

### **The Core of the Faithful**

It is a tradition at our seminary that students in their final year preach at a midweek service at the seminary. This past Thursday was my turn in the pulpit of Keffer Chapel. Thursday was also Martin Luther's birthday, and the worship planning team for this week decided the service would focus on the re-newers of the faith, so today I am not preaching from the assigned lectionary readings we read this morning. Instead, I am preaching from a text they chose from one of Paul's letters. [Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-23]

As I sat down to prepare this homily—I was aware that it would be both my senior final semester sermon and a message for this community of faith, a community that has supported me in many ways during my time in seminary. A number of things ran through my mind. The first was how many professors would be at the chapel service and hear it. I have to admit I was much more nervous preaching to them than to all of you. Not that they have been less supportive, but in my mind they would be critiquing me, mentally measuring if I had actually learned anything in the last four years. In our study of Islam here at Zion we discovered that while Muslims focus more on the correct practice of living out their faith, Christians focus more on Orthodoxy, or correct teaching. So maybe there is some basis to my anxiety. While writing this I worried that my research would have to be accurate. My rhetoric would have to be clever. My delivery would have to be confidently smooth, and I might even have to throw in a few Greek words just to demonstrate that I could. Adding to the pressure—was that, in the end, even if this sermon is not able to accomplish any of those things it must somehow communicate the gospel.

The second thing I thought of was how much I have changed in the last 4 years. One of my professors would say that doesn't happen to everyone, that some of us students are like corn and try to move through the system without being changed. I have not been corn. I have changed. There are stories that a seminary experience will either cause you to lose your faith or it will strengthen your faith. Mine has been strengthened. I entered the seminary as a Lutheran because in the words of Lady Gaga, "Baby I was born this way". A cradle Lutheran I just didn't know any better. Now as I prepare to leave seminary with a better knowledge of what a "Lutheran" is I remain one, but not for reasons I would have suspected.

To be Lutheran, is to be Protestant, is to be Christian, and is to be a believer in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation Paul speaks of in his letter to the church in Corinth. The church there has been given the grace of God through Christ. It has enriched them in speech and knowledge of every kind. They know the gospel. Yet Paul is writing to a church divided. There is disunity among the believers. Some are claiming I belong to Paul, and others are claiming I belong to Apollos, and still others I belong to Cephas. God's beloved are boasting that they possess special knowledge or wisdom that others don't. They are lifting themselves to a status above other believers. They have been given the gospel, they just don't understand it. Paul cautions them to be careful of what kind of church they are building on the foundation of Christ. You can build a church with gold, silver, precious stones, or with wood, hay, and straw. However, when that church comes up against a fire, although the builder will be saved what will become of the builders' work. Depending what is built on the foundation of the gospel it will either be destroyed by fire, or refined by it.

And so when we say I belong to Luther, or I belong to Calvin, or I belong to Menno Simmons out of what are we building the church, the Ekklesia, the body of Christ? In our broken humanity we often tend to try and build the body without recognizing the value and diversity of its parts. Martin Luther who we celebrate as one of the re-newers of the faith recognized the foundation of the church had to be built on Christ. The Holy Spirit revealed to him through the words of Paul that, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Luther recognized this as the foundational core on which the church must be built. He knew that the church of his day had drifted from the gospel and that the faith had to be re-newed. This is the core theology of Luther that we celebrate. We celebrate it but do we actually understand it. Luther was given the gospel and much of what he built on it was refined, but even some of what Luther tried to build on the foundation of Christ had to be burnt. Even our celebrated church father Martin Luther didn't fully understand the gospel. You only have to read "On the Jews and their Lies" or "Condemned are the Anabaptists" in the Augsburg confession to see that even though Luther was given and knew the gospel, he didn't quite grasp the fullness of it. There seems to be this innate human desire to limit the gospel.

