

On Giving Advice To God

Devotions on the Wisdom of God
and the Foolishness of Man

Part 2

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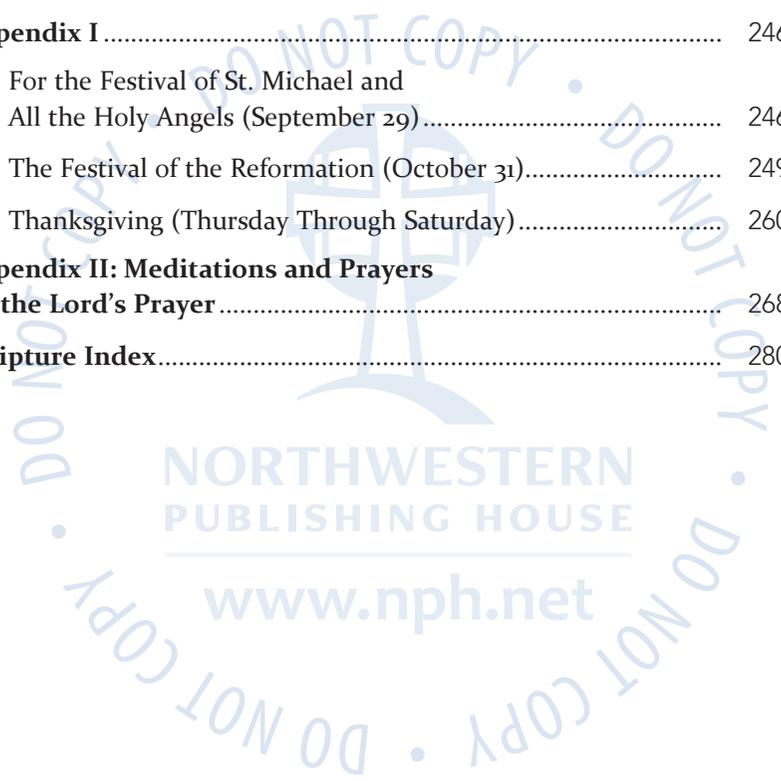
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Pentecost and Trinity Sunday

The Pentecost/Trinity season is called *The Half Year of the Church* to distinguish it from the first half of the year, called *The Half Year of Our Lord*. During that first half, the chief focus of the liturgical readings is on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for us and for our salvation. All of those sacred events are rich and inexhaustible in their applications to our faith and life. In this second half of the year, the primary focus shifts from the life of Christ to the growth of faith and the church through the preaching and teaching of the gospel of Christ's work for us. Of course, constant recourse is made back to what was proclaimed in the first half of the year. We might put it this way: In the first half of the year, the *primary* emphasis is on *what* happened (never forgetting the *so what*); in the second half of the year, the *primary* emphasis is on the *so what* (never leaving behind the *what*).

We begin with the two great festival/feast days that mark our entry into *The Half Year of the Church*. They sum up for us what this half of the year is really all about.

The Festival of Pentecost

I.

Acts 2:1-4 – When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now this is more like it! Finally, power! Finally, something befitting the message of salvation that should go out into all the world! No more lowliness of the manger with a message heard only by simple shepherds, whose repeating of it was largely ignored. No more shame and disgrace of disciples hiding out in fear for their own skins. No more humiliation of the cross. No more hidden glory of Easter Sunday morning when God rose—with no one to see it! Isn't this what we've been waiting for and advising God all along that he should do? And now at last he has done it!

What a sound that must have been. The sound of wind without the wind itself, and that happens not just outside. This sound of wind also fills the

room inside! What a powerful demonstration that the Holy Spirit chose for making his presence known and certain; after all, his very name, “Spirit,” is also the word that is used for “wind” in Greek and Hebrew. Jesus had promised that the Spirit would come in power. And there he is: the third person of the Holy Trinity, “showing” his invisible presence through a sound of nature whose source none can name and whose coming and going no one can control but the Holy Spirit himself.

And there’s more: He descends and sheds his presence in the form of fiery tongues on those present. That’s just perfect! Fire cleanses and refines gold and silver. Yes, and it destroys too—destroys all that gets in the way or would dare to oppose it. That’s exactly what the proclamation of the Word always does: It cleanses those in whom it works faith; then it ultimately destroys all who reject the saving gospel in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels. And look at the form the fire takes: tongues! Again, it couldn’t be better. For it is by preaching and teaching, it is by mouths opened to proclaim what wonders God has done for us in Christ that everything will happen in the miracle of the church. It is the Word that the Holy Spirit will use to create and preserve the faith of each believer. So—fiery tongues—how perfect, how appropriate!

