

The Spirit of the Message

Day of Pentecost – 05/28/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Numbers 11:24-30 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 25, **“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to [Moses], and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders.”**

v. 29, [Moses said,] **“Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!”**

Introduction

✘ In ancient Rome, after the Roman army had gained a great victory over an enemy, the victorious general often received one of the greatest of all honors in the Roman Empire. Only the Roman Senate could grant this honor called a “Triumph” parade.

→ In the Triumph, the victor rode a four-horse chariot through the streets of Rome, accompanied by his soldiers, the captives from the campaign, and scores of slaves carrying trophies and spoils from the conquest. This procession would conclude at the temple of Jupiter, where sacrifices of the booty would be made to this chief Roman god.

→ As time went by, these Triumph celebrations became more a celebration of the man than the actual value of the victory for the nation. For example, Pompey the Great in 61 BC, in his third triumph parade, rode in a gem-studded chariot, with carriages loaded with gold, a king of the Jews among his captives and more (Plutarch, Parallel Lives, vol. 5, 42.43) so that in the words of Pliny, a Roman author and historian of the 1st century AD, it was “more the triumph of luxury than the triumph of conquest” (Pliny, Natural History, 37.6 [London: Taylor and Francis, 1855]).

✘ Today, an unformed view of the Day of Pentecost, as we hear it described in our Second Reading from Acts, chapter two, might think of Pentecost as Peter’s greatest day in the sun – the day when his “brilliant sermon” won the first 3000 converts to the new Christian Church. But Peter would be quick to say that our celebration of Pentecost is not about Peter or even the apostles who received the Holy Spirit with the tongues of fire over their heads. They were merely the Spirit’s faithful messengers, equipped and sent out on that day to proclaim real victory and purpose, which was the wider spread of the message of Jesus Christ and His victory over sin, Satan, death and the lies of this sin-filled world for the salvation of all mankind.

I. Losing the message for the sake of the messenger.

✘ But it can happen so easily in this worldly life that we live, can’t it; that we can get so wrapped up in the person or ourselves; in the attention or the benefits that the moment or the message brings, that we totally forget or lose the message itself for the sake of the messenger.

→ That spotlight; that extra attention; the compliments and praise really feed our inner ache to have the focus on ourselves whenever we accomplish something notable, so that the actual accomplishment is no longer the point of the celebration.

→ We see this not only in the rich and famous, but in our own personal lives as well. For the older sports fans among us, think, for example, of Mohammad Ali who was arguably one of the greatest boxers of all time. Yet what is remembered more than his boxing accomplishments is his flamboyant personality and his constant declaration, “I am the greatest”. In other sports, think of how the touchdown, or soccer goal or homerun celebration can be such a big production that it becomes what is remembered and watched more than the scoring play itself.

- And why do you think we need to have so many music and entertainment award shows? Because just having people listen to the music or watching the show is not enough of a compliment or reward.

- And look, it's doesn't stop with those other people, does it? Our society has deceived us all, so that now well-meaning parents, schools, and even churches are making so many normal events that happen to almost everyone into huge, elaborate celebrations that build up the ego and expectations of our children and others so that now they believe they deserve hundreds, even thousands of dollars to be spent on them for every birthday or change of grade or just being a part of a team. Rather than celebrating the actual accomplishment of graduating from high school or college, or God joining a husband and wife together in His name, it has now become the party and the food, the clothes, the venue and the elaborate decorations – or the lack there of – that ends up being the focus instead. In other words, these things end up being about establishing or maintaining a person's status or reputation instead of the actual accomplishment.
- ✘ And as we see in our Old Testament Reading today, this is nothing new or unique to our current era and culture, is it? We see in verse 28 how Joshua, Moses' long-time assistant, completely misses the great work that God is doing when He comes personally to His people, through the Holy Spirit, and enables the two elders who remained in the camp to proclaim the Word of God among His people.
 - ➔ Joshua is more worried about Moses' position and status as the prophet of Yahweh, than he is about souls growing closer to the LORD. So he comes running to Moses and, in the original Hebrew, literally says, "My lord Moses, shut them up" (v.28).
 - ✘ It's as if Joshua's own status and connection to Moses is being threatened; as if he doesn't actually want more people to receive God's Spirit, or to proclaim God's Word or to grow in their faith.
 - ➔ His self-centered pride has put blinders over his eyes so that he's not seeing Yahweh's amazing progression of increasing His presence among His people right in front of them. Yet it was just in chapter ten, before our text, that God showed He was guiding the people by lifting His cloud and leading them toward the Promised Land (Num. 10:11).
 - ➔ And then Yahweh started meeting with Moses in the Tent of Meeting to receive direct instructions followed by Moses acting as the mouthpiece of God, personally proclaiming God's own Word to His people. You see how it's getting more and more intimate with each step?
 - ➔ Now in verse 25, we're told, "Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to [Moses]," right in front of the people, "and took some of the Spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on the seventy elders". No longer is it Yahweh revealing Himself only to Moses, but it is Yahweh Himself – present among the people! It is Yahweh's direct word that is being heard!
 - ➔ But we're not done with this great work of God. Verse 25 continues, "And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied." The same thing happened with Eldad and Medad in the camp. As soon as "the Spirit rested on them...they prophesied" as well (v. 26).
 - ✘ How does Joshua miss the main point? This is not about Moses at all. Of course it never was about Moses. This is the one and only true God; our loving and compassionate, ever-saving LORD, doing what only He can do, when and where and how He wills to do it.
 - ➔ Joshua, just like you and I so often do, forgets God's important lesson in Isaiah 55:9, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts." And that truth includes the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:11 declares, "No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."
 - ✘ Joshua, just as we often end up doing in God's holy church, was placing the work and/or position of people at the same level, or maybe even higher, than God Himself.
 - ➔ It's the Spirit who has come to deliver the Word of Christ to us today. But what do we do? I have heard it countless times; often unintentionally I'm sure, when church members say that it's

