin.

Okay, impeding the Spirit's work and causing others to sin are negative things to avoid. In addition to giving us the gift of prophecy through the speaking and sharing of God's Word, today's readings give us a couple more positive things we are to be doing for each other as fellow members of the Body of Christ. The first that is we pray for ourselves and for one another. This is too often viewed as a nearly useless act of last resort. If all else fails, if the situation is hopeless, well, then pray (though it almost certainly won't do any good). And yes, with an attitude toward prayer like that, you're right. This is not true, however, for those who pray as an act of faith – faith that for Christ's sake our heavenly Father delights to hear and answer his children, and to give them whatever they ask if it is indeed for their good. So ask,

ask in faith, often, trusting that the Lord does hear, and that according to his good and gracious will he will give you what you ask. And if his answer is no or not yet, trust that that too is for your good – or the good of the person for whom you are praying.

In his urging us to pray, James slips in another way we are to care for each other in the Body of Christ; namely that we confess our sins and be forgiven by one another. Too often we want to reserve confession and absolution as a between me and God sort of thing. I'll confess my sins to him and receive his forgiveness for Christ's sake, but I'll be damned before I go to the person I sinned against, confess my sins to them, and ask for their forgiveness. And again, with an attitude like that, you're probably right: you're very likely damned. How can one be reconciled to God through Christ and not want to be reconciled with another member of his own Body, someone who shares the same Holy Spirit? It doesn't make sense. Or maybe the shoe's on the other foot. Someone has sinned against you, perhaps without knowing it. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go show him his fault. If he hears you, you have regained your brother." Don't hold a grudge. Don't withhold the hand of fellowship. Go. Talk to whoever it is that's offended you. And if they confess their sin, forgive them. Be at peace with them.

Or maybe the sin isn't against you personally. James addresses this situation too. "If anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." That really is what the Church is all about. It's why Christ died. It's why he gives us his Spirit; that we lost in our sins and headed for eternal destruction might have our multitude of sins covered by the blood of the Savior and be delivered from death. And now Jesus makes us partners in this work with respect to each other. If you see someone wandering from the truth, either into false doctrine that denies basic saving truths of Christianity, or into willful neglect of the means of grace by which the Spirit is given and faith is sustained, or into soul destroying sin of some kind, then you owe it to that person to try to rescue them from their own sinful nature that at the moment has the upper hand in their life. Yes, true, your interference might not be welcome. You may suffer as a result; but then, no one is going to nail you to a cross either – which is what Jesus suffered in his attempt to bring all of us back. Really, is the bit of unpleasantness you may have to endure not worth saving a soul from eternal hellfire? Go. Make the attempt. The Spirit does his work through the Word. Speak that Word of the Lord. And God willing, you will save a sinner from death and cover a multitude of sins.

We live in the age of the Spirit whom the Lord has poured out upon all of us. It's the time Moses could only hope for. Let us therefore live by the Spirit, walk in his ways, and care for each other in the Spirit as members of the one Body of Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!