That pretty well sums up the future of the apostles, doesn’t it? That will be their total and all-consuming work: to preach, to teach, and to write what God’s Spirit himself will give them. Their message will not be their own opinions, their best guesses about the significance of Jesus’ work. It will not be a mixture of philosophy and reason with the Spirit’s Word. It will be just the Word, just Jesus, just the law and the gospel; that’s what creates and sustains the church “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

Oh, wondrous moment! Oh, glorious birthday of the New Testament church! Now if that outward glory would just continue! That’s our advice to God on this wonderful feast day—just keep it going! But that was not to be. The outward glory of this day was absolutely necessary and that’s why things went the way they did. The apostles and the rest of us needed the confirmation that Jesus was keeping his promise. He promised that he would send them the Holy Spirit, who would make clear to them all the things that had seemed such a puzzle and a mystery when Jesus taught them before his suffering and death (John 16:5-16). Only after the promise of the Spirit’s coming was fulfilled would the apostles know for sure that they were indeed the ones Jesus was sending with his saving gospel. Only after that great day would we too know that the apostles were indeed the ones sent with the saving message—with words that are spirit and life from the Holy Spirit. Yes, and only after that would the apostles who earlier had

been filled with fear be filled with boldness to suffer all, even death, rather than be separated from Jesus, from his Word, and from their soul-saving assignment.

But after Pentecost, for the most part, God has not taken our advice to keep on giving powerful outward displays to confirm the message of the apostles. Oh, to be sure, there were some such additional displays, and they were for the most part recorded in the book of Acts. Even after the time of the apostles there were some astonishing demonstrations of God's control over history so that the gospel could continue to be preached and taught. But with the passing of time, even in the book of Acts, the number of such demonstrations has decreased. And in the history of the New Testament church, the evidence of God's outward control over that history often escapes the notice of most.

What, then, is there in Pentecost for us if God is not pleased to confirm his Word with another sound of a mighty rushing wind and with tongues of fire descending on the heads of our pastors and teachers? What is there, then, for us if our pastors are not miraculously given the ability to speak in many foreign languages that they have never studied before? There is this, just this, only this, always this: *Jesus in the Word; the gift of the Father in the Word; the Holy Spirit in the Word!* After all, that's what Pentecost was all about—a sound of wind blowing through mouths that have tongues aflame with the saving gospel to cleanse and to serve as a judgment from God on all who hear it. It will be the purging tongue of fire that rebukes the sin of the fallen and calls to repentance those who have wandered from submission to the Word (e.g., the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3). The sound will be the gentle voice of Jesus heard in the liturgy: *I, by virtue of my office as a called servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to you; in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* It will be tongues used for the ongoing confession of faith in the recollection and repetition of the Creed, and the assurance of the Holy Spirit that the confession of faith and its preservation are all his doing through the Word (1 Corinthians 12:3).

So then, on this glorious feast day let us rejoice and give thanks to God the Holy Spirit. Our faith is not just another human set of opinions or the philosophies of wise and learned men. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit himself. It is in words that he has taught and preserved for us in the sacred Scripture. It comes from the Creator of the wind and the fire in the breath of those who preach and teach the message that he himself breathed into the writers of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Peter 1:12–21). Indeed, it is just as Jesus promised: Heaven and earth can and will pass away and perish, but not this holy, unerring, life-giving, and saving Word (Luke 21:33)!

O Holy Spirit, on this day we give you thanks and praise. You confirmed your presence with the sound of wind and tongues of fire, and it continues to this day in the sure and certain Word of the apostolic and prophetic Scriptures. To this day you have not forsaken our poor world of sinners. You still speak to us as surely as on that holy day by that saving Word. Oh, grant us this great blessing so that we—up to the gates of heaven itself—may cling to all of it in humble and joyful confidence in the forgiveness, life, and salvation that it brings from Christ’s holy cross and glorious resurrection. Then in heaven with all the saints, we will give you the thanks and praise for all that you accomplished in us by your Word for our salvation. Amen.

II.

