

Sermon 2-10-19
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Second Lesson for The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany,
1Corinthians 14:12-20, and 1Corinthians 14:1-3

Advanced Course on Spiritual Gifts

As we've mentioned. The life of the New Testament Church is significantly described in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. This is because the Corinthian church – made up of some Jews and many former pagans – had many defects in doctrine and practice. Because of this, Paul laid out for them, and for us, correct doctrine and practice in Christ's Church.

The section of 1 Corinthians that has appeared in our second lessons the last several weeks – chapters 12, 13 and 14 – deal with what are known as spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are part of our sanctification – the good morality and good works Lord Holy Spirit gives us to do toward our neighbors. They are part of love your neighbor as yourself.

We all have natural talents and abilities through which God uses us to serve our neighbors in our various vocations. But the spiritual gifts are different. They are direct manifestations of God's power through individuals when needed or deemed good as Lord Holy Spirit determines.

As we saw last week, the purpose of spiritual gifts is to strengthen the people of God as we endure the hostility and persecutions of this world. They are for the common good of God's people. Spiritual gifts active within Christ's Church remind us that our God is a God close at hand, and that His arm is not too short to save us.

God's Word alone is sufficient to remind us of these things. But the Word itself declares that God graciously reminds us of His unfathomable love and favor through spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1 again in 14:12 we are urged to eagerly desire the spiritual gifts.

As we have noted, 1 Corinthians chapter 12 is the basic course on spiritual gifts and their use in the church. Chapter 13 – the love chapter – is the basic course on the motivations for spiritual gifts. Now, in chapter 14 this morning's second lesson treats us to an advanced course on two of the gifts – what's known as speaking in tongues and prophecy.

In order to understand these two gifts, we're going to begin ahead of today's second lesson in 1 Corinthians 14:1-3, "1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort."

OK. First, we see the admonition from chapter 13 to follow the way of love. Then we are encouraged to eagerly desire spiritual gifts. Again this is so the church may

be strengthened in its persecution and Lord Holy Spirit may achieve the common good among us. Then Paul tells us to especially seek the gift of prophecy.

Having done that, Paul then gives us the best definition of both tongues and prophecy that can be found in the New Testament. Here is the key to tongues. "Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men **but to God.**" Zero in on the words, "speaks to God." When you or I speak to God, what is it that we're doing? Praying! This is tongues in a nutshell. It's a form of prayer. That's exactly what the very Word of God says it is.

We know from Romans 10:17 that faith comes from hearing the message. Therefore, way back in the late spring of 1979, when I understood what the Word actually tells us about tongues, I said to myself, "I pray. I wonder if I can pray that way?" That reaction was faith created within me by hearing the Word. And so it began for me. That night in my sleep I prayed in a tongue. I only know this because Carol told me the next morning that I woke her up doing so. Faith even works in your sleep! It happened again the next night. It still happens in my sleep from time to time. This confirmed for me that it wasn't just my conscious mind engaging in praying in tongues. The thing graciously comes from the Lord.

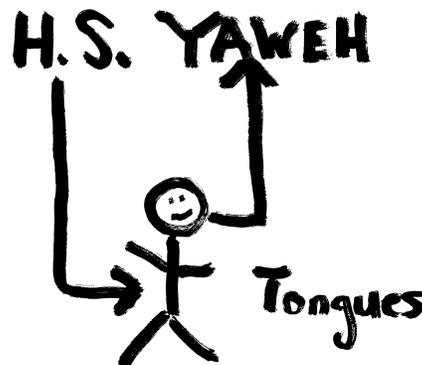
In public we hear people speaking in languages other than English all the time, especially Spanish. I don't speak Spanish. And so as an English speaker, Spanish sounds a certain way to me. I can identify someone speaking it in public. But, I've often wondered what English sounds like to non-English speakers.

