

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, 6.vi.2006, 8:30/10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35,37; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*When the Advocate comes, Whom I will send to you
from the Father, the Spirit of truth Who comes from
the Father, He will testify on my behalf. You also
to testify, because you have been with me from the
beginning.*

– John 15:26-27

This morning the Adult Bible Class began its consideration of that very thing which Our Lord mentions in His promise to send the Holy Spirit. He is promising that the Holy Spirit will ‘testify on His behalf,’ and that the Disciples will do this too. They will do the very same thing the Holy Spirit does. Why? How? ‘Because you have been with me from the beginning,’ Jesus says. The one who ‘bears witness’ or who ‘gives testimony’ is, in the language of the New Testament, a *martyros*, a ‘martyr.’ That is

precisely what that word means in Christianity and, for that matter, in the Biblical faith of Judaism, nothing more and nothing less than vouching for God, giving evidence on God's behalf in a world that condemns God and the cause of God in this world. The result of that giving testimony, of that bearing witness, of that speaking up for God is suffering and often enough an unnatural death. That is their calling. That is the calling of all those who 'have been with Him from the beginning.'

Alright, we understand that the world does not like to be called to task by God for its injustice, for the fact that God has given commandments that preserve life and society and the environment and that the world breaks these commandments routinely. We understand, too, that where speaking up for God and the Kingdom of God gets in the way of the petty kingdoms and power structures of this world, those who speak for God and against the world are often simply eliminated, condemned

by the world for being not purely religious but rather political advocates of their own political interests and goals. But, are *we* called to such a life? After all, *we* were not ‘with Him from the beginning,’ *were we?*

If the Lutheran Church has not only theologians but prophets, then Søren Kierkegaard was one of those prophets. A younger contemporary of Hans Christian Andersen, Kierkegaard studied and wrote in the middle of the 1800’s, at a time when Protestant scholars of the New Testament had ‘just discovered’ Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of God running throughout all of the four canonical Gospels and the Apostolic witness to His teaching. They were so excited and proud about this insight, one would have thought they had invented the teaching themselves, so theology students like young Kierkegaard were heard to observe. To Søren, what the academics had ‘discovered’ was so plainly there in the Bible, in the Sacraments and in the Church’s liturgy, and that plain

teaching was that *God* had entered this world in Jesus Christ, that *God* was now our very own Brother and that God Himself would show us the way to love one another in this world as God loved us from all eternity. How would God do this? God our Brother, Jesus Christ, would take us by the hand of faith and lead us to those very same people *He* had sought out, loved and helped—the poor, the sick, the mad, the moral failures, the unbelieving.

Søren returned to Denmark from his studies in Germany confused that all of Protestant Europe was excited about the Kingdom of God teaching, but that neither his Lutheran Church nor anyone else's seemed poised to live in radical solidarity with the poor, the sick, the mad, the moral failures, or the skeptics, proclaiming God's own love *among* such people, that is, among *most* people of Søren's experience. Instead, Søren heard, or thought he heard, both theologians and churchmen eager to point out that Jesus' teaching was for those Disciples who *had*

been with Him from the beginning—literally—and not for middle class Christian gentlefolk, of whom God asked only that they be kind, honest, hard-working and patient with the natural suffering of illness and aging. The age of martyrdom, the age in which the Holy Spirit both called and *drove* Christian men and women to speak up for God's cause in the world, even if it meant their torture and death, was all but over, or so they thought in Copenhagen. Of course, there was suffering and there was death on the part of missionaries and their families, but, in another century or so perhaps the whole world would be Christian, and much of it Protestant and Lutheran, and so there would be no more martyrdom and no more martyrs. *We* were not with Him from the beginning, they thought.

But Søren Aabye Kierkegaard looked at things differently, not just with the eyes of an uncritical, Biblical faith, not with the eyes of his peasant grandparents out on the Plains of Jutland, but almost with eyes that could see forward to the

breakdown of that middle class dream of order, to a day, such as ours, in which the wounds of society are as apparent as they were to Jesus when He walked the roads of Galilee and Judea and the streets of Jerusalem. He saw things that way, I suppose, because he knew what it was to testify to his faith, to speak up for God, because he knew martyrdom also as suffering, and that it was part of faith. Søren was a pious boy who loved to God to Church with his mother, Anna, but his father was a Bible-thumping monster. As soon as he was sure that Søren was old enough to remember the experience, he dragged the boy out onto those windswept Jutland plains to let him in on two secrets. The first was to show Søren the very spot on which his father had cursed at God years earlier, the very spot where the father had dared God to strike him dead if God really did exist. To Søren's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, this meant at first that he had won, but later he had second thoughts and was convinced that God would get even with him by cutting short

the lives of his seven children, not letting any of them live longer than Jesus' 33 years. This he told Søren, the youngest. Having made his best attempt to destroy the boy's faith, his father's next revelation was intended to destroy the boy's sense of personhood and to knock out of him any thought that he might be better than his father. Søren had been conceived out of wedlock, his father told him, and had never been wanted in the first place. God would punish both father and son for that, the boy was told.