Acts 2:5-21 – Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” . . . Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

The events of that great day of Pentecost are so rich in their application that books can be written just on this day’s events. They are really a summary of the whole history of the church and of our own faith. Here we can only skim over some of the points worthy of consideration.

Notice, for starters, that the message of this day was intended not just for the Eleven and those few who were with them in that upper room on the day of Pentecost. No, it was intended for the whole world. See how the

Holy Spirit arranged things: That day there were people from all over the world in Jerusalem for the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost. Some were Jews by birth, some were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. When the Jewish festival was over, they would go home, many of them with the message of another festival far greater, the festival of God's fulfilled promises in Christ and his work for the redemption of the world.

Of course, as on that day so too today: On that day the sound of wind with no wind and the preaching of simple Galileans in multiple languages evoked nothing but sneers from many. "They're drunk!" they said. Many today likewise dismiss the blessings of the gospel in the lives of believers and in the work of the church; mindlessly or crudely they consider it all as the work of superstitious bigots who are too drunk on their superstitions to realize that the Word is all nonsense, long ago proven so by "science."

What should we do, then, when confronted with ridicule grounded on ignorance or arrogance? Should we perhaps shrivel up and go back into the upper room to enjoy what we know to be true but are too timid to share? That had been Peter's great crime in the courtyard of the high priest's palace on Thursday night of Holy Week. But that crime would not be repeated on the great day of Pentecost. No, this time, careless of his own safety and unintimidated by the ridicule of those who will never listen, Peter boldly preaches a sermon inspired by the Holy Spirit.

For the present we can only note some of the masterful points that the Holy Spirit makes in Peter's sermon—for that sermon too, like everything that happened on this day, was a gift of the Holy Spirit as well as a summary of the message of the church for the rest of time.

So then, note for starters how the sermon begins. Peter does not apologize in the face of ridicule; there is no simpering, "Well alright, if that's what you want to think, but I still would like to say something. . . ." No, he defends the truth without apology.

Then he begins with a text from the Old Testament that his Jewish hearers would have been familiar with. His very use of it is to emphasize a vital point to all who would that day and ever after hear the gospel: The gospel message has its roots in the promises of God in the Old Testament; it isn't something that just came up suddenly and unexpectedly in the days of the apostles. That's how man-made religions are invented: Someone or some group thinks them up at some point in time. But that's not the way it is with the only true religion. Quite the contrary—the gospel is the sure and certain fulfillment of all that God said in the Old Testament from the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. See how the text from Joel encapsulates all of history in a few lines of Hebrew poetry: God pours out his Spirit not just on a few but on all who hear and then receive his Word in Word-created faith; not just priests and Levites will proclaim and teach the

gospel, but men and women, young and old, will share the Word-created faith with one another, each in their turn and in their appropriate station in life.

And how long will that go on? It will proceed from generation to generation as long as the sun and moon endure. When the sun is turned to darkness and the moon to blood, then will come that next and final glorious day of the Lord. He will return in judgment and keep his final promise: All who in life called on him in faith will call on him on that day too, and they will not be disappointed. Risen from the dead, they will receive the promised heaven won for them by the judge's own payment of the penalty their sins deserved.

The prophecy from the book of Joel in the Old Testament says it all in summary form. While we cannot here consider all of it, at least one of the points of this first part of Peter's sermon bears our grateful consideration: God keeps all of his promises; he rules over history so that not one word falls useless to the ground. See how he kept so marvelously the promise made already in Genesis 3:15 and expanded all through the Old Testament—the promise of the Savior. That promise was so expensive for God and so saving for us, for sinners who could never deserve it. But generation after generation heard the promise, and in spite of all human perversity and wickedness, God kept his Word. And he so ruled history that the promise made through the prophet Joel is kept now on this day of Pentecost, with still more promises to be kept all the way up to the end of time.

