

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 25, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 284, 282:1, 297, 27, 15.

Lessons: Daniel 6:23-27, Acts 28:1-16, Acts 1:1-11.

Sermon Text: Mark 16:14-20.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our past several sermons have talked about what Jesus said and did before he ascended into heaven. So you are quite familiar with some of Jesus' statements between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven. But today we look at some words that may seem a bit unusual to us today, words Jesus also spoke to his disciples before he left them on earth with their important mission to *"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."* (Mark 16:15) Today, please hear about

GIFTS JESUS PROMISES AS HE SENDS OUT HIS DISCIPLES

- 1. He gives his followers the ability to teach and preach the Gospel.**
- 2. Early New Testament believers had other gifts, too.**

Jesus told his disciples *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20) That, and the words you just heard from Mark's gospel summarize the real importance of what Jesus is trying to do. He wants his disciples – all of us – to teach, to tell, to proclaim the gospel of eternal salvation to everyone we can. He wants to use us to bring his Word to all men. Our God is a God *"who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."* (1 Timothy 2:4)

That stresses the real importance of what Jesus is trying to do. He is trying, through his followers, including us, to bring people to faith so that they might be saved eternally.

After giving that command to his followers, Jesus speaks of signs, that is, miracles, that will follow believers.

Now this is the only place in the New Testament where this kind of statement about snakes and poison is given to his followers. That reminds us of the real importance of what it is that Jesus is trying to do. People are brought to faith by the word of God. That is made plain in Romans 10:17: *"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."* (New International Version) *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* (King James Version)

Teaching and preaching the Word of God is the most important part of what we as believers do.

If anyone, even Jesus himself, were to simply perform a miracle, would that in itself bring a person to faith in God? Listen again to what Scripture tells us: *"faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* (Romans 10:17 King James Version) Simply seeing miracles is not God's normal way of bringing people to faith. He uses his Word. God, of course, is capable of bringing people to faith without such means – we call them the means of grace – but he doesn't give us any other instructions or ways to lead people to faith. Because simply seeing a miracle without any word, without any explanation, without any teaching about it, without knowing anything about the one who performs the miracle really would not bring someone to faith in the Triune God. Even scripture has examples of people who saw miracles performed by unbelievers, such as

miracles performed by Pharaoh's magicians. These miracles by themselves surely would not bring one to faith in the true God.

We read that Jesus told his disciples at this time: ***“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”*** Jesus does not guarantee such gifts to all of his followers. But he does give them the command to preach the gospel in all the world.

Scripture also makes it clear that before he ascended into heaven, Jesus spoke repeatedly of “the gift of the Holy Spirit”. And the most important gift of the Holy Spirit is the forgiveness of sins, and with the forgiveness of sins, faith in the forgiveness of sins. On Pentecost, God also gave special gifts of speaking in tongues, that is, speaking in foreign languages. But that speaking in tongues, sometimes called “glossalalia”, or the “gift of tongues” was done so that the Word of God might be proclaimed by men. The context of these words talking about such miracles is essential. Jesus had just given the command: ***“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”***

Now he also says that certain signs will accompany those who believe. These signs are not to be the most important thing, but they are accompaniments, additional proof or evidence, of what the followers of Jesus are saying. These gifts are driving out demons, speaking in tongues, picking up snakes, and drinking deadly poison. Let's look at each of these special gifts from God to early New Testament believers.

First, consider speaking in tongues. We already mentioned what is probably the most prominent feature of Pentecost: the speaking in tongues. On that day, we read that ***“a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?”*** (Acts 2:6-8)

There was the sound of a mighty rushing wind on Pentecost that drew people together, to see what was happening, and the appearance of tongues like as of fire. But on Pentecost the most important thing is that the Word of God was proclaimed. What was unique and remarkable is that on Pentecost the followers of Jesus had the ability to speak in foreign languages, languages they had never known. This is the “speaking in tongues”. And what were they speaking? Well, we have Peter's Pentecost sermon as a remarkable example of what people were being told by God. It is entirely possible that by the power of the Holy Ghost, they preached the same sermon in which Peter preached Jesus Christ. It would not have been translation, that is, repeating what Peter said after he said it. God is powerful enough that he could put the message into everyone's mouths simultaneously. Peter's sermon explained what Jesus Christ had done, who Jesus Christ was, and what this meant for the hearers. And as a result we read that on that day many came to faith. ***“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”*** (Acts 2:41)

We must never forget the really important purpose of this speaking in tongues. The speaking in tongues, or foreign languages, was not the purpose or goal in itself. It was to communicate the gospel message. Remember, the purpose of this sign or miracle, was that foreigners may learn of Jesus. To repeat: the purpose of speaking in foreign languages is that strangers may hear of Jesus Christ – in their own languages! Some churches such as Pentecostal churches falsely teach even today that speaking in tongues is a sign that you are really a Christian.

