

Faith Comes Through the Preaching

✠ *In the name of Jesus.* ✠

“The chief service of God is to preach the Gospel” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession [Apology] XV:42). It all comes down to this. Of all the things we can do in the Christian Church, of all the things that pastors, teachers, and laymen can do, this is the big one, the chief one, the Apology says. This is the service most needed, most acceptable, and most necessary that we can render to God: “preach the Gospel.” It comes as no surprise then, that Luther would explain the Third Commandment by saying, “We should fear and love God that we do not despise *preaching* and the Word” (Small Catechism, “The Ten Commandments,” emphasis mine).

Why? Because faith comes through the preaching. That sounds like Romans 10, but more than likely you learned that a little differently. You probably learned to say, “Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17, NIV84), or, perhaps, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (KJV). But Luther, when translating Paul into German, says, *So kommt der Glaube aus der predigt.* “Faith comes through the preaching.”

By using the German word for a preacher or pastor in translating Romans 10, Luther seemed to understand Paul to be highlighting the public preaching of the Word, that is, especially the preaching we call the sermon, something normally done neither by teachers nor by laymen, but by pastors. Luther did not minimize or eliminate the Gospel-preaching ability of teachers or laymen according to and in their own vocations, that is, in the right place and time. Alongside this translation still stands Luther’s high view of the priesthood of

all believers and an understanding that the Gospel is proclaimed by the “mutual conversation and consolation of brethren,” (Smalcald Articles [SA] III:IV), whether those brethren occupy the pastoral office or not. Rather, with this translation, Luther highlights the holy office of the ministry and that place where the preaching takes place: the Divine Service. When Christians gather together on Sunday morning (or Saturday night, or Wednesday night, etc.) under the leadership of a pastor something incredible happens: “God comes to us in Christ” (Vatja, 122). Not because there is a pastor present making something magical happen, but because at the center of the Divine Service, or worship, or church, or the assembly, or the liturgy, or whatever you may call it, is the proclamation of the Word, the proclamation of Christ. Here in the Divine Service spoken, prayed, and sung and in the sermons preached, we give absolution and receive it. We speak justification and it is granted. We do this in the present tense, here and now: for you and to you.

This is not to say that preaching the Gospel only happens in the Divine Service by the ordained pastor and not in the classroom, or at your breakfast table while reading *Meditations*, or across the fence with your neighbor. We are not here to exalt the Pastor over the People, nor to exalt the People over the Pastor. At this moment, in this essay, we are paying attention to one specific arena of gospel proclamation: the Divine Service and with it the sermon.

Nor is this to get into the old argument about which is more important: the sermon or the Sacrament. That is a false dilemma. The Church must have and use both. As Hermann Sasse, among others, has pointed out, if we

leave out the sermon, the Sacrament “might be understood as one of many religious rites in the world” and if we leave out the Sacrament, “the Gospel might be understood as one of the many religious messages in the world” (Sasse, 1). So, it is not either-or: either the sermon stands at the pinnacle of the Divine Service or the Sacrament does. It is both-and. To do the one, that is, exalt the sermon over the Sacrament, is to join the band of generic Protestants in our country preaching about having your best life now. To do the other, to exalt the Sacrament over the Sermon, turns the church into a place of mechanical ritual and sacrifice, “We’re here to perform this rite to appease our god (or pastor) and get in good with him and maybe get some favor from him today.” Sasse continued, “The Sacrament and the sermon belong together, and it is always a sign of the decay of the church if one is emphasized at the expense of the other” (Sasse, 2).

We can say this with confidence, for what happens at the altar happens at the pulpit and vice versa. For good reason St. Augustine referred to preaching as the audible sacrament, just as he called the sacrament the visible Word, because the words we speak do what the elements you receive do. The sacraments preach. The preaching sacraments. That is, they do to you what Christ did for you. They give Christ to you. They hand out Christ to you. For “a sermon of Christ always forgives sins” (*Pieper Lectures*, 126). That is, you hear the “for you” of Christ from the pulpit as well as at the altar, and faith in that “for you” comes through the preaching.