So then, let those who want to do so continue to mock as some did that day. We will listen to the Word of the Lord and from it draw courage to hold it fast and to confess its saving truth to the end of our days. See how God has kept his Word, all of his promises to us. That's just the way he is. He promised the Savior and the Savior has come. He promised to gain our forgiveness and eternal life by the Savior's work; he has done that. He promised to abide with his gospel in the Word and sacraments for the creation and preservation of our faith; he has done that too. He promised to remain our precious Savior, our guide in the Word, our hope in trouble, our comfort in sorrow, our strength in weakness, our life in the hour of death, yes, and our joy on the day of judgment! When the sun turns to darkness and the moon to blood, we will still be saying and will say through all eternity:

Blessed are you, O God of our fathers, O Savior of the world,
O Spirit of truth. For you have made us, you have saved us,
you have brought us to saving faith and preserved us in it by
your presence, your promise, and your power in the gospel
message in the Word and sacraments. Grant us still this

blessing, that with the passing of each day and year, we may grow in our knowledge of that Word and our gratitude for it, until that great and glorious day when we perfectly and forever will see in Jesus the fulfillment of all your promises to and for us. Amen.

III.

Acts 2:22-36 – “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. . . . Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

What an astonishing sermon this is! Peter unfolds for his listeners the mind and heart of God in all its fullness of grace. The Father sent his Son into the world. His Son was equipped with all the necessary power to prove that he was indeed the One promised of old to be the Savior, the Messiah. Consider the signs and wonders, the miracles of cleansing lepers, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, and even raising the dead; he did all of it with nothing more than his own word and will—only God’s Son could do that. So abundant were the signs and wonders that the deity of Jesus was beyond legitimate doubt or dispute.

But what happened to him, the Son accredited by God? He, the Lord of life, was despised and rejected. He was put to death by the very people who had seen all that he had done and who had heard his words so full of love and grace and truth from God. And they did it with the help of wicked men who cared nothing about God’s love and grace and truth.

But here’s the astonishing thing, the shocking element in this part of Peter’s sermon: It all happened in accord with God’s set purpose and foreknowledge! God knew, yes, his Son knew it too, that exactly this would happen. Indeed, God willed it to happen! And Jesus himself would let nothing interfere with this astonishing rejection, suffering, and death! And then to crown it all off, after suffering and dying, God raised his body from the dead. Out of the most humiliating defeat comes the most glorious victory for the Son of God in his resurrection. And now this same Jesus lives and reigns in the glory of his Father forever and ever; he is King of kings and Lord of lords! For he is the Lord indeed; that very title “Lord” is a synonym

for “Savior.” And there is none other. For it is he who is the “Christ,” that is, the one and the only anointed by God for the work of our salvation. He did it. He did it all.

What then is Pentecost about? It, like Lent and Easter, is all about Jesus! That’s what the Holy Spirit does with Peter’s bold sermon on this great festival day. He points us to Jesus. He tells us not what we have done that’s good and deserves redemption. No, he tells us what we have done to deserve nothing but God’s wrath and punishment. For we were there in Jesus’ suffering and death. We were there at his crucifixion. We were there when wicked men mocked him and would give him no peace until they were sure that he was dead. That’s our role in the redeeming work of God’s Son: We are the reason for it! But the work itself, the work of redemption—that’s all Jesus! His Father sent him to it. He willingly came for it. He let no one help him and nothing hinder his carrying out that work perfectly and alone. And now the Holy Spirit in the work of the church, in the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, brings us back again and again to Jesus. Without ceasing he points us to the Father’s love in sending his Son. He shows the depths of the Savior’s grace by holding before our eyes the wounds of the cross and by letting us hear the Savior’s anguished cries there. Then the Holy Spirit impresses on our hearts his own yearning for our salvation by preserving that saving gospel from generation to generation; he gives that gospel the power to overcome our death, our doubts, our unbelief, and to win us to trust in Jesus as our only Lord, our all-sufficient Savior.

Read the parts of Peter’s sermon not cited above, verses 24–32, 34, 35. Peter grounds all that he has said in his sermon on texts of promise from the Old Testament. He wants his listeners—that includes us—to know that this work of our salvation was always on God’s heart and mind. Not just during Jesus’ life and times was God in control of what happened so that Jesus would die and rise again. No, all of history, especially the history of Israel, had this as its point and goal. God the Father and Jesus his eternal Son and the Holy Spirit worked it out over the course of history, from the time of the Garden of Eden until Jesus’ coming. Think what longing there was in the heart of God for your salvation, what care, what urgency, what eagerness that everything would happen just at the right time (Galatians 4:4), just in the way he wanted. There could be, there should be, there *must* be no doubt about it: Jesus is Lord, our Savior; Jesus is the Christ, the anointed One come from God to accomplish in his life and death and resurrection all that God yearned for, namely, your salvation! Yes, that’s what Pentecost is about. That’s what the church is about. That’s what we are all about too. Apart from this message, nothing matters and all we hold dear is just tinsel and fools’ gold. But, ah, with this message, our life is hidden in Christ, in his

wounds, in his resurrection, in his promise of heaven for our blood-bought bodies and souls.