Perhaps this is why many of our churches are struggling to survive. What we have built on the foundation of Christ is built with material that will not last. The steeples are falling because a fire is sweeping through destroying what we have attempted to build. We have built with material that so easily burns. We have built with those things that attempt to put limits on God's amazing grace. We have used materials with the purpose of lifting ourselves to a status above others. We too easily use any material that separates us from one another; rich and poor, black and white, Christian and Muslim, male and female, gay and straight. When the churches we build look more like country clubs for those that are just like us, instead of places that proclaim love and forgiveness they are going to burn in the refiner's fire.

No matter how often we forget the core of our faith, the Holy Spirit continues to call us back to the gospel. She asks us to build on the foundation of Christ with materials that will survive any fire. The church shall be built as the hymn says, "Where love can dwell, where all can safely live, a place where we learn to forgive, a place where the love of Christ ends divisions." A church will stand forever that proclaims the gospel it is built upon. The gospel that Paul recognized was for all who have sinned, the gospel that Luther recognized we are called to not by our own understanding or strength. The gospel that offers new life and forgiveness to all.

Brennan Manning in his memoir "All is Grace" speaks of his most memorable lost-then-found moments coming during his time spent with a fraternity order called "The little brothers of Jesus". Manning himself is synonymous with the phrase, "God loves you as you are, not as you should be" but he says those words were impressed upon him by the life of a tender six-foot-two "Little" Brother, Dominique Voillaume who had experienced them himself. He tells the story of New Year's day 1969 when the brothers were all gathered around the table, singing the blues as the standard workman's lament, poor wages, lousy hours, and hypocritical employers. The conversation rapidly descended to a holier-than-thou rant of comparisons and judgements on how the money loving patrons they selflessly served couldn't possibly compare with their pure hearts. Brother Dominique at the end of the table began to cry. When they asked him what was wrong he said, "They don't understand". Manning wondered if his friend and mentor was referring to the people they had just criticized, those they saw as oblivious to the mercy of the brothers while they lounged in bed, made love, and drank wine. Or was he actually whispering a prayer for his brothers seated on either side of him, men who had momentarily forgotten their utter poverty before God and their kinship with those they so easily condemned? Later Brother Dominique found he had inoperable cancer and left the order to be closer to family and friends. He took a job as a night watchman in a nearby factory on the graveyard shift. Each morning following his shift, he would visit the park across the street from his house, an area filled with what society calls "the riffraff: winos, the old and young and homeless, losers. Brother Dominique turned in his old habit for a new one, that of passing out candy to the least of these, listening to their stories, and always leaving them with good news, words Manning had heard a hundred times, "Jesus Christ is crazy about you. He loves you as you are, not as you should be." After Brother Dominique had died his journal was found with this as his final entry,

All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me. I can truthfully say that I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If God wants it to, my life will be useful through my word and witness. If God wants it to, my life will bear fruit through my prayers and sacrifices. But the usefulness of my life is God's concern, not mine. It would be indecent of me to worry about that.

I think Brother Dominique comes close to understanding the gospel. One of the things that I have learned in almost four years as a seminary student is that I don't fully understand the gospel. It seems every time I think I get the gospel, or have a grasp of the gospel, I find myself limiting it in some way. One thing I have learned and do understand from this time in my life is that I will remain Lutheran. I don't remain Lutheran because I think we have the corner on the truth. I certainly don't remain one because we have an unblemished past that infuses a well deserved pride. Surprisingly I remain as a Lutheran even with a newfound knowledge of denominations and other faiths, which in many respects do an even better job of living out the gospel. The reason I will remain a Lutheran is because at the core of our faith, at its very foundation is the good news. The good news that in spite of the fact that all have sinned and fall short, we are justified by God's amazing un-comprehensible grace. It is a grace we drift from. It is a grace that as we have just discovered can't even be adequately described by a seminarian in his fourth year. But it is grace that the Holy Spirit continuously points us to, granting each and every one of us life and salvation. It is a grace that we don't have to fully understand. Because it's not about what we do, it is because of what God does.

It is because All is Grace! Amen.