

August 30, 2015
Ephesians 6:10-20

Proper 17B
The Spirit's Battle

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't have to tell you this more than once, we are in a battle. We are fighting for our very lives. When there is a war or some other national conflict, what do we rally behind? We are coming up on the 14th Anniversary of September 11. That day is now known as Patriot Day. In many instances when there's a national conflict, war, etc., we become increasingly Patriotic, we have a sense of who we are as American people. We rally around the flag. We rally around a banner. It's what leads the Fourth of July Parade, it's what leads military processions. The Star Spangled Banner is part of our rallying cry as Americans.

Yet we are in another battle, a greater battle than a fight against terrorism or even political battles between two parties. We are in a spiritual battle. A battle that is hard and scary. We, too, have a rallying point as Christians. Last week we turned to look at the person of Jesus Christ, who He is, what He did, continues to do. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our redeemer. You heard that has redeemed with His holy and precious blood and His innocent sufferings and death. He gave His life for you on the cross to free you from sin, death, and the devil and free you to serve Him. It's the cross that we as Christians use as our rallying point. The cross is a symbol of our faith. It's the center point of churches, and even most of our homes. Some even have home altars. In festival days in the church year, many churches begin the service with a processional. The cross and really the cross activity of Christ is the center of our Christian Worship service.

At the cross a battle took place, a battle that is not fully over until Christ returns. For now we fight, we fight a battle, and we are given armor for that and even an offensive weapon.

Since this is a Spiritual Battle, the Holy Spirit provides us with the tools to fight and defend ourselves. Before we go there, let's here from Thomas Wengert and what He says about the Third Article. "The first and foremost commandment demands what we cannot deliver: faith. The Creed's first article revealed a yet more human sin, "terrifying and humbling" us with the mere fact that we are created and yet abuse the Creator's gifts. The second article, even while proclaiming that "Jesus is Lord," failed to give us the faith to believe it. And without faith, we are left with the Oslo syndrome, where we have spent so much time with our captives that we fall for them. So we arrive with Luther at the third article." We confess in the meaning of the third article, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." In essence we say, "I believe I cannot believe."

You see God must come to us, we cannot go to Him. Luther wrote these words in the Small Catechism of how the Holy Spirit brings to faith... "It is the Holy Spirit who calls

me through the gospel, enlightens me with His gifts, sanctifies me and keeps in the one true faith.” The Holy Spirit calls by the gospel. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit does His job, He makes people Holy. He makes people Holy and grants to them faith, through the preaching of the gospel.

Indeed as the church rallies around the Cross Activity of Jesus Christ, we are given the faith through the preaching of the Gospel message that Jesus Christ is your Savior and has freed you from sin, death, and the devil. It is through the church that the Holy Spirit leads us to Christ. For the Church is where we heard the proclamation of the gospel. The Church is where the Holy Spirit names you as His own. This happens when gives you faith through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit claims you and gives you faith.

The gathering of the communion of Saints in the Holy Christian Church is vitally important in this spiritual battle. It's where we receive our full armor of God. The belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes – having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. We are given the Shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. The Holy Spirit has also provided to each of you the only offensive weapon you'll need, the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. You see the Spirit gives the Gospel Word its effectiveness.

Even with all of this, I have heard countless times about how people don't need the church. They say we are a bunch of hypocrites. They say, “I can worship on my own. Isn't God everywhere? So and so said something to me 25 years ago that upset me, I can't stand being in their midst, especially in the church.” There are countless reasons people are not in church, but the biggest one today is that many believe they are their own god.

Luther goes on to write in the Large Catechism, “For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit who creates, calls, and gathers the Christian Church, without which no one can come to Christ our Lord.” This is bold...without the Church, you cannot be a Christian. It is in the Christian Church that we hear the gospel preached in truth and purity...that eternal gospel, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring us into the fold. The gospel that gives us the readiness and preparedness for the battle.