O Holy Spirit, hold ever before me that love and grace of God in Christ my Savior. Let me never forget and never cease to marvel at the care and the longing with which God planned for my salvation and then carried it out perfectly and completely in the work of Jesus. Fulfill your promise always to accompany your Word with power so that by your Word I may embrace and ever hold fast to Jesus, to his perfect merit, to the forgiveness won by his work for my salvation. And then at last, O Holy Spirit, call me from my grave to the eternal enjoyment of all that Jesus has won for me. Hear my prayer for the glory of God's most holy name and grace. Amen.

IV.

Acts 2:37-39 – When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

There is so much to think about and consider in this first sermon on the birthday of the New Testament church. One of the points that we should not miss is Peter's missionary method (if we can call it that) in the sermon that the Holy Spirit gave Peter to preach that day.

Look at the effect that his sermon had on his listeners: “They were cut to the heart.” Peter didn't flatter his listeners. No, not a bit of that. He told them plainly, *You* were the ones who crucified Jesus, who now sits and rules at God's right hand! To be sure, because of God's will and God's rule, the result of what they did was that we were redeemed. But when they rejected and killed Jesus, they did it with only hatred and utter wickedness as their motivation; they certainly didn't see themselves as helping along—much less causing—the world's redemption. No, they were guilty of murdering the Holy One of God! That's Peter's message. It is definitely not a missionary message that flatters the listeners, designed from the start just to make them feel good about themselves.

Those listeners and all the rest of us who are with them in sin and guilt should feel in our hearts the cutting, slashing, killing sword of the Holy Spirit, who with the law convicts us of our sins. Peter's sermon, just like the call to repentance in the beginning of the liturgy on Sunday morning, needs

to make us aware of our desperate condition, our own shame, our sin, and our guilt. It needs to show us that fundamental truth that we are, as we confess in the liturgy, “by nature sinful and unclean.” In the liturgy and (we should hope and expect!) in sermons, we are reminded that we have proven our sinfulness. How? We have not even come close to loving God perfectly. Nor have we loved our neighbors as ourselves—much less selflessly sought out and found every possible opportunity to prove such love. And those were the minimum demands of the law. Who would dare deny that he has failed to come even close to fulfilling these minimum demands of the law? And yes, those are the demands; there is no, “Well, do the best you can, and God will let it go at that.” The result: *You* were the ones who crucified Jesus. That’s the goal of sin in the sinner: It is to throw off God’s claims to our obedience in the law; it is an attempt to kill God, to replace him with *Self*, to become our own god. The law in Peter’s sermon, the law repeated every week in the liturgy and in the preaching and teaching of the church created on Pentecost, is necessary. For unless we come to that awareness of our basic condition as sinners who are hopeless and helpless, we will never long for or understand or rejoice in the solution to our condition in Jesus the Savior.

But listen to the initial reaction from those who heard Peter’s sermon. As soon as his listeners are cut to the heart, they ask the silliest question possible: “What shall we do?” Just think of it! You killed the Son of God in the most cruel and heartless way imaginable. And now you imagine that there is something you could do to unring that bell?! Could there be anything more ridiculous than that? Their question is repeated in the hearts of the still unconverted who have only heard the law. All natural religion and (tragically) even many churches that call themselves Christian—yes, in fact all of us by nature—would like to think that we could do something at the very least to contribute to our salvation. “Let’s just try harder next time! Let’s give up something for Lent! Let’s do this and then do that!” But isn’t that all really very silly? What could we possibly do that would undo the crime of crucifying the Lord of life? And we need to remember that that is, in fact, just how *God* defines sin; sin, whether we think it a big sin or imagine it to be little, is always an attempt aimed at killing God, at replacing his rule and will with our own. We are not free to change God’s definition!

