

“Gift Registry”

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

While the Christmas season is the time of year most associated with gift giving, this is also a season in which many people turn their attention to finding the most appropriate gift for persons who are celebrating special life moments:

- Weddings
- Graduations
- Confirmation

I still have the gift my home congregation gave me for my Confirmation: a copy of the *Lutheran Book of Prayer* that has been on my office shelves throughout my years as a pastor. Tucked inside the front cover of the book is a photograph of my parents and me in our driveway on the day when I joined my classmates in affirming our baptismal promises and celebrating this milestone in our lives. It was a day that included a backyard party at our house, many cards and presents, and the best wishes of family and friends who joined me in this day of celebration. My Confirmation was a special day that I will always remember.

While I will always treasure this gift that each member of my class was given on that June afternoon, the best gift I received on the day of my Confirmation did not come in a card or a box; it was the gift that was bestowed on each of us when our pastor laid his hands on our heads and prayed that God would bestow upon us the most precious gift of all: the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- “The Father in Heaven, for Jesus’ sake, renew and increase in thee the gift of the Holy Ghost, to thy strengthening in faith, to thy growth in grace, to thy patience in suffering, and to the blessed hope of everlasting life.” – *Service Book and Hymnal*.

It is not by accident that our congregation – and many congregations – celebrate Confirmation of the Day of Pentecost, the day in which the gift of the Holy Spirit was first bestowed on the apostles so that they might be empowered to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the day when Jesus’ promise to his disciples before his Ascension is fulfilled:

- “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” – Luke 24:46-49.

The Acts of the Apostles (the second volume of the work of the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel According to Luke) tells the story of the fulfillment of Jesus’ words that “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8). It also tells of how for the ten days between Jesus’ Ascension and the day of Pentecost the apostles were unable to even begin to fulfill Jesus’ command; all they were able to do was wait in trust that Jesus’ promise would be fulfilled. This fulfillment takes place at Pentecost, a harvest festival when “*there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.*” (2:5). It is at this moment that they receive the gift through which they are able to fulfill Jesus’ commission for the apostolic community:

- “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (2:2-4).

The gift of the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the languages of all who were gathered in Jerusalem on that day, so that *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (2:11). While some scoffed that these apostles were merely *“filled with new wine,”* through their Spirit-empowered proclamation (which included Peter’s sermon), many *“who welcomed his message were baptized, and on that day about three thousand persons were added.”* (2:41). The mission of the apostles, and of the apostolic church that continues this mission to this day, began on this Day of Pentecost when *“the community is filled with the Spirit to express the wonders of God in intelligible and intelligent tongues.”* (Robert W. Wall).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is among the many blessed bestowed on the apostles when Christ comes into their presence after his Resurrection. Today’s Gospel brings us into the presence of the disciples on the evening of the first Easter, *“the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews”* (John 20:19). This gathering of disciples, like that of the farewell meal, probably included the core group, but there is no indication that it was limited to the Twelve. It is a gathering that *“represents the faith community in general, not only the apostolic leadership.”* (Gail O’Day). Their being locked inside *“for fear of the Jews”* must not be misinterpreted as a form of anti-Semitism, since all of these disciples were Jewish; it was a fear of the authorities who had caused the death of Jesus, and a fear that his followers might meet the same fate. It is in the midst of this fear-filled gathering that *“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”* In one sense, the Risen Lord utters a conventional greeting (*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* – 1 Corinthians 1:3), but here it functions to fulfill Jesus’ promise early in the Fourth Gospel of the gift of his peace:

- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” – 14:27.

In the Old Testament, “peace” (*shalom*) was a conventional leave-taking address, but Jesus is not simply saying farewell to his disciples with the promise of peace (*Eirene*). In the context of Jesus’ death, the verb “to leave” (*aphiemi*) takes on the meaning of a bequest; “peace” is the gift Jesus bestows on his disciples. But this “peace” that Jesus offers is not to be confused with the world’s understanding of peace; it is neither the false promise of security (*“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”* – Jeremiah 6:14) nor the end of conflict. The peace that Jesus gives is *his* peace, a peace that derives from the heart of Jesus’ life. The promise of Jesus’ peace is not an occasion for complacency on the part of the disciples, however; it calls *“the disciples to find strength to face the new circumstances in which Jesus’ departure places them.”* (O’Day).

The joy of the disciples at the appearance of Jesus, like the end of the weeping of Mary Magdalene when she sees the Risen Lord (20:16), is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the pain of his disciples will turn to joy when they see him again:

- “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.” – 16:22-24.

