

“Fear and Trembling”

“... work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Attending the bicentennial of United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia earlier this month was a wonderful experience and an opportunity to return to the campus that played such an important role in my life and ministry. As soon as I walk onto those grounds, memories come back of the years I spent there as a student, the relationships I formed that are still a blessing to me, and of course the place where Susan and I met and fell in love. Among the places on the campus that played an important role in my formation as a pastor was the seminary chapel, where we gathered for worship and learned about leading worship in a public setting as seminarians. One of the highlights of the anniversary celebration was the bicentennial worship service in which I was privileged to have a small role in reading one of the prayer petitions. The chapel was packed with alumni, students, faculty, and persons from across the church who gathered to worship and give thanks for the many generations of pastors who were educated and trained to serve the church as ministers of Word and Sacrament. When the time for the prayers came in the service, I got in line with the other persons who were reading the prayers; but when it was my time to stand behind the lectern, I felt an unexpected emotion: the same fear and anxiety that plagued me when as a student I stood before the congregation to lead worship. While many people who meet me today think that preaching and leading worship has always come naturally to me, in truth it took me a long time to get over my fear of standing in front of a congregation and leading worship, not only in reading prayers but especially in preaching. Standing in the same place where I had originally experienced those terrifying emotions of fear and trembling was a reminder of how challenging it was for me to get comfortable leading God’s people in worship on a regular basis.

I know that I am not alone in having these feelings of anxiety when I am speaking in public; many people would rather visit the dentist than engage in public speaking. Being back in the same place where I first encountered the anxiety of public speaking reminded me of the challenges I faced in my formation as a pastor, and how it was only through working through my fears by getting in front of congregations on a regular basis that I was able to become more comfortable in this very important

aspect of my calling as a pastor. My own anxiety-filled experiences have helped me understand the challenges many people face in getting in front of a congregation, especially the interns and other students with whom I have worked over the years. While those days of facing the “fear and trembling” I encountered on a regular basis are far behind me, going back to the place where I first encountered them reminded me that the call to serve our Lord often includes this experience of facing our fears and the experiences that cause us to tremble.

Within days of returning from Philadelphia, I opened the lessons for this Sunday and noticed that the Second Lesson is one of my favourite texts in the lectionary, Paul’s words of encouragement to the Christians in Philippi. But I also noticed that the lectionary includes two verses that usually are not included in this reading, verses that include those two words that encapsulated by recent experience in my seminary’s chapel:

- “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” – Philippians 2:12-13.

At first, I was mystified as to why the creators of the lectionary included these two verses in a text that focuses on Paul’s encouragement to the Philippian Christians that they share the same mind as was in Christ Jesus, so that they make the Apostle’s joy complete and live in the unity that they have as sisters and brothers in Christ. This epistle is sometimes described as “Paul’s happy letter,” since he has great affection for the Christians in this Macedonian city and writes to both thank them for their encouragement as he encourages them to remain steadfast in their faith even in the face of the challenges and persecutions that were daily realities for people who professed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord in a city where worship of the Roman Emperor was standard. His thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter includes Paul’s confident assertion (my Confirmation verse) that *“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (1:6). Even as he is imprisoned by his Roman captors, Paul continues to rejoice, *“for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance.”* (1:19). No matter how difficult their present circumstances may be, Paul assures his readers that *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (4:7).

On the basis of what they share in Christ, Paul begins the second chapter of the letter by making an appeal to the Philippians to behave in such a way as will make his joy complete: “*be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*” (2:2). Members of the Christian community must share a common attitude, having the same love as Christ, and being in full accord with each other that embodies their unity as the people of God. Because in baptism they have been joined together in the church, which is the Body of Christ, they are to “*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit*” (2:3), but to have an attitude that in humility considers others better than oneself. In the Old Testament, humility is presented as the proper attitude toward God:

- “For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.” – Psalm 138:6.
- “Towards the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour.” – Proverbs 3:34.
-

Paul urges the Philippians to regard others as better than themselves, to encourage a recognition of the rights and achievements of others. Christians are to be looking to the interests of others rather than their own. Christ’s actions provide not simply an example for believers to copy but also the foundation of their own Christian experience.

- “Although Christians are thus free from all works, they ought in this liberty to empty themselves and to serve, help, and in every way deal with their neighbours as they see that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with them. This they should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval. All our work should be directed toward the good of our neighbour, because for each of us our faith suffices and all our work and all our life are left to him to use in a free serve of love to our neighbour.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

In order to reinforce his teaching, Paul quotes a hymn that was well-known by Christians in the first century. Introducing the “Christ Hymn” with the encouragement that “*the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*” (2:5), Paul’s appeal is both to the attitude shown by Christ Jesus and to the attitude that is therefore appropriate to those who are “in him.” The hymn may have been an early confession of faith that recounts how the one who “*was in the form of God*” chose to humble himself and become obedient unto death for the sake of God’s people. The hymn also offers the Philippians a paradigm to follow: “*Having the same*

disposition as Christ Jesus, Paul urges, highlighting Christ's embrace of lowliness and self-emptying obedience." (Paul Schellenberg).

The hymn begins by describing what Christ did not do before spelling out what he did for the sake of God's people: "... *though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*" (2:6-7). Equality with God was something that Christ already possessed, but he which he chose not to use for his own advantage, as he proved in the wilderness when Satan tempted him to use his divine powers for purposes other than which God willed so that we have the confidence that our Lord was "*one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*" (Hebrews 4:15). Christ deliberately identified himself with humanity when he not only chose to be "*the Word that became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14), but took "*the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*" To adopt the form of a slave, with all the dishonour and lack of privileges it implies, is the complete opposite of claiming the status and privilege of equality with God. Christ became obedient to the laws to which he was now enslaved, which decreed the universal rule of death: "*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross*" (2:7b-8). Christ death was by crucifixion, the punishment reserved in the Roman world for rebels and disobedient slaves, "*thus making the reality of Christ's self-identification with those who are slaves*" (Morna D. Hooker). Crucifixion was the cruelest and most shameful of deaths, and there could be no greater contrast with the opening lines of the hymn or with the exaltation that follows.