Peter’s answer to their ridiculous question underscores just how ridiculous it is. He tells them and us, “Repent!” What a powerful answer! Repent, that is, admit it; you are guilty; you deserve nothing but God’s wrath and punishment. Peter’s sermon, indeed, the Holy Spirit working through that sermon, had already convinced them of that part of repentance. Now comes the amazing, wonderful, joy-filled answer of God to the repentance that he himself has worked in them: “Be baptized, every one of you, in the

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” Do you catch how active God is in this whole business and how utterly passive we are? God works the anguish of repentance through the sharp preaching of the law. Then God gives the forgiveness that could never be deserved or earned, not even in the least part by us. To seal and confirm the forgiveness, he gives us the Sacrament of Baptism. There he pictures exactly what it is that he is doing for us, with us, to us, and in us by the message of forgiveness. He is washing away our sin and our guilt—not just a little bit of it, not just if we promise to be perfect in the future or at least better, but all of it! For what good is a washing that still leaves the washed one dirty?

And it is all done “in the name of Jesus Christ”! The one we crucified by our sins is the one who reveals himself as Jesus—Savior—and as Christ—the one anointed by God to earn and bring us salvation by *his* work and by *his* gospel in Word and sacraments!

There it is! It’s all grace! It’s all Jesus! It’s all the Word and the sacraments. That’s what this church created by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is all about. It is about God’s work; it’s about how, through the preaching and teaching and through the administration of the sacraments, God brings the saving benefit of Jesus’ work to us. It’s about how faith is created. It’s about how it is nurtured and sustained. That’s the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to us and to our children. That’s how God calls us and draws us to himself. That’s how he, through us, calls our children and people near at hand and far off in distant lands to the forgiveness so precious and so dearly won for us all by Jesus.

O Holy Spirit, call us still! Crush us with the law so that we may ever yearn and long for the sweet message of the gospel. Help us to hear with devout attention the preaching of your Word so that we never foolishly imagine that we already know it all or that we are in ourselves good enough to somehow merit your grace and favor. Then ever fill us with joy and thanksgiving that comes from the certainty that Jesus has done it all, all that is necessary for our salvation. Let our hearts ever skip a beat at the mention of his saving name. Then let us recall our baptism and your promise there to wash away forever all of our sin and guilt. O Holy Spirit, keep your promise to call us by your Word and to give us yourself together with Jesus our Savior as you claim us again and again for your own. For the glory of your name we pray; on account of Jesus’ work and your promise, we trust that you will hear us. Amen.

V.

Acts 2:40,41 – With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Well then, how did Peter’s sermon go over? It worked! Just imagine that! He told people that they were murderers of God’s Son. He told them that, in their sin and guilt, there was absolutely nothing they could do to merit forgiveness for this monstrous crime. He told them that God had to do it all; God had to finish off what he started when he cut them in their hearts with the law. He told them that, contrary to all natural inclination, they could do nothing to gain God’s grace and favor; they could only trust the truth that God loved them still—that he forgave them by the very work of Christ’s coming and by his death and resurrection. Even that trust would have to be God’s own work in them, his gift through the gospel. There in the gospel promise they would receive the assurance of God’s love and Jesus’ saving merit—simply and beautifully and fully in the washing of Holy Baptism. And it worked! The Holy Spirit was present with his Word and with his promise in Baptism. Three thousand had sin and guilt washed away, spiritual death replaced with living faith, and anguish removed and joy unbounded put in its place.

Of course, Peter’s work was not yet done. Those whom the Holy Spirit called and brought to faith that day still had a lot to learn. Luke sums it all up with just those brief words: “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” The rest of the book of Acts, together with the epistles, spells out for us the content of the “many other words.” But already with just Luke’s short summary statement, we have a good idea of what Peter was striving for in the rest of his teaching.

Peter says, for starters, that those newly baptized should realize that they are part of a “corrupt generation.” So are we. For not all, not even most, who hear the law and the gospel will believe it and be baptized. So many will block the Holy Spirit’s call and pleading in the Word from their hearts all together. They will laugh and mock that anyone could be so gullible as to believe that God became man, that he was born of the virgin, that he suffered and died and rose again just so that we could be forgiven. Still others will hear the message and then corrupt it beyond recognition. Not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings, they will water the message with flattery, with people-pleasing opinions. Some will say, “Jesus was a good man and a martyr to his beliefs, and so we should be good too and stand up for our

beliefs, whatever those may be.” Others will declare, “Jesus started the work of our salvation; he made it possible, and now we have to finish it by our decisions/our submission to this and that regulation of the church (*even though it isn't found in the Bible*).” Still others will insist that we should strive by our efforts to create with earthly political tools the kingdom of God on earth. All of that is part and parcel of living in a corrupt generation. The nature of corruption is that it spoils what is pure; by this spoiling, it either hinders or prevents altogether what was pure from accomplishing its good purpose. Spoiled, corrupted food and water either hurt or kill those who ingest them. Spoiled, corrupted doctrine either hurts or kills the faith that the gospel is designed to create and preserve.

