

Sermon Preached by Prof. Georg Sverdrup on Pentecost Sunday, 1902
at Trinity Lutheran Congregation

Georg Sverdrup, *Professor Georg Sverdrups samlede skrifter i udvalg*, Andreas Helland, ed. (Minneapolis: Frikirkens Boghandels Forlag, 1910), 6:324-329. Trans. Harald Grindal.

John 14.23-31

Our congregation's¹ situation² at just this time is such that it is unusually sobering and significant and for us to celebrate our congregation's birthday as well as the Festival of Pentecost, especially if this could be for us not only an historical memory, but truly an experience of the Holy Spirit's outpouring, which could be a new birth for our congregation.

We need spirit and life. It would be incorrect as well as unfortunate to deny this. It is necessary in our spiritual life to admit our need if we are to expect any help. Who would say, "I am rich, and have abundance and lack nothing?" If that were true then we would not demand nor receive any blessing from God through his Holy Spirit. Much more should we fear the judgment of the Lord when he says, "I know your works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. I would you wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot I will spew you out of my mouth."

Let us begin by admitting that we lack the Spirit and life. Then we may begin to buy from the Lord gold purified in fire and put salve on our eyes so that we could see. Or are we doing one another wrong by suggesting that we lack so much which would make our congregation full of life and spirit? Is it true amongst us that we all are living members on the body of Christ? Not just healthy, but fruit bearing branches on the true vine? Is the life of God moving freely and unhindered in us so that Jesus' will is our will, so his thoughts are our thoughts, so that his heart is our heart? Are we always running God's errands and are all of our tasks in his service? Is Jacob's ladder of prayer raised God-ward day and night so God's angels are climbing up and down continually with a message from God to us or a message to God from us?

Oh, no. If we were to place a mirror before us and see our reflection as we really are, then it would be necessary to beat our breast and say with the publican, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

¹The word "congregation" for Sverdrup means also what we would call "church." He translated "ekklesia" (which means in English, the called out, or gathered) always as "menighet."

²Sverdrup is referring especially to the difficult time the congregation has just come through. At the January 1902 Annual Meeting of the congregation, Trinity's popular pastor, M. Falk Gjertsen had lost his bid to remain at Trinity and withdrew with many others to found Bethany Lutheran Congregation on Franklin Avenue. Gjertsen's leading opponents in the fight about his worthiness to be a pastor, after allegations concerning inappropriate sexual behavior failed to be put to rest, were the Augsburg professors Sverdrup and Oftedal.

Isn't it enough that we confess that we are a torn-apart and scattered flock, worldly and carnal in thought and mind so that we are a long way from deserving to have the name of "congregation." Let us seriously ask about the "old way" which is a good way, so we can again become a congregation.

Jesus shows us the way in the words we just read together. It is an extremely simply way. Because of that, it is difficult for those of us with crooked hearts and carnal and earthly thoughts.

We concentrate too much on outward things and think they will help us. Of course we have a church and a pastor and the preaching of the Word and the sacraments administered among us. But the Lord shows his disciples the spiritual way they must follow. We must go the same way.

We will only become a true congregation when we become God's habitation for the spirit in which each one of us is a living stone with life from the cornerstone who is Jesus Christ in whom we are united.

Jesus teaches us how this takes place when he says in verse 23 of John 14, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." Do we love Jesus and do we keep his word? Yes? Then we are truly a congregation, for then the Triune God dwells in us. Then we are the body and he is the head. It is good for us if this is so.

If we are like the people I talked about earlier, if now our love is cold and life is snuffed out, what then? Is hope gone and light fled from our heaven forever? Or is there some advice for those who are languishing and scattered like sheep without a shepherd? What if the Lord should say about us, "I know your works, that you have a name that you are living, but you are dead." Is there possibly any help for us?

"Look," says the Lord, "I stand at the door and knock." Therein lies the hope of salvation. It is his love that must help since we have none. And shouldn't the knock at the heart's door awaken some longing in the heart, if we would only listen to the knock. Hear what the bride says in the Song of Solomon: "I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark, my beloved is knocking. Open to me my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night. My beloved put his hand to the latch and my heart was thrilled within me."

Are there those among us who would be thrilled to have Jesus come to their hearts? What if there were no one who was moved by God's love, revealed to us while we were yet enemies. This is how it begins: God's love was revealed to us while we were yet enemies, ungodly, unrepentant sinners for whose sake God's Son died. Can you see this crucified love, O soul, without being moved by it? Then you must be harder than the thief on the cross who cried out, moved by God's love, saying, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Lord, remember me."