- "‘Even death on a cross’ is not an addendum but the very climax of the statement. In Paul’s world, death on a cross was the ultimate extreme not only of pain but also, and especially, of humiliation. Paul is, after all, expanding on the self-abasement of Jesus. First came his self-emptying in the incarnation; then came his self-humbling in his human life, which culminated in the most humiliating death of all, the gruesome form of Roman execution ... to which God the Father responded by bestowing the supreme honour that is about to be described.” – Dennis Hamm.

As Christ suffered and died on the Cross in order to free God's people from "*all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil*" (*Small Catechism*), Christians also believe that death was not the end for our Lord or for God's people; for "*on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures*" (Nicene Creed). The Christ Hymn expresses this with the triumphant "therefore" that introduces the action of God, who responds to Christ's self-emptying and humiliation when God "*also highly*

exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:9-11). “Highly exalted” (*hyperypsosen*) emphasizes the magnitude of the honour bestowed on Christ. To give someone a name is to give him or her status and power; the name bestowed on Jesus, *“the name that is above every name,”* is the name the angel instructed Joseph to name the child of Mary, *“for he will save his people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:22). It is at this name that *“every knee should bend ... and every tongue confess,”* words taken from Isaiah where they refer to the worship of God (*“By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’”* – Isaiah 45:23). Whoever honours Jesus must also glorify God, because in Jesus we see the one who is “in the form of God” and mirrors God’s glory.

- “Jesus’ lordship is in no way that of another god in competition with the God of Israel. Rather, God freely shares his glory with the Son, who is equal to him from all eternity. The Gospel of John expresses a similar idea: God glorifies the Son so that the Son may in turn glorify the Father (*“Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.”* – John 17:1). – Hamm.

Paul now continues his appeal concerning the way in which the Philippians should live, urging them to live in a way that is appropriate to the gospel, whether he is present or absent. Having presented the Christ story as the ultimate paradigm for Christian living, Paul now proceeds to apply that model more explicitly to the Philippians’ lives as well as his. He makes it clear that the “working out” of salvation is both a gift of God and a communal task, one that entails sacrifice. Putting on “the mind of Christ” has practical implications; this means that the Philippians must *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* (2:12b-13). “Fear and trembling” does not mean that Christians should live in a state of perpetual high anxiety; rather it is a scriptural expression for awe and profound reverence in the presence of the Holy God:

- “Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled.” – Psalm 2:11.
- “And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do to them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for them.” – Jeremiah 33:9.

“Fear and trembling” is not caused by uncertainty regarding one’s salvation but is the appropriate attitude in the presence of God, an attitude that may be better described as “awe” or “reverence.” God’s gracious action in Christ demands a response; as Luther teaches in the *Small Catechism*, “*for all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*” The Philippians are the complete what God has done by living it out in their own lives. The life that is to be lived is lived in the community of believers; “*Paul’s words, like those of Moses, are addressed to the people of God, not to a collection of individuals.*” (Hooker). Having exhorted the community to “work out” their common salvation in a spirit of awe, aware of God’s presence among them, Paul reminds his readers that in reality it is God who is working among them, “*enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (2:13). God both moves the faith community from within to desire his will and empower them to work in carrying it out.

- “Thus this passage is not only a call to a common task but also a plea to see this task as a *collaboration* with God in something he is already doing among us and even giving us the desire to do. It is God’s intimate presence in our very desires and efforts that warrants the biblical phrase ‘with fear and trembling,’ that is, with awe that springs from the awareness of God’s presence.” – Hamm.

While I no longer experience the level of anxiety that afflicted me during my student days in the seminary chapel, I still approach every worship service I lead with great seriousness, because being a worship leader means that we are coming into the presence of the Lord in the company of God’s people and are entrusted with proclaiming the holy Word of God that is centered on what our Lord has done for us through the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ. We should not understand “fear and trembling” as being terrified of an angry and vengeful God, because we know that the God we worship is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*” (Joel 2:13), whose mercy “*is in reality the core of the Gospel message: it is the name of God himself, the face with which he revealed himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love.*” (Pope Francis). We come into God’s presence in awe and reverence and take seriously our task to be faithful stewards of the Word of God and means of grace that are meant to bring all persons into the loving presence of God so that we might continue to “*will and work for his good pleasure.*”

Before I entered the sanctuary of the seminary chapel, I was walking through the sacristy in the rear of the building when I came across a copy of Martin Luther’s

Sacristy Prayer that remains a source of strength for those about to lead worship, many of whom were facing the same anxiety, the same “fear and trembling” that I experienced in my seminary days. While Luther acknowledges his unworthiness of the office which has been entrusted to him, he prays that as he leads God’s people in worship that God will *“grant me, out of Your pure grace and mercy, a right understanding of Your Word and that I may also diligently perform it ... send your Holy Spirit to work with me to will and to do through Your divine strength according to your good pleasure. Amen.”*

As we gather as God’s people in God’s presence this morning, let us never take our worship gatherings for granted, for we come into the holy presence of God that fills us with “fear and trembling,” awe and reverence that our Lord is with us, our Saviour is present among us, and God’s Holy Spirit continues to empower us to accomplish God’s Will in this time and place. May we share in the mind and will of Christ in loving and serving all people so that they may know that the awesome presence of God is with us, enabling us to will and work for God’s good pleasure in the lives we share as the people of God who continue to confess that *“Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Amen.