So Peter warns his listeners and all the rest of us that we are not in heaven yet. The Holy Spirit wants to create and preserve faith by the pure teaching of his Word. But he forces no one. And those who do not recognize the danger of their corrupt generation will easily end up back in the camp of those who first corrupt the Word by false teaching and then ultimately set it aside altogether with ridiculing unbelief. So St. Peter urges, “Save yourself!” By that, of course, he doesn't mean that we earn our salvation, as all the rest of his sermon and his own epistles certainly make clear. “Save yourself” simply means “That's exactly what's at stake here with the Word and the sacraments: our salvation! If we set these aside and join in their corruption, then salvation is threatened and finally can be lost.”

So much for the lazy and, yes, very corrupt notion so popular in our day: “It doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you believe something and are sincere.” So much for the superficial but beguiling notion likewise so popular in our day: “We don't want to judge anybody for their beliefs; after all, only God can judge.” That God has judged and does that in his clear and unerring Word does not occur to such people—or if it does they don't want to hear about it. So much as well for the always popular delusion: “I'll just do the best I can, and God will just have to be satisfied with that; for the rest, I just don't understand it anyway (and I have no intention of gaining an understanding that I might find, well, inconvenient if I did get it!).”

We've all no doubt heard these fruits of a “corrupt generation” and many others as well. Perhaps we ourselves may have been tempted by such tinsel talk when faithfulness to all of God's Word was difficult, either for our own sinful inclinations or because of the ridicule of the corrupt world in which we live.

What, then, shall we do to “save ourselves” from all such and similar departures from the gospel? The answer is still and will always be that one word that Jesus repeated so often when he was teaching: *Listen!* Listen to the Word of the Lord in the Bible and in the sacraments. For that is where

the Holy Spirit speaks. That is where he again and again pours forth the love and grace of God that brings Jesus to us and us to Jesus. That is where he keeps on assuring us of forgiveness. That is where he increases in us understanding and, with it, both the ability and the desire to save ourselves from any corrupting of the saving Word. To be sure, our forgiveness and eternal salvation are entirely God's work in Christ and his gift in the gospel. But that gospel is never long left with those who neglect it or who are unwilling to grow in it, to treasure it, to share and defend it. The whole history of the New Testament church proves and demonstrates the point.

O Holy Spirit, as you have saved me from this corrupt generation—yes, from my own corruption through the saving gospel in Word and sacraments—so grant me still this grace too: Help me to so love your Word and its saving benefit that, by the power it gives, I may be saved from the corrupting of that Word by ignorance or willful false doctrine. Teach me to love it more and more so that, growing in knowledge, I may also grow in love to God and in eager and grateful service to those around me. By my example may others too be drawn to hear your Word, to learn it diligently, and to follow it faithfully. Hear me for the glory of your name. Amen.

The Festival of the Holy Trinity

John 16:12-15 (ESV) – “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

What a glorious festival day this is! In the whole of the church calendar, we have none like it. All of the great festivals of the year (Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, even Reformation Day) are devoted to some great event in the history of salvation. But this day concerns itself not with an event but with a doctrine. It falls at the halfway mark of the church year. It points back to everything that Jesus did for us and for our salvation and emphasizes that it was all the work of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons, one divine essence. That one God in three persons was totally in harmony and totally devoted to the work of our salvation. This festival also points ahead to all that is emphasized in the second half of the year: The Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit—is completely devoted to the work of bringing the accomplished salvation to us through the Word and the sacraments. Indeed, this is our God, the only true God, who rules and reigns over all of history to preserve that saving Word. Then he lives in and with that Word, giving it the power to create and preserve faith. Finally, in his devotion and his ardor for our salvation, he sees to it that the Word never will perish until the end of time.

