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1st Cor. 14:12b-30

Understanding the Gift of Tongues

Today's Epistle brings us to a disturbing topic... the gift of tongues. I call this gift "disturbing" because you worship in plain English... not in some strange language... some language the meaning of which you do not understand. You do not gather here to "pray in a tongue," or "pray [only] in your spirit"... as St. Paul says here... but you gather to pray in a public and understandable way... in a way that will allow your brother to say "Amen" to what you are praying. And so this business about tongues is disturbing ... because it describes something foreign to your worship. It is easy for the Christian to read these words and wonder, "What are these tongues? Why don't I speak them? Am I missing out on something?"

But the disturbance runs deeper than that... Not only are you aware of other Christians in other churches who claim these abilities... these tongues and interpretations... but you are also aware of what they think of you... and of your inability to speak as they claim to speak. Call them Pentecostals or Charismatics... or whatever you want... but they believe that you do not have the Holy Spirit. "In order to be truly filled with the Holy Spirit," they will tell you, "you need to be able to speak in tongues. Look what Paul says," they will say, "right here in verse 5 of this same chapter:

'I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues.' Therefore you must have this gift... and if you don't have it, pray for it! If you don't have the gift... it means that you don't have a full measure of the Holy Spirit. But keep trying! Keep praying and maybe someday you will this wonderful gift of tongues and you will be able to feel like I feel...it's wonderful!'

Nonsense!

Today's Epistle gives you an opportunity... not only to learn anew what this gift of tongues was all about... but also to address deeper and certainly more haunting questions... Are you filled with the Holy Spirit? Do you have a full and complete measure of the Holy Spirit? Do you "lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed?" (1 Corinthians 1:7).

First of all: Why the gift of tongues? What purpose did this gift serve the Church... and why does St. Paul talk about it? Think of how a child learns to ride a bike. He doesn't just get on and ride away the very first time. In the beginning... a pair of training wheels is bolted to the bike. Or, someone runs alongside the child...holding onto the seat to steady him... The child receives special help. But when the child grows older... he puts away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11). The training wheels are removed.

In the same way... God gave special and extraordinary gifts.. training wheels... as it were... for the Church to use in its earliest days. When the apostles went out and preached... they did not yet have a New Testament that they could point to say, "See, this is what God's Word says about Jesus." So God gave them special gifts... the ability to heal or to cast out demons or to raise the dead. And these miraculous abilities were used to show that the apostles' message was from God. This is the exact reason Jesus used miracles. Remember how first He preached to the paralyzed man, "Son your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Then His miracle gave proof that His message comes from God: "'In order that you may know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' He said to the paralytic, 'Get up, take your mat, and go home'" (Matthew 9:6).

When the apostles first established congregations in various places throughout the world... these, in their very earliest days, still did not have a New Testament for guidance. So God again gave special gifts. He gave some the gift of prophecy... that is, the ability speak a Word directly from God. He gave others the ability to perform miracles... to show that the message of the Church is truly God's message... full of His power and His authority. He gave to others the gift of tongues... that is, the ability to speak the message of the Gospel to foreign visitors... so that they may bring the good news of salvation home to their native land. This is why St. Paul says later in this chapter, "Tongues are a sign for unbelievers" (1 Corinthians 14:22), and this is what happened at Pentecost.

"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 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 them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (Acts 2:2-8)

These tongues that God gave... these were not strange, private languages. These were the languages of the world! As the people at Pentecost asked, "how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (Acts 2:8).