This is the context of the sermon. The sermon happens in a forgiveness zone. Each Sunday we commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ in sermon, Sacrament, song, and prayer. “You proclaim the Lord’s

death until he comes,” Paul says (1 Cor. 11:26). But more than commemorating it, we do it. I don’t mean that in the papal sense, that is, that each Sunday we in some way or another re-present or re-offer Christ to be killed and raised to life again, that is the old error of the sacrifice of the mass, us offering up Christ to satisfy the Father. That, of course, was done, once and for all, not by us, but by Christ Himself, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the atoning sacrifice, which is ours through faith in His blood. As Luther says, it is “done and accomplished” (Large Catechism [LC] 2:38).

Maybe better than saying “we do it,” we should say that something gets done to you. You die and rise again from the dead each week as the Word gets preached to you. That is what happens during the Divine Service, church, worship, *Gottesdienst*, the Mass, etc. When preachers proclaim God’s Word, God kills you. He kills you to death, as Prof. Deutschlander likes to say. And then He raises you to life, life “to the full,” as Jesus likes to say (John 10:10). But only, ever, and always God does this through the Word, because faith comes through the preaching (cf. SA III:VIII:9-13, “God does not want to deal with us in any other way than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments.”).

If faith comes through the preaching, then we need lips to preach. God knew this. God intended this. Thus Paul says, “How can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14). For this reason, then, the Lutheran church confesses, “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news” (Augsburg Confession [AC] V:1-2).

"Feed my lambs," Jesus told Peter (John 21:15). "Preach the Gospel," He told the Eleven (Mark 16:15). On Easter evening He said to them: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). Thus God gave a message and put it on the lips of men. He commissioned lips. In the context of sermons and preachers, that would be pastors' lips (cf. AC XIV, "Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call.").

And if there are lips, they must speak: "The message is *heard* through the word of Christ" (emphasis mine). Paul does not there use the same word for "word" that we find in John 1. There it is the famous word *logos*, as in "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*)" and "The Word (*logos*) became flesh." Here Paul uses the word *rema*, "The message is heard through the word (*rematos*) of Christ). A *rema* can be a single word or a group of words, but it is most often a spoken word, spoken by a living voice, as one Greek lexicon has it. That is exactly what preaching is: a living voice. Single words strung together into phrases, units, sentences, paragraphs, thoughts. And, as Paul says, they are the words of Christ, because faith comes through hearing, and the hearing through the word of Christ. And if there are lips, they must speak. And if there is speaking, there must be words.

And if there are spoken words, *rematos*, then something must be heard. Sermons are not trees falling in a forest without anyone around to hear them. They are not spoken to the air (except when the pastor practices). They happen in the assembly, in worship, in church, in the Divine Service, among the people, to the people, for the people. The sermon is a time of listening. We come to worship to hear, to listen, to receive. Hence the German term for the worship assembly: *Gottesdienst*,

God's service to us, arrow down, from heaven above to earth below. And since that is the case, and since preachers want their people to "obtain this faith" (AC V:1) "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3), they make sure that the people hear what they need to hear when they preach.

What do they need to hear? Paul defines that: "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ." People do not need motivational speeches to obtain this faith. People do not need pious talks. People do not need a weekly pep rally. To obtain this faith people need to hear and see Christ crucified and raised from the dead, "my gospel" Paul said (2 Timothy 2:8), that is, they need to hear the word of Christ.

We could debate Paul's prepositional phrase "through the word of Christ." It could be understood in one of two ways. Either Paul means, "through the words spoken about Christ", or Paul could mean "through the words Christ speaks." The former is probably how we most often understand it. The pastor talks about Jesus. He tells you about Jesus and what Jesus has done for you and is doing for you. That is not wrong or illegitimate. It is what your pastor does. The latter, however, is quite intriguing in its own right. Let us chew upon it.

"The message is heard through the words Christ speaks." An overly literal understanding of that would say, "Only words spoken specifically by Jesus are important." Some have taken that position in our world. In debating homosexuality, advocates for same-sex relations have said, "Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, therefore...." To follow this line of reasoning would discard the entire Old Testament (except those verses Jesus quoted) and all of

the epistles of Paul and the apostles (except where perhaps they quoted Jesus' own words). We will right now abandon that as a possible understanding of Paul's words. Then what does it mean?