If the longing in your heart is awakened so you open the door for your Savior, do not be too quick to assume that there is no one at the door. You may say, "There is no one here, I don't see him, I don't feel his nearness, much less his coming to sup with me." In many ways your relationship with God has gone the way of the bride in Solomon's song. "I opened up for my beloved, but my beloved one had turned around and departed. I searched for him, but found him not, I called for him and he answered me not." Yes, many have had to wait and seek and cry a long time before the Savior came to them. And why? Because the deep inner being of the heart was not opened for it, it was only a superficial moving they experienced. But, hold on. "He that asks shall receive, and he who seeks shall find and he who knocks shall have it opened to him." Do not be despondent. Let your longing increase and your love commend itself. Grasp the Lord's promises of grace and

do not let him go before he blesses you. Christ says this plainly in the text, v. 23, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will make our home with him."

It is then that the soul will rightly taste God's love. Then the soul will be filled with spirit and life. Then we will grasp and understand that we are his and he is ours; that we are in him and he in us. What we already heard in the Word we will perceive in the spirit; namely, God's love poured into our hearts.

It is then we will have Pentecost in our hearts. We are not celebrating it as a past event, but we are experiencing the same as the disciples who gathered in the Upper Room waiting for the Lord's time and the Father's promise.

This is the way for a dead congregation to become a living one. Why shouldn't this miracle happen to all of us? Or is our Lord's arm shortened so he cannot help or has his heart become so cold that he no longer cares for us? Truly, truly, as an earthly Father cares for his children, so God cares for his children who fear him. Can a woman forget her suckling child so she no longer cares for her son? The Lord will not forget you. Therefore, I say it again. Why should we not all become participants in the Spirit? Or are we afraid there might be too many spiritual people?

Perhaps that is what it is: we are afraid that we will become God's children and be driven by the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus says in verse 26: "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

It is possible to find real people who want God's grace, but will have nothing to do with the Holy Spirit; or they want the forgiveness of sins, but do not want to know about walking in the light. But that will not work. It is written in I John 1:6-7, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth us from all sin." Let us not be afraid of this walking in the footsteps of Jesus. The Spirit himself will teach us and remind us so we will not go astray, or stumble, or fall on the way. And Jesus says it himself, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for you souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

If we become a congregation in Spirit and in truth, then this will not be missing: walking in Jesus' steps and working in his vineyard. It is true that it is difficult for flesh and blood, but it is also true as Paul writes in II Cor. 4:16, "For though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." And what is difficult for the flesh is freedom and joy for the Spirit. Thus by the Spirit's energy a living congregation can come to be a mission-minded church. "For the love of Christ compels us." The Spirit is not only energetic, he is the power for the work. "Therefore it is not a slave's work, but a service of freedom."

When we come into this blessed condition and follow Jesus, then we experience what Jesus spoke of when he said, "Ye shall find rest for your souls," and then Jesus repeats in a very gripping manner, "Peace I give to you. My peace I give you, not as the world gives, give I to you." "Let not your hearts be troubled neither let them be afraid." This is the great bond which holds faith, hope and love together. In addition, the Holy Spirit gives the power of the death and resurrection of Christ to believers. Peace of mind and heart is so different, yes, even contrary to the peace of the world. The world has peace when it can intimidate, so no one can touch it. Believers have peace when they turn everything over to God and say, "Not my will, but thine be done." When we give ourselves over to God and the fight is over, and the resistance to God is broken and the heart has become quiet and filled with love, and driven by the Holy Spirit, then the peace is there. There we are

meek and humble of heart like Jesus was. This is the blessing of heaven in its current form, or earthly form, which we can enjoy while we are here in this earthly home.

See, this is the congregation, the living church! And this is the kingdom of God on earth. Such is the invisible Savior's invisible kingdom that shines as a light on a hill and is felt and known as a spiritual power throughout the world. This happened when Jesus went home to his father unknown by the world and yet with power to conquer the world. Greater is our Savior now that he is sitting at the Father's right hand. Greater is his kingdom than any visible kingdom, deeper is the foundation. It reaches higher and lasts eternally; from everlasting to everlasting is the love which created it and the great blessings are eternal which crown the whole plan.

Jesus has gone to the Father. The Father is greater than Jesus was when he was visible on earth. So the congregation has become greater and stronger and mightier in spiritual fellowship since Jesus went to his Father than if Jesus had remained in visible form on earth and created a visible kingdom. These things, however, are the conditions by which we become participants in the kingdom. "What the Father has asked me to do, I do." Farewell to the world and the powers of darkness, war, and strife, if such shall be. In your life in the congregation, you may suffer the cross and much affliction, a crown of thorns and many battles against you, but nevertheless, you will have peace of heart and glory with God forever and ever.

Rise, let us go hence. Amen.