

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

2 Corinthians 3:4-11: "Drink Deeply from the Well of Jesus' Word."

August 30, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, who, according to Your unspeakable mercy in Your dear Son, called us to the new testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit, we humbly ask You, remove the veil from our eyes, that we may behold the glory of Your Gospel; and grant that we all, beholding as in a glass Your glory, may be changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord; through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 154)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. / Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who drank the cup of God's wrath, so you could drink from the waters of salvation through His Word, dear fellow redeemed:

What does it mean that "*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*"? Some say that when Paul refers to "*the letter*," he is talking about the words of the Bible. So they argue that the Bible is a "dead letter," and a "dead letter" cannot save your soul. If you want to be saved, you need the Spirit. And how do you get the Spirit? Not by reading or hearing the words of the Bible, but by your own prayers, your own inner struggle, the stretching of your feelings and emotions toward the mighty God.

Another twist on this idea is the churches which display rainbow-colored banners outside their walls which say, "God is still speaking." They believe that the Spirit reveals new teachings to Christian communities that may even contradict deeply-held beliefs of past generations. "God is still speaking" is another way of saying, "We don't believe the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. We don't believe it is all-sufficient for Christian life in today's world. The times

when the Bible was written were much different times than these. We believe that the Spirit is still shaping and guiding us not through the Bible but through the collective judgment of the Christians in this place.”

These attempts to separate the Spirit from the Word remind me of a story I read a while back. It’s a fairly short story, and I’d like to share it with you today.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful little village nestled in a valley between two mountains. In the center of the village was a well. The well provided water to all the inhabitants of the village. People came from all over the world to drink the cool, clean, crisp water that was drawn daily from the well. Countless people remained in the village and made their homes there. They loved the water.

The well was sufficient for the people of the village. No other wells graced the cobblestone streets of that mountain town. There was no need. No one ever suggested that they might like some other well more. Such a thought would be incomprehensible. The well was sufficient to satisfy all their needs, and it seemed that no matter how many people came to dwell in the mountain village there was always enough water. Water from another well? The thought was unheard of—absurd.

The well was also powerful. At the suggestion that the well might run dry some day, the people only laughed. “A waterless well?” The thought was unheard of—absurd. Whenever anyone went to the well, from the smallest child to the mayor himself, water was always there. The well was predictable, trustworthy, and always dependable. The well had power.

The people depended on only one well, and that well never let them down. The well and the water went together. You could not have one without the other. If you wanted water, you got it from that well and that well alone. If you went to the well, you always had water. There was no water without the well and no well without the water.

One day, the saddest day the town had ever known, a stranger came to the village. He tasted the water, as had every visitor before him. The visitor said, “This is good water. But I know another source that can give you water just like this well.”

The people were divided. Some said, “Impossible. Water comes only from this well.” Others were curious.

The visitor took another drink and said, “This is a good well. But I don’t think that we can depend on the well.”

The people were divided. Some said, “Impossible. Water always comes from the well.” Others were curious.

So the townspeople discussed two questions. First, was it *only* the well? Was that well sufficient enough? Second, was it *always* the well? Was that well powerful enough? The stranger proposed an experiment. “Why not cover the well? I’m sure that there will be water

from some other place. This well is not sufficient. Yes, let's cover the well. I don't think we can afford to rely on it forever. The well is not powerful enough."

But the people protested. "No, the well and the water belong together. If you cover the well, we will not have water."

Scornfully the stranger replied, "You are well lovers. You should love the water. Don't you think that God can give us water from anywhere He wants? Are you trying to limit God? You faithless people, you lovers of wells, God does not need a well to prosper you." That talk of "God" seemed so pious and godly. Of course the people did not want to limit the power of God. They covered up the well.

And, alas, all the people in the town died. (Klemet I. Preus, *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice*, pp. 80-82)

What do you think of the story? It's kind of silly, isn't it? What little village would cover up the only source of water it had?