It means for us a possibly radical reevaluation of what preaching is. Preaching is that moment when we get to hear Christ speak. Really dig into that thought. After all, Jesus said, "He who listens to you, listens to me" (Luke 10:16). Likewise, in John's Gospel, Jesus talks about the ministry of preaching and says, "A time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live" (5:25). This cannot be only about the general resurrection of the dead, because Jesus says that the time has now come. He says in the verse before that "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). He prays for this very thing to happen in Gethsemane, "My prayer is not for them alone [the apostles]. I pray also for those who will believe in me *through their message*" (John 17:20, emphasis mine).

When the preacher opens his mouth to preach, and when what he preaches hallows God's name, that is, says what God says, then it is not just a guy up there talking. It is God talking. We "hear the voice of the Son of God" in the Divine Service. And in the service, in the preaching, death and life happens. Christ kills. Christ brings to life. It is the daily experience of the believer, as you learned in catechism about Baptism, that daily the old man gets drowned and dies and a new man arises to life, through the preaching of the word of Christ, exposing my sin, revealing my Savior. It is the experience of the pew-sitter (and the preacher) during the sermon, and during the whole Divine Service: death and

new life. Of course, sadly, not for all. The parable of the sower and the seed reminds us that some remain dead, some come to life only to die again, and some come to eternal life. Likewise, Paul told the Corinthians that to some the preacher and his preaching are the smell of death and to others the fragrance of life (cf. 2 Cor. 2:16).

But because Christ speaks, something really real happens. Melancthon writes in the Apology: "But the Gospel brings not merely the shadow of eternal things, but the eternal things themselves: the Holy Spirit and righteousness. By the Gospel we are righteous before God" (VII-VIII:15). So the preacher does not speak empty words when he preaches the word of Christ, and what the hearer hears are not just wonderfully pious, religious thoughts.

When it is Christ speaking, if something is heard, then there's faith, because, "faith comes from the hearing" (cf. KJV above, also ESV, NASB, NKJV, NLT, NRSV). Vilmos Vajta put it pithily in his study of Luther and worship, "sermon-plus-hearing-equals-faith" (Vajta, 134). Again, I (and Vajta) do not deny that many hear and remain dead and some come to life initially only to fall away. Rather, this affirms the powerful nature of God's Word preached, the sacramental nature of the Word preached: when Christ speaks, and when Christ is spoken about, things happen. As God's waters wash away sin's guilt, and the body and blood of Christ give and seal forgiveness, so the sermon speaks very real grace and forgiveness, gives it, just as the sacraments do. The sermon is a means of grace place too. The whole Divine Service is a means of grace place.

Consider every miracle Jesus performed evidence of this. Most apt, perhaps, in comparison to preaching is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus' sermon at the

tomb of Lazarus must have been a crowd pleaser. It was short, only three words: "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43). And it was effective: Lazarus came out. Alive. Lips spoke words, words were heard, and the dead came to life because of those words. Faith, in Lazarus' case, life even, came through the preaching.

The same miracle happens in our preaching. Martin Franzmann said it so poetically and we sing it so triumphantly: "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous" (*Christian Worship*, 280:3). Notice the subject of that sentence: God's Word. Again we could debate: is it the word about God or the word God Himself speaks? And again we say, "Both!" For as Luther said, "One little word can fell him" (*CW* 201:3), and by the promise of God, God puts that Word on our lips as His agents, the very voice boxes of God, so in our preaching our words are God's words. Paul said that to the Thessalonians, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5), and again, "We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). So in our preaching we say, "Come forth!" and in that very invitation (really a command, is it not?) comes the Holy Spirit with His power to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify, to forgive "in this Christian Church...daily and fully...all sins to me and all believers" (Small Catechism, "The Creed: Third Article"), because in that invitation God speaks, God preaches, and faith comes through the preaching.

And if there is faith, then there is salvation. Again, Melancthon writes in the Apology, "But God cannot be interacted with, God cannot be grasped, except through the Word.

So justification happens through the Word, just as Paul says in Romans 1:16, '[The Gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.' Likewise, he says in 10:17, 'comes from hearing.' Proof can be derived even from this: faith justifies because, if justification happens only through the Word, and the Word is understood only by faith, it follows that faith justifies" (IV:67). The sermon plus hearing equals faith. Faith comes through the preaching. Faith grasps the