Jesus' resurrection appearance to his disciples accomplished the purpose of turning their fear and sorrow into joy and peace; but his appearance is not only for their sake, but for the sake of the mission that will bring this good news to all people. Jesus' repeated greeting – *"Peace be with you"* – is not merely reduplicative; the disciples can receive Jesus' words as the gift of peace and not simply as a greeting only after they recognize that the person who speaks these words is "the Lord." His gift of peace is accompanied by his commission to the apostles: *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* (20:21). These words echo the prayer of Jesus before his Passion (*"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."* – 17:18), and are connected to the Father's sending Jesus into the world:

- *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* – 3:17.
- *"The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me."* – 5:36.
- *"... can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'?"* – 10:36.

Jesus commissions the faith community to continue the work God sent him to do, and bestows upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit that will empower the community to continue Jesus' work. Jesus had promised his disciples that *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."* (14:16). This promise is fulfilled when the Risen Christ *"breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (20:22-23).* To "breathe" (*emphysao*) occurs only here in the New Testament; its usage evokes the description of God's breathing the breath of life into the first human (*"then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."* – Genesis 2:7) and also recalls the description of the breath of life in Ezekiel (*"Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'" – Ezekiel 37:9).* Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples is thus described as a new, second creation. Those who believe in Jesus receive new life as children of God, and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains that new life.

- *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* – 3:5-8.

Jesus connects the gift of the Holy Spirit with the authority to forgive and retain sins. Once again, it must be noted that these words are addressed to the entire faith community, not only to its apostolic leaders (as in Matthew, where Jesus says to Peter, *"I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* – Matthew 16:19). Forgiveness is to be the work of the entire community of faith; the community's enactment of Jesus' words depends both on their sending and on the gift of the Holy Spirit. The forgiveness of sins is the Spirit-empowered work of continuing Jesus' work in the world.

In John's Gospel, "sin" (*hamartia*) is a theological failing, not a moral or behavioral transgression. To have "sin" is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus commissions the community of faith to continue to work of making God known in the world and thereby to bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment with regard to sin (*"I told you that you would die in your sins unless you believe that I am he."* – 8:24). The community is to continue what God sent Jesus to do.

- “By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world; by revealing God to the world, the church makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. The faith community’s mission, therefore, is not to be the arbiter of right or wrong, but to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus.” – Gail O’Day.

Today is the occasion in which those who are celebrating their Confirmation stand before God and the Church and declare that they have chosen to enter into relationship with God who established God’s loving relationship with them in the waters of Holy Baptism. As Lutherans, we believe and teach that *“in baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ... [and makes us] members of the church, the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). On this day, those with whom God established this loving relationship affirm their baptismal promises in rejecting the devil, the forces of evil, and the ways of sin that draw one away from God while choosing to *“live in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the church.”* They have chosen to affirm the faith of the Church of Jesus Christ as they promise to join with all Christians who commit themselves to continuing the mission that Christ gave to his first followers as they *“proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed ... serve all people, following the example of Jesus ... and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”*

The key moment in this Confirmation service will be when each of these young people answers *“I will.”* But as the apostles were powerless to fulfill the commission of Jesus on their own, these young people will not be able to live according to their promises unless each of them will *“ask God to help and guide me.”* None of us has the ability to fulfill Jesus’ commission and expectations on our own, because *“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.”* (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*). No matter how well-intentioned our promises may be, it is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that we are able to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and fulfill our Lord’s call to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9).

- “Before he left his disciples, Jesus bestowed upon them the Spirit. It seems that without the Spirit’s involvement in the lives of the disciples, there would be no peace, faith, or courage. This passage reminds me of Luther’s notion of the crucial role that the Spirit plays in breaking the barriers of sin and its bondage of the human will. For Luther, human beings are, in and of themselves, incapable of living up to what God desires. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for the disciples, and for all of us, to be who Jesus wants us to be.” – Samuel Cruz.

If you are in need of assistance in choosing a gift during this busy time of year, there are many tools that can help guide you. You can go online to the many websites that promise to provide you advise on choosing the right gift for a graduate or confirmand. Many couples have gift registries or websites filled with “wish lists” of what is most needful to them. But no matter what gift you may have chosen for these ten young people, the most appropriate gift is the one that cannot be placed in an envelope or covered with wrapping paper. The most appropriate gift for our confirmands – and all who affirm their faith in Jesus Christ – is the gift of God’s peace, of God’s presence, and of God’s power which is ours when the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon us, the one who is for all God’s people *“the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.”* (Isaiah 11:2). Of all the gifts that will be given on this day, it is what God bestows upon us that is the most appropriate gift for Confirmation – and for every day of our lives as the people of God, as the community that continues the apostolic mission of making Christ known in every generation. Amen.