But when God's Word of the New Testament became established in the Church... the need for these special gifts diminished. The training wheels were removed from the bike. The gift of direct knowledge from God... dissolves when you have God's revealed will to you right in your hands. No longer do preachers perform miracles to show their message is from God... they point to the Bible... God's full and complete message to man. The spontaneous ability to speak in other tongues gets replaced by God's written Words... words that you can sit down and translate into any language known to man. The Church's attention shifted away from the special gifts and focused completely on the greater gift... the gift of the New Testament. "When I was a child," says St. Paul, "I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

According to today's Epistle... it looks for all the world like the Corinthians began using the special gifts that God had given in a way different than they were intended. They had twisted God's good gift into a personal play toy. Where God gave tongues as a tool for evangelism... the Corinthians began using them as a tool for worship. This doesn't work very well, as St. Paul says: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful" (1 Corinthians 14:14) And again, "If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?" (1 Corinthians 14:16).

In this way, the Corinthians began using God's good gifts as a way of serving themselves... rather than a way to serve the Church. Their tongues became an opportunity for them to look like they were more spiritual than other Christians... because they had these great abilities. As a result of this... as well as other abuses in the Church... the congregation became horribly divided (1 Corinthians 1:10-17). To this, St. Paul says, "Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants, but in your thinking be adults" (1 Corinthians 14: 20).

Now for the most important part... What does all this have to do with you? There are two essential things that you must learn here. First, you must realize that you already possess a gift from God that is far greater than any tongue or interpretation or, for that matter... any miracle of healing. The greater gift that you now possess is the gift of the New Testament... God's Word...which itself is the gift of the Spirit. Just think about this: Is God's Word so insufficient that you must still hear an additional message spoken apart from that Word, whispered by the Holy Spirit into your heart or your mind? Do you doubt that the words written in this book are truly God's Words... so much so that you must see a miracle in order to believe them? What Jesus said about the Old Testament is equally said of the New: "If [people] do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Because you now possess the full revelation of God's will, you no longer have need of special gifts, the temporary gifts, the training wheels. You have "put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

But there is even greater comfort here... especially in face of the lies you may hear others tell you... those who believe you must rattle in a strange tongue or have a gift of healing... or some other spectacular ability in order to know you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

You are the Baptized of Christ! You have the gift of the Holy Spirit. "Do you not know," says St. Paul, "that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives within you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). God the Holy Spirit has called you to faith in Jesus the Crucified One... and having called you ...He has also taken up residence in you, because "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). You have the Holy Spirit because God's Word SAYS that you have the Holy Spirit... and God's Word far exceeds any gift or ability or feeling you could ever perceive in yourself. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith. this is most certainly true! (Small Catechism, 3rd Article).

Last week I, when I preached on 1 Corinthians 13, I tried to make clear to you that love is not a feeling. **Love is a** deliberate act of grace and mercy shown to you by your God. **In the same way**, the possession of the Spirit is not a feeling. **You do look** within to discover if you have Him... **you do not** look to your own abilities or your own feelings. **YOU LOOK SOLELY AND COMPLETELY AT GOD'S WORD.** And **God's Word** assures you with many words and verses that you indeed have the Spirit of God within you.

This is the gift of the Holy Spirit... "**that you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe with your heart that God raised Him from the dead**" (Romans 10:9). **This is the** gift of the Holy Spirit, that you know your Redeemer lives, and you too, shall "**rise to live with Him in righteousness and purity forever**" (Small Catechism, Baptism IV). **This is the** gift of the Holy Spirit... **that you** look into a book and onto a page in this New Testament and see there the living message of the living God who has given you new life in the resurrection of His Son.

Dear, People of God...You are not second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. **Let no one** look down on you because you do not babble as they do... **but rest** confidently in the Word and Promise of God. **You truly do not** you "**lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed**" (1 Corinthians 1:7). **To the contrary**, the Spirit of the Lord is upon you... **and by that same Spirit** you have become "**a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy**" (1 Peter 2:9-10). **The gifts** of the Holy Spirit are not for you an object of distress, but of great joy, peace, and comfort. **It is the** God given faith to know and to trust that your sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ ... **and that** you now possess eternal life... **not because** you can speak in tongues or have some other "gift"...**but because** Jesus has died for your sins and He has Risen from the Grave! In the Name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit...Amen

Epiphany 5C, 2007

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