Forty years ago an Italian pop singer by the name of Adriano Celentano was having a really tough time learning English. He thought it was the weirdest, oddest language. So, he recorded a song that is supposed to be what English sounds like to people who don't speak it. It was a huge hit in Italy and nowhere else. It's called, "Prisencolinensinainciusol." The whole song is a bunch of American English sounding syllables strung together. And it's all gibberish as you can see by the title.

Well, praying in a tongue is gibberish. It has sentence structure and inflection, but it's all gibberish to any human listener, including the one doing the praying in tongues. However, there is one being in the universe who absolutely understands what is being prayed for in tongues. And that's God. Weirdly enough God the Spirit is the one who gives the tongue so that God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit may understand and receive the prayer.

Here's how it looks in a diagram. The arrow coming down represents the syllables being given by Lord Holy Spirit to the human speaker. The arrow going right back up represents the prayer in tongues being received by Yahweh who absolutely understands it.

Prayer is actually a strange thing. Concerning the Lord's Prayer, Martin Luther writes in his small catechism, "*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" What does this mean? Answer: To be sure, the good and gracious will of



God is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also be done by us.¹ In other words, this petition of the Lord's Prayer came from Yahweh through Jesus to us. When prayed, it returns to Him from whom it came so that He will do what He wanted to do anyway. This is what makes prayer strange. Why doesn't God just do what He wants to do without our prayer? Apparently He desires to include us in the closed loop of His will through prayer.

In this way, then, prayer in tongues is no different than prayer in English. It comes down and goes back up so that God will do what He wants to do. We're simply included in His gracious loop. Therefore, why pray in English or in tongues? It is God's good and gracious will that we do so. We enter into a spiritual joining with Him through prayer.

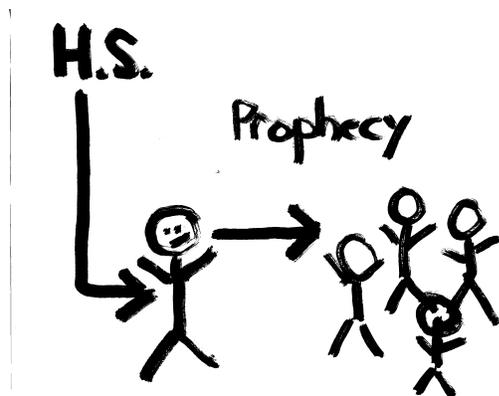
So, being prayer, tongues accomplishes that for which it was sent. It addresses the Holy One. Most of the time it has an audience of exactly one – the Lord Himself.

On the other hand, prophecy has as an audience of all humanity. As it says in 1 Corinthians 14:3, "Everyone who prophesies speaks to **men**." In order to be understood when speaking to people, the language of the listeners must be spoken. That's why I'm preaching in English to you English speakers. If we make a diagram of prophecy, it comes down from Lord Holy Spirit. But instead of going vertically back up to God, it goes out horizontally to all of humanity.

It says in verse three that prophecy speaks to people in their native language for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. Therefore, the spiritual gift of tongues is a good work that meets unknown needs on earth by prayer to the Lord in languages that only the Lord understands. On the other hand, the spiritual gift of prophecy is a good work that brings the Word of the Lord to all people in languages they understand.

The best understanding of prophecy and what a prophet is comes from Exodus chapter 4. In that chapter Moses stood before God at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. God had commissioned Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt. But Moses protested that not being a good public speaker, he was afraid no one would listen to him. God became angry at Moses for his lack of faith, but obligingly went to plan B. In plan B, God would tell Moses what to say, Moses would tell his brother, Aaron, what God said and Aaron would speak publicly to the people of Israel. God said to Moses in Exodus 4:16, "He [Aaron] will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him." So, a prophet is a mouth for God.

Why does God need a human mouthpiece? The answer is again found at Mount Sinai. By Exodus chapter 20 Moses had successfully lead Israel out of Egypt and they



¹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church (The Small Catechism: III, 8-10). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

were all gathered before the Lord at Sinai. There, Yahweh came down on the mountain in His native glory and spoke the Ten Commandments to the people. We then read in Exodus 20:18-19, “18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.’” You would feel the same way if God stood here in His glory and spoke directly to us.