the pastor who is responsible for getting the Word of Christ out into the community or that the pastor's the one who gets the credit for increasing members or converting souls.

→ Too often we actually pit the pastoral office against the priesthood of all believers and we forget, as Joshua did, that both are unique callings and both are great gifts from God and both work together according to God's will and design, not for our own attention, but as humble servants and instruments in God's Church! Here's God's own Word on the subject: Regarding the pastoral office Romans 10:14 asks, "How are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" And regarding the laity in the church, 1 Peter 2:9 says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession," why?, "that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

II. Losing the messenger for the sake of the message.

✘ You see, we're all on the same team – the Holy Trinity's team! So for both of us – for all of us – the point is not us, but the message and the work of God and His Spirit. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ," not the word of Pastor Besel or Scott or Joy René or any one of us. It's the Word of Christ, for Peter said on Pentecost in our Second Reading that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord", that is the name of Jesus Christ, "shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

→ It's the faithful messenger who knows that he/she does not save, but instead it's the message he/she carries that does the work – because that message is Jesus, and Jesus alone.

✘ In fact, losing the messenger for the sake of the message actually ends up blessing the messenger in the end. It wasn't only Peter who was blessed on Pentecost, but throughout the entire book of Acts, when apostles, deacons, or any Christians faithfully spoke, they focused on Jesus, not their own rights or needs or agendas.

→ Yes, Jesus is always the focus of the message. Jesus is the one who was crucified for us. Jesus is the one who rose and reigns at the Father's right hand. Jesus is the one forgiving our sins, even as we hear that forgiveness proclaimed by the voice of a simple messenger.

✘ That's how it was for Moses too. He had no concern for his own personal position, but he instead expressed his deepest wish in verse 29, "Would that all Yahweh's people were prophets, that Yahweh would put His Spirit on them!"

→ It's not about Moses himself, but his message to Joshua; to all of those in the people of Israel that day and you and me here in His Church today. The Holy Spirit does not belong to us folks, but we belong to Him. He is God Himself and it's not you or me or any other creature on this planet that determines His work or His ways.

✘ He's the one that comes to us, in spite of our complete and utter sin, in the water and Word of our baptism and lovingly – undeservedly, creates saving faith in Jesus in our hearts and minds. He's the One that washes us clean in the blood of Jesus; wraps us in Christ's Robe of Righteousness and, along with Jesus, presents us to the Father so that we are now His adopted sons and daughters in the One Holy Christian Church.

→ You see, when Jesus is magnified in our message rather than ourselves, we end up not as less, but more! For it's only in Christ that we receive the fullness of who and what He has called us to be.

Conclusion

- ✘ The legendary college football coach, Lou Holtz, is most known for his days leading the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, though he also coached at five other colleges and one NFL team. He worked hard to instill discipline in his players; having little patience for any behavior that was detrimental to the team. And that included the way his players would act after a touchdown. He told them that when they reached the end zone, they only thing they should do is act as if they'd been there before. His point? Any elaborate end zone celebration only gives the appearance that you are not accustomed to scoring; that you're actually surprised that you made it there.
 - ➔ Similarly, one of the greatest NFL running backs was well known for not celebrating his touchdowns. Barry Sanders, who had some of most amazing moves on the field, seemed to have no interest in displaying his "moves" in the end zone. He jokingly said that when he scored a touchdown, he was usually "too tired" to celebrate. As a result, we are left only to remember what Sanders did to get to the end zone, making his incredible work shine that much brighter.
- ✘ So, this day; the Day of Pentecost must always be about the incredible things God has done for us in Christ and never about any human celebration around it.
 - ➔ No person; no prophet or apostle, neither you nor I, can ever eclipse Jesus and what He has accomplished for us by His cross, resurrection, and the giving of His Spirit far and wide for the salvation of souls around the world.
 - ➔ Why, even the Holy Spirit's work is to focus the eyes of all people upon Christ and His saving work. How blessed we are then, to have the Spirit actively living and working within and through each one of us to direct our focus on Jesus as well. To Him be the glory. Amen.