Jesus made just such points to his disciples on the night before he died. He had much to say to them about the unity of the Trinity in its devotion to our salvation, much more than we have in the few verses cited above. Read John 14–16 and see how Jesus weaves through those chapters the devotion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to your salvation. Then you will marvel at this doctrine of the Trinity, so incapable of rational or mathematical explanation. How can three distinct persons be distinct and still be one divine essence? Who cares! That's God's concern, not ours. The doctrine is plain and clear. The *what* is unfolded for us, not the *how*. And it is unfolded for us, not so that we would break our skulls over something that only God himself can fathom. Rather, it is unfolded for us so that we could marvel at and rejoice in the love and grace of the Holy Trinity.

Just think of it! God, who is beyond all time and space, who is above any human attempt to fathom him in his essence, who needs nothing and no one, who is absolutely independent and complete in himself, who is the author of time and the one who will bring even time to an end, who is everywhere at the same time, who controls and fully understands the movements of the planets and no less the march of the ants on the forest floor—that God has one overriding and overwhelming concern: *your salvation!* We, by contrast, are so altogether other than he is. We are but flesh and blood, dust and ashes, shackled by time and space, hemmed in by the limitations of our little minds, so easily turned aside from him and his Word; with the attention span of a gerbil, we are always finding something other than our salvation to distract us and to consider more important. But that does not deter God the Holy Trinity from his saving purpose and work for us. No, he just keeps on keeping on with the preservation of the Word and sacraments. He just keeps on keeping on with his goal of bringing us at length to the full enjoyment of his presence and to the beatific vision of our Savior in heaven!

Just take a deep breath. Just for a few moments today, drink it in as much as you can. Jesus tells the disciples that the Father has given him everything. To what end? So that he could give it all to us! Jesus tells his disciples that he has more to give them than they can take in at that moment. And so the Holy Spirit will come after Jesus' visible departure and give them more and more of the saving truth. Jesus promises, in other

words, that through Pentecost and the gift of the New Testament, they will be instrumental in passing on this truth to the rest of us. What they pass on is, in sum, the message of all that the Holy Trinity has willed and done for our salvation. In the gifts of wisdom and power that will be in the Holy Spirit's work, there will be enough to keep the disciples and the rest of us busy until the end of time. They never finished in their lives learning from that Word, rejoicing in it, living through and because of it; neither will we ever be masters of that Word, for so rich are the gifts that come from the Father to Jesus and to us from Jesus through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

So feast on it on this festival day! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons yet one divine essence! That is our only God, our Creator, our Savior, the ultimate Author of the Scriptures, the God who is devoted to your salvation. And as you feast on that most savory truth, join with the church on earth and the church in heaven, singing his praises in that beautiful hymn of St. Paul in Romans, a hymn given by the Holy Spirit himself for us to sing:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”
“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?”
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

There is just one little point that we cannot help but notice when we read John 14-16, the chapters so fitting for this festival day. In these chapters the Father is seen as praising the Son and wanting him to have all the glory; the Son is seen as praising the Father and the Holy Spirit and giving them all the glory; the Holy Spirit is seen as having one great joy, that of bringing Jesus to us and us to Jesus so that Jesus will have all the glory. It's a minor point perhaps, but still one worth pondering: What a pattern for God's children to imitate! What a wonderful marriage it would be if the husband wanted only to please his wife and the wife wanted nothing more than to make her husband happy. What a wonderful congregation it would be if the pastors and teachers never flinched from doing everything possible for the benefit of each and every member, and each and every member just couldn't ever quite finish speaking well of and helping their pastors and teachers. What a wonderful neighborhood, workplace, and on and on if the goal of life was to receive the gifts of the Holy Trinity in Word and sacraments so that I could live selflessly to put everyone else first—the way the persons of the Trinity do, and that for our benefit.

O Holy Blessed and Glorious Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—neither will my thanks and praise end nor be adequate for expressing my thanks to you for your revelation and gift of yourself in your Word and work for my salvation. Oh, help me to love you and to treasure the saving Word by which you show such love for me. By that saving Word in which you give me everything necessary for my salvation, inspire me to so love you that I devote myself ever more and more to your Word, to growing in my knowledge and understanding of it, and then to a life that submits to that Word. All that I ask is that your name, O Holy Trinity, may be glorified by the faith you have given me and by a life that delights to share your glory with all the world through my own witness and that of the church. Hear me, I pray, that your name may be glorified still more. Amen.

