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## A Communion of Saints Gathered for the Forgiveness of Sins

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Day of Pentecost - June 9, 2019

We read throughout Scripture about how at various times and in multiple ways, God scatters and gathers His people. He gathered them around His presence and His promises, but time and again, they made themselves unworthy to be there.

God scattered Adam and Eve from His presence in the Garden of Eden. He scattered Cain from His presence in the land of Eden, cursing him to wander the earth after he murdered his brother Abel. The generations following the flood came together in one place, but not around God and His gracious promises which He spoke to Noah. **They gathered to make a name for themselves.**

Up till this point in the story of Scripture, names had all been given. They were something one passively received. In other words, a gift. But here, the people of the city of Babel turned the gift of a name into a thing to be earned and accomplished. They sought to be free of their need of God and His righteousness by building their own righteousness. They tried to justify themselves by constructing a great city with a tower that reached the heavens.

In a touch of irony, we read, that despite their efforts, God still had to come *down* to see this supposedly great city and the tower, which they built. And, "From there the Lord scattered them over the face of all the earth."

This self-righteous, name-making motive for gathering persists in the church today. We, in our sinful natures, gather to prove to God that we are righteous, that we are enough. Good enough parents and grandparents; good enough spouses; good enough brothers and sisters; good enough employees and employers; good enough friends; good enough neighbors; good enough citizens; and good enough Christians.

But, we're not good enough. In the words of the psalmist, David, "No one living is righteous before [God]." Despite our failed attempts to make a name for ourselves, to be good enough, to be righteous on our own, God still determines to gather us around *Him* and *His* promises.

**He reversed the scattering at the city of Babel in the gathering at Pentecost. And, He still carries out this reversal, week after week, in the church.**

After Jesus' ascension, His followers gathered, "all together in one place" in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost. Suddenly, God came into their midst. He came with the sound of rushing wind and with visible tongues of fire, which divided and rested on them. The Holy Spirit filled them, and they proclaimed the Gospel in languages they didn't previously speak.

"When they heard this sound, a crowd came together;" Jews from every nation under heaven who also came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. Each one heard Jesus' followers proclaiming *in their own language* the mighty works of God, which He accomplished in Christ. "Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'"

Peter explained. What they were seeing and hearing, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Gospel is the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's words. "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people."

God had poured out His Spirit, that is He poured out Himself. As God came down at Babel, so too He came down at Jerusalem. Only this time, instead of scattering the people, He gathered them. God gathered them around Himself and His promises now fulfilled in Christ, so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The benefits of Christ's death and resurrection were now theirs to have.

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What Joel said would happen and what Peter said did happen at Pentecost is still happening today, to you, and to me. In the Apostles' Creed, we confess, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

Martin Luther, In his explanation of this section of the creed in the Small Catechism, explains that when we confess belief in the Holy Spirit we confess, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

Luther then explains what it means when we confess that we believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints, "In the same way, [the Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

The Holy Spirit not only calls and keeps individuals in faith; **the Holy Spirit also gathers us together and keeps the church in the true faith, and He does it all by way of the Gospel.**

And the Gospel is that which we confess in the creed: That our sins are forgiven, that we will rise from the dead and that we will have life everlasting. And all this is freely ours, solely on account of Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried and on the third day rose from the dead—all for us.

Luther explains where we receive this forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life on account of Christ, in his explanation. "In this Christian Church, He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." And as Luther adds later in his Small Catechism, "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." It is in the church where the forgiveness of sins is most assuredly handed over in Word and Sacrament.

Delivering it is the principle calling of the church. Not because the church is by any means perfect, but because God has chosen to place His presence and His promises in our midst. God is the one doing the forgiving and the saving.

Instead of making a name for ourselves, God pours out His Holy Spirit on us, forgives our sins, and gives us His name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the waters of Baptism. As we gather together, we call on God's name in the Invocation and it reminds us of our baptism. Our sins are pronounced forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And God's name is spoken over us and His favor declared to us in the Benediction.

As God came down at Pentecost, God comes down to us in Christ's body and blood under the bread and wine of Communion. By this, He gathers us together, forgives our sins and keeps us and His church together with Jesus Christ in the true faith.

**God gathers us to forgive us.** Through the forgiveness of sins most assuredly delivered by the church through the proclamation of the Gospel and the giving of the Sacraments, week after week, month after month, year after year, God is continually reversing the fallout of the first scattering from the Garden of Eden and every subsequent scattering. And in that reversal, He gathers us to Himself—a communion of saints gathered for the forgiveness of sins. **AMEN.**