Jesus also told his followers: ***“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons”***. Driving out demons and speaking in tongues are found in the book of Acts.

Jesus had previously given this power of driving evil spirits, demons, out of people to his apostles. Jesus called 12 men to be his apostles. Remember, the word “apostle” means someone who is sent out. These 12 were especially called to be with and follow Jesus and later they were sent out by Jesus. Listen to Mark 3:13-15: ***“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve--designating them apostles--that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.”*** That specifically speaks of the time that he called those men to be apostles. But notice what is first: ***“He appointed twelve--designating them apostles --that they might be with***

him and that he might send them out to preach.” (Mark 3:14) The preaching is named first. Then he speaks of giving them power and authority to drive out demons. Demon-possession was an especially troubling problem in Palestine. We aren't really sure why. Perhaps because God's Word was so available to its people? Perhaps because Satan was working hard to eradicate the Word of God in their midst? Was the devil trying to exert special power to lead people astray? Remember, Satan, the chief of demons, works hardest among people who believe in the true God. And remember, it is entirely possible that much of what we call “disease” today is really the work and power of the devil in people. We can't help but wonder if that is the case when we think about heinous crimes such as terrorist bombings or mass murders.

Later, Jesus sent out these apostles with some very specific instructions: ***“Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: ‘Take nothing for the journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.’ They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”*** (Mark 6:7-13) Notice why they went out: They preached that people should repent. They were to tell, to proclaim the Word of God, both law so that people should repent, and gospel so that they should know they have forgiveness of sins through Jesus' works and merit. Then comes the reference to driving out demons and anointing and healing many sick people. The driving out of demons and healing was to show that their words of forgiveness had power. For when I tell you that your sins are forgiven, that is just words. Satan might ask you ‘how do you know that your sins really are forgiven?’ You can't see forgiveness. You can only see the fruits of forgiveness in people's changed lives. For example, we see such fruits of the forgiveness of sins when we forgive those who sin against us. Think of the words in the Lord's Prayer “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. Jesus' apostles had such powers to show that they could also forgive sins. It is like their actions against evil spirits were proving their power from God when they preached forgiveness.

Then Jesus says something that sounds very strange to us today. ***“They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.”*** Doing these things with snakes and poison seems really strange to us. We are not to tempt God. This is not something believers are to do as if they are trying to “prove something”.

The activities of today's snake-handlers and poison-drinkers, who stress these activities and in the process ignore the gospel message, demonstrate that these are no longer special gifts existing in the church today, but such as have served their purpose. The special gifts recorded in the book of Acts are what God sent to fulfill his need at that time in history. Nowhere did Jesus say that they would continue to the end of time. What is to continue is the preaching of the gospel.

Notice that Jesus does not tell us “Go and pick up snakes”. He says when they pick up snakes with their hands they will not be harmed. It is not a command to pick up snakes. There is, as you heard in our epistle lesson, a reference in Acts to the apostle Paul being bitten by a snake. This however, is not on the same level with picking up snakes with their hands. When the viper bit Paul, he ***“shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects”*** (Acts 28:5) by the grace of God.

We must say the same thing about poison: Jesus does not command us to drink deadly poison. There is no example in the book of Acts of drinking deadly poison. Jesus states that when these disciples do, or are forced to drink deadly poison, they will not be harmed. It is easy to image unbelievers persecuting and trying to kill believers in these ways, with snakes or poison. But you can be sure that if Christians are forced to do these things, God will take care of them, either protecting them on earth or taking them immediately to heaven. Remember the three men thrown into the fiery furnace? Remember Daniel being thrown into the lion's den? Either these things will not harm them or if they should die they will be taken to heaven to be with Christ.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, ***“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”*** His disciples did what he told them to do. They went out and proclaimed the gospel. And God was with them. May we continue with that work of preaching everywhere! Amen.