We've been talking about the Christian Church, where we hear the Word of God. SO what actually is the Christian Church? In the creed we confess that we believe in the Holy Christian Church and the Communion of Saints. These two terms are one in the same. They describe the same group of people. We confess that the Church is really the gathering of God's people. Really one could summarize these two together in this phrase...“congregation of saints.” Now when we talk about the Christian Church, or really the local congregation, we can typically say that there are three types of people in the pews. “Believers” – these are those that are committed to Christ. Nonbelievers- we know what that means. “Make-believers” – those that you might say are just pew potatoes, the ones that come and sit in the pews but that's about it.

When we confess that we believe in the Holy Christian Church and the Communion of Saints, really the congregation of saints, we are confessing as Luther writes in the Large Catechism: "I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ. This group is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with many gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms." Luther is talking about the invisible church, the church that is made up of only Saints. Saints that are brought into the fold by the Holy Spirit. The Saints that are marching as to war. For the Holy Spirit abides with the holy congregation or Christendom until the last Day.

What happens when you are apart from this holy congregation? In short, you don't receive the forgiveness of sins, you aren't able to grow in faith, your fruit of faith will not mature, and eventually faith will die. Being in union with Holy Spirit is a good thing, for the Holy Spirit gives you faith. He is the one that causes your faith to grow and mature.

He is also the one that brings us into the Christian Church, brings us to the forgiveness of sins. Luther writes: "We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sins, which is wrought through the holy Sacraments and Absolution and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel....God's grace is secured through Christ, and sanctification is wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian Church. Yet because of our flesh, which we bear about with us, we are never without sin."

Since we are simultaneously saints and sinners, everything in the Christian Church is ordered to one goal...receiving the forgiveness of sins through the Word and signs. Even though we do sin...in every possible way, the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. As Luther writes, "For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sins....But outside the Christian Church, where the Gospel is not found, there is no forgiveness, as also there can be no holiness. Therefore, all who seek and wish to earn holiness, not through the Gospel and forgiveness of sin, but by their works, have expelled and severed themselves from this Church."

Sanctification is by far something different...sanctification is where we grow daily in our faith, and our flesh will daily be destroyed and buried with all its uncleanness as we read in Romans 6: ⁶ *We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. As we daily die to our sin, we daily arise and live a new life. It's because we sin daily, and we need forgiveness daily.*

There is coming a day when we won't need forgiveness anymore, for we will only be perfect and holy. We will be full of godliness and righteousness, free from sin, death, and evil. We will be living in a new, immortal and glorified body. We will be alive forevermore. As Luther writes in the Large Catechism: "He begins and daily increases holiness upon earth through these two things: the Christian Church and the forgiveness

of sin. But in our death He will accomplish it altogether in an instant and will forever preserve us therein by the last two parts [of the creed].”

The Holy Spirit continues His work on earth and will do so without ceasing until the Last Day when Christ raises us all from death to life. My dear fellow redeemed Saints of God...it is in the church where you hear the Gospel Message. It is in the Church where you receive your battle armor and your battle weapon the Word of God.

It is in the church where you receive forgiveness of sin...it is in the church where you ultimately receive the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Dear fellow created, redeemed, and sanctified Saints of God...we have been created by our Creator and given everything that we need to support this body and life, we have even been entrusted to take care of God's creation. It is part of our task as God's baptized Children. We have been given redemption by the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. We too have been given the Holy Spirit who continues to work without ceasing, and will do so until the Last Day. Luther comments: For that purpose He has appointed a congregation upon earth by which He speaks and does everything. For He has not yet brought together all His Christian Church or granted all forgiveness. Therefore, we believe in Him who daily brings us into the fellowship of this Christian Church through the Word. Through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins He bestows, increases, and strengthens faith. So when He has done it all, and we abide in this and die to the world and to all evil, He may finally make us perfectly and forever holy. Even now we expect this in faith through the Word.”

You see God has given us everything...from His creation, to giving us His Son to win us forgiveness, and to the Holy Spirit who gives us faith through the Church and hearing of the Gospel. God has given you the Church where you receive the forgiveness of sins through the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments.

All of this you have received is from your gracious and giving God, why not give back to God so that the Church and its ministry in this place can continue, and you can continue to receive the forgiveness of sins through hearing the Gospel preached and through receiving the Sacraments as He prepares you for battle while you keep on praying in the Spirit.

In the name of our Triune God. Amen.

Now may the peace of Christ which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