Why do I tell you this story on Pentecost? I tell you this because it is the story of one who did exactly what the Gospel says, because it is the story of a little boy who grew up to be a man who spoke up for God, for God alive in this world through Jesus Christ, and who *lived* because of it, though that life brought much suffering. Little Søren had no words for his father on that bleak day in his boyhood, but, as Our Lord promises, the Holy Spirit led him into all truth, a truth which he

refused to adulterate, a truth for which he stood up and spoke up for the rest of his life by claiming the faith the Holy Spirit gave him in his infant Baptism, the faith his mother loved and taught him, and by thus bearing witness against the lie negating God's love his earthly father had told him by means of certain facts.

It was in the very experience of being unwanted by the world—first in the person of his birth father—that Søren experienced what it is to trust in God's Word of love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. He likened it not to figuring out a problem intellectually, something he was good at, but rather to jumping over a deep chasm from the world of wrath and doubt to the world of faith and love. What if one fell into the abyss? Not 'my own reason or strength,' as the Catechism says, but Someone of a different order, Someone Who *knows* me, Someone Who *loves* me, Someone Who knows the agony of *my* despair, the loneliness of *my* existence as I stand before death

and the question it poses about the *meaning* of my life, *Someone is there with me*, bringing me to Jesus my Brother, to Jesus my God, away from those who would destroy all faith and hope and across that chasm of doubt, so that I am with Him *now*, in my present moment, as if from the beginning. In the instant of faith I become, as Søren Kierkegaard wrote, ‘contemporaneous’ with Jesus and the Disciples. *I too* am called to testify to God’s love in Jesus Christ because I *have* been with Him from the beginning, because *I am with Him now!*

And what form does that being with Jesus from the beginning take? You are with Him now through His Holy Spirit and His Word. You will be with Him and He with you, also by the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. You should know. What has it meant for you? What could this mean in your life? Are there voices in your past or present that negate your dignity as a child of God? Then, in the Holy Spirit, testify against them and speak up on behalf of what God

is doing in your life and in this world! Does this world and our part of it treat the poor or those fragile in mind or body as though *they* were of no account? Speak up for Christ in the least of His brethren, just as He speaks up for *you* before His Heavenly Father's throne of majesty! See where that leads you. See what it is to be led into all truth, to have a magnificent life as His Disciple and as a member of His priestly people.



You and I are not Søren Kierkegaard, to be sure, but here is part of what that bearing witness to Jesus Christ meant for him. It may interest you. I hope that it will help you. Testifying with the Holy Spirit on behalf of Jesus Christ meant, for Søren, never

believing the hateful words of his father-in-the-flesh, but holding

fast instead to his mother's faith and making it more his own every day. It meant for Søren never being ordained, though he was fully credentialed and qualified, offered a call that would keep him busy enough so that he would not have so much time to write. The Church's requirements were appallingly low, in his view, for they did not require one to suffer for the faith and the priestly vocation. It meant never marrying the girl of his heart, Regina Olsen, feeling not only unworthy of her but loving her so much that he wished also to spare her the pain of his past that he might bring into their life together. Bearing witness in the Holy Spirit finally meant for Søren Kierkegaard relentlessly telling the truth to a Church and a society that were tired of hearing it, being written off as a crackpot by most and loved by a few old friends unto the last. He published thirty books by his death and countless newspaper articles and lengthy letters to the editor, plus another couple of volumes of thoughts written on scraps of paper and tucked away here and there all over his

rambling flat with a chest high writing desk, the kind printers use to set type, in each room. His statue stands carved into the stone exterior of the Royal Chapel in Copenhagen today, along with the great Saints and churchmen of Denmark, but I am told it is carved differently from all the rest, as if not from the past but from a future time. He was with Jesus from the beginning, and that is where he remains. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.



S. D. G.!