Day of Pentecost – June 8, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 14:8-17; 25-27, Romans 8:14-17, Acts 2:1-20 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This past Thursday through Saturday was the annual assembly of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod. One of the reasons for having a synod assembly is to conduct the business of the Synod – to do due diligence and oversight of the combined efforts of our hundred-something congregations, working together in a common mission as the church in this part of Illinois. We had to pass a budget, consider reports, and elect people to administer and oversee the many different tasks that make up that larger common mission. Those are important things to do, so I'm glad we do them, but like household chores, I can't say I particularly enjoy them. So I'm glad that there are other reasons for gathering the Synod together in assembly. One of those other reasons is a chance to be the church together, to do what the church does, together – one of the most important being worship. That is always the highlight of the assembly for me; gathering in one worship space with siblings in Christ from all over central and southern Illinois around God's gifts of word and sacrament, and responding in prayer and song to the promise of the gospel. We did that on Thursday evening. On Friday evening we gathered under a tent on the grounds of St. John Lutheran Church in Bloomington for an Octoberfest-style meal, complete with a polka band. Still another reason for the Synod to gather is to learn about and discuss important issues that need to be addressed by the church. And once again, as in previous years, our synod staff brought in a speaker who helped us to think about the challenges facing the church in our time. This year they brought in professor Dwight Zscheile from Luther Seminary, who helped us to continue thinking about the cultural shift that is underway, one that is skeptical of organized religion, but at the same time more and more open to the "spiritual," or what he named "the enchanted world." At the base of his understanding of the way forward for the church today was a renewed emphasis on faith formation for all ages, and the importance of each member of the church taking ownership of the faith, to be an agent for nurturing the faith in the congregation and passing it on, both to future generations and to those with no current connection to the church. His work is behind an effort currently in use by a number of congregations in our synod called Faithful Innovations, which is exploring new ways to be church. The goal is to move us from the old membership model, in which the church is like many other organizations where you join, pay dues, and take part in their activities, to a discipleship model in which you are equipped and empowered by God for a life of faith active in love for the sake of the world.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the sending of the Holy Spirit to create the church for exactly that kind of model for living out the faith. In the next few minutes I want to quickly focus on three aspects of the Holy Spirit's work in the readings before us this morning that help to clarify how God is at work among us to bring hope in the face of discouragement and to form us into willing and eager partners in God's work of caring for and redeeming the world that God loves.

First, Jesus tells us that one of the important tasks of the Spirit is to comfort us. The Spirit does this by keeping us connected with God's presence in our lives in a profound and visceral way as the fundamental relationship in our lives. When this connection is made and felt like the embrace of a loving parent, it calms our fears. It gives us peace. And it gives us the confidence to open our hearts and arms to the world around us. "We belong to Christ, in whom we have been baptized," the Spirit reminds us. Knowing that, and experiencing it in an ongoing way, gives us a foundation upon which to build the rest of our lives. This task of the Spirit finds expression in the church particularly

in the sacraments, but also in other ways that God's love for us in Jesus is made known to us – in liturgy, hymns, and our caring for one another as the family of God in Jesus Christ

The second task of the Spirit is to teach and remind. That task flows out of the first one and goes hand-in-hand with it, in the way that parents' love for their children leads them to teach, to remind, and to keep them "on task." That's a big part of what we do here each week at Grace, particularly on Sunday, but also throughout the week, through Bible study, Adult Sunday School, Confirmation instruction, and faith-formation opportunities like On The Way. I think that that is a particular strength of our Lutheran tradition, but it's something that we can always do better at. That teaching and reminding focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus as God's ultimate act of grace, love, and liberation on our behalf. Everything Jesus did and taught pointed to his self-giving love for us on the cross and his victory over the powers of sin, death, and evil through his resurrection from the dead. God in Jesus Christ has done this saving work for us. It is done. Love and life win. Death, fear, and hatred are conquered. That means that we can now begin to live as God intended us to live all along.

And that leads us to the third task of the Spirit – to activate us and move us to loving action on behalf of others, in relationship with others. I think that relationship piece is really important, and something we often miss, as if the mission of the church was mainly about telling other people *about* God – delivering information. This, maybe, has been a weakness of our tradition. But I think it's really what that Pentecost story from Acts is about. The mission of the church, the followers of Jesus, is to meet others where they are, to value them and their life experience and ways of understanding, and to build real relationships in which genuine love is nurtured and the love of God becomes known. That's the real significance of the disciples' speaking in the native languages of all the different people in the story.

That means that the focus of the church is ultimately to be directed outwards, not just as an institution, but as individual disciples of Christ. We gather as a community to facilitate the Spirit's task of comforting, teaching, and reminding, so that we can be equipped and empowered to be partners in that third task of speaking God's love into the world through the relationships we have with others. The whole point of Pentecost was to activate the followers of Jesus and set them loose on the world.

The old model of doing church, the way we've been doing it for a hundred years or so, that model is fading away. We are being shaken up and challenged, just like those earliest disciples were shaken up and challenged after Jesus' resurrection. But I am confident that that will ultimately be a good thing for the church, and for the life of the world. So let us look forward in faith and hope. Let us face the challenges ahead trusting that the Holy Spirit is in and among us, working to accomplish God's good purpose, to give us the peace that passes all understanding, and to make us fitting witnesses of the good news that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)