For 33 years, Jesus, the Son of God, spoke to people clothed in mortal flesh. He revealed His true glory very briefly on the Mountain of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, the cloud of glory and the voice from heaven. The result was that Peter, James and John were terrified. We rebels cannot stand in the presence of God’s glory because of our sinful nature. So, Yahweh does us a favor, and stays in the background. Instead, He puts forward a mortal human being to be His mouth. The most glorious example of this is Jesus Himself.

But being a prophet is no fun, as Moses found out. On one side is Yahweh who demands obedience. On the other are rebellious people who won’t listen and plot against you. Again Jesus is the best example of this. He was more than a prophet in that He is the sacrifice for our sins. However, He became obedient to God the Father even unto death on the cross. And the rebellious people He came to bless were precisely the ones who put Him up on the cross.

So, Moses was a mouth for God giving Israel both God’s ceremonial Law and His moral Law. By His moral Law God judges us – but it’s not the only measure He uses as we will see.

The prophets who came after Moses gave Israel no new law. Their task is best described in the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah. In verse 22 of that chapter we find out that a true prophet stands in the counsel of the Lord so that based upon God’s Law he may turn us rebellious people from our evil ways. John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet, is a good example. We read in Mark 1:4, “And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s task was to turn people from their evil ways through repentance and move their hearts to expect Messiah’s arrival.

So. A prophet is a mouth for God who speaks to people so that they may repent and turn from their evil ways. He does so, however, using God’s Law that has been given, once for all through Moses.

But Yahweh doesn’t judge by the Law alone. He also judges by the Gospel. Jesus said this in John 3:18, “Whoever believes in him [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” Believing in Jesus as God’s righteous gift to us for the justification of our lives is the key measure all people will be judged on.

As we’ve already seen, then, the prophet’s task in the New Testament is to address people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort in Jesus Christ. This is nothing else than the preaching of the Gospel so that people might believe in Jesus and stay in Jesus despite all the world’s persecutions. The prophet of the New Testament doesn’t just point people away from their evil ways. He points people to

Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation – Jesus the crown of righteousness for all who believe.

Just like the Law of Moses, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been established for all time. There is nothing that can be added to it. So, when Paul is desiring everyone in Corinth to operate in the spiritual gift of prophecy, he does not mean that they will be direct mouthpieces from God announcing new Law like Moses or new Gospel like the prophets, Jesus and the Apostles. Rather they will be confirming the Law and Gospel for one another. They will be establishing one another courageously in the things of God based upon the established written Word. And that's exactly what a sermon is supposed to do. For this reason, we consider preaching to be part of the New Testament gift of prophecy.

Unfortunately, down through the centuries there have been people claiming they have had direct revelations from God by which they have established doctrines. For instance, the pre-Reformation church got into error mixing Law and Gospel because the popes and the councils considered themselves to have unerring direct revelation from God. In the Reformation, some reformers claimed the same thing. This is why there are divisions over Baptism and Holy Communion. On the other hand, Lutherans have established doctrine upon the written Word alone. When it comes to doctrine, we say that God speaks to us through Scripture as a means of grace and not directly.

Therefore, based upon the written Word of God, the congregations of The American Association of Lutheran Churches have agreed that spiritual gifts have not ceased, as some denominations teach. However, we do not approach spiritual gifts on the basis of the traditions that have developed in other denominations. Rather, we approach them on the basis of the Word alone, grace alone, faith alone.

Spiritual gifts exist for the common good and the strengthening of God's people. They are among the good works God has planned for His people. They proceed to us out of God's Love. God intends them to be a means of Agape love toward our neighbors. That's why Paul exhorted the Corinthians to seek them, especially the higher gifts that build up the church, the people of God. Through this Word, we are exhorted as well. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.