But this sad story is not really about a village, a well, and water. This story is about the church, the Word, and the Spirit. It is about the church centered on the Word. As long as the church drinks from the Word, like the village from its well, it has the Holy Spirit in full measure. It lacks nothing. By the Spirit working through the Word, faith is fed and the thirst for righteousness is satisfied. When the church has the Word, it has the Spirit.

But there are "strangers" – false teachers – who try to convince the church that it can have the Spirit apart from the Word. "Why stick to the 'dead letter' of the Word?" they ask. "*For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" – isn't that what Paul says? God can give the Spirit however He wants. He doesn't need the Word to do it! Don't worry about the Word; go right to the Spirit!" This is all a lie. There is no Spirit apart from the Word. The Holy Spirit works through the Word.

Today's text does not teach that the Word and the Spirit are separate. What it teaches is the distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel. God's Law is referred to in this text in different ways. It is called "*the letter,*" "*the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,*" and "*the ministry of condemnation.*"

God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and when Moses came down the mountain from God's presence carrying the two tablets of the Law, his face shined with a bright light. It shone so brightly that the people of Israel ran away from him in fear (Exo. 34:30). After he called them back, he delivered God's Law to them. And then he covered his face with a veil, so the people would not be afraid (vv. 31-33).

Moses' shining face reminded the Israelites that they were not like God. They were not holy like He was. God's holy Commandments drove this point home. The letter of God's Law condemned them. This is why Paul wrote that "*the letter kills.*" God's Law kills any idea that we can be right with Him by our own efforts. It kills our self-righteousness. It kills our boasting. It

kills our pride. If we take a good look at ourselves in the mirror of the Law, all we can see is our sin. There is no hope for salvation in the Law.

But *“the Spirit gives life.”* How? Through the Word of God’s Gospel. The Holy Spirit does not bring you anything new today. He does not bring you any knowledge or understanding or wisdom that believers in the past did not possess. If you run into someone who claims to have new messages from the Spirit to share, run the other way.

Jesus clearly stated the work of the Holy Spirit: *“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you”* (Joh. 16:14). The Holy Spirit takes what belongs to Jesus and gives it to you. He takes Jesus’ perfect life of obedience to the Law. He takes Jesus’ innocent suffering and atoning death for all sin. He takes Jesus’ triumphant resurrection from the dead. And He declares it all to you. *“Jesus’ righteousness – yours. Jesus’ forgiveness – yours. Jesus’ life – yours.”*

That is why Paul calls *“the ministry of the Spirit”* through the Gospel, *“the ministry of righteousness.”* The Word of God’s Gospel is the way that He gives you everything He demands of you in His Law. Through the Word of what Jesus did for you, the Holy Spirit gives you all that you need to get to heaven.

However, you still need to hear the Law in this life. The old Adam, your sinful nature, still needs to die every day through the condemnation of God’s Law. The Holy Spirit is at work there too to lead you to repentance. But His primary work is to bring you Jesus. Jesus kept the letter of the Law for you. He was condemned so you would be freed. He died the death you deserved to die, so you would have abundant life in Him.

Eventually, Moses with his shining face was replaced by another leader and then another. The tablets of stone engraved with God’s Law were lost. *“[T]here was glory in the ministry of condemnation,”* but *“the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.”* What Jesus has done for you and all sinners will never fade. His Word will never lose its power. The church will never need something new.

The saving words of Jesus are *“spirit and life”* (Joh. 6:63). Whoever drinks of the water of this world will be thirsty again. *“[B]ut whoever drinks of the water that I will give him,”* says Jesus, *“will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (Joh. 4:14).

Drink Deeply from the Well of Jesus’ Word through which the Holy Spirit does His powerful work. The living waters of His Word are meant for you and your salvation. Jesus’ Word of forgiveness and life is your oasis in a parched and dying world. It is the source of your healing and strength. It is the guarantee of God’s favor upon you and of the eternal glories to come.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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