

***“Take Not Thy Holy Spirit from Me” (Psalm 51:11)***

**A Lenten sermon about taking advantage of the here-and-now**

**If I ask you church-goers what one or two things you’re struggling with in your relationship with God, could you give me an immediate answer?** I’m not talking about things you’d like God to do for you. You have cancer or Parkinson’s or some other disease and you pray to God for a cure. That’s fine, but I’m not talking about that. You have a financial problem, a family problem, a work problem and you pray to God for help. That’s fine. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything, everything to God in prayer.” So that’s fine, but I’m not talking about that. Way back when we began this year’s Lenten journey, we heard that God doesn’t want to be a backup, a plan B, when something like health or finances or what have you goes awry. Christian faith isn’t as much about the circumstances of our lives as it’s about our relationship with our Creator and Redeemer. Hence the question: If you take seriously the life of repentance, can you at any time, not just now, at any time, identify one or two things you’re struggling with in your relationship with God?

I don’t know how you’d answer but, you know, it’s important that you do. Psalm 51 says, “Take not Your Holy Spirit from me.” The Holy Spirit is the third person in the Triune God. The Holy Spirit is the sole giver of God-pleasing spiritual life. “No one can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). The psalm makes it pretty clear that **the Holy Spirit can be taken from you and me**. What makes us think that the Spirit will always be there for you or for me? Maybe you’re thinking, “The thief on the cross. We can always repent.” I don’t think so. The thief was blessed because he had a last-minute opportunity to repent. He had a death-bed, really a death-cross conversion opportunity. Who’s to say that you’ll have that? An auto accident, a heart attack, a stroke... How many people die without the opportunity to repent? That’s a reason why **it’s so important that you and I always give priority to our relationship with God. God gave His life-giving Spirit; He can take it away.**

**Even the fact that God gives you His Holy Spirit is something that we take too for granted.** When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, He said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Can we control where the wind of God blows? The Augsburg Confession says that God gave the Word and the Sacraments, and “through these God gives His Holy Spirit who works faith when and where He will in those who hear the Gospel” (V). “When and where He will.” On Maundy Thursday it is routine to remember the institution of the Lord’s Supper and Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet. How many times haven’t we been through this? Repetition rocks the cradle and we can become complacent about the work of the Holy Spirit through the

Gospel and Sacraments. That's why it's so important to say that God gives His Holy Spirit...

... and **He can take it away**. Remember Ananias and Sapphira? They sold some property and claimed they were giving all the proceeds to the church but that was a lie. They were struck dead. They didn't get the opportunity that the thief on the cross got. Remember Pharaoh? If you remember how he dealt deceitfully with Moses and the children of Israel, you may well remember this line, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." Isaiah 6 has a troubling passage. "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6:10). I want you to think of that line, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me" in a new and somewhat troubling way. God gave you this thread of life. He could take it away.

At this junction **I can go two ways. One way is to conclude that God is capricious**. Did you ever read the famous sermon by Jonathon Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God?" Edwards was a 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan minister. He compares our relationship with God to a man holding a spider over a candle. At any time the man wants, he can drop that spider into the flame. Psssss.... If God wakes up one day on the wrong side of the bed, He could say, "Enough," and drop you into the eternal flames. Psssss.... That would be a capricious interpretation of God taking His Holy Spirit away from you and me.

I hasten to say that the capricious interpretation, God waking up on the wrong side of the bed and letting you have it, is wrong. It's wrong because the Bible teaches that **God is faithful**. He keeps His promises. He promises in Ezekiel 18 that "the soul that sins shall die." In 1 John 1:9 we are promised, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins." In John 6:63, Jesus says, "My words are spirit and life." In 1 Corinthians 6:11 he says, "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." In Philippians 2:13 we are promised, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." All of these promises of God are centered in our Savior Jesus Christ. "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20). This is the work of the Holy Spirit: To bring these promises of God into your heart, through the Gospel, through Baptism, and as we especially remember this evening, through Holy Communion.

How will God react if you and I disregard the opportunities we now have? So we best take advantage of the work of the Spirit while the Spirit is available to us! We call this the **"time of grace."** The time of grace is now. Think about it. You don't have anything but here and now. You don't have the past. It's gone, and thank God the sins of the past are forgiven by Jesus. The future is not in your control. We look to the future with a great hope that comes from Jesus'

resurrection. He rose and we shall rise. But the specifics of tomorrow are in God's hands. Now is all that you and I have, the time of grace.

So to come full circle: "Jesus, I will ponder now on Thy holy passion. With Thy Spirit me endow for such meditation." If you take seriously the life of repentance...and I believe that you do...**can you at any time, not just now, at any time, identify one or two things you're struggling with in your relationship with God? The Holy Spirit would be delighted to have you do such a thing. That gives Him something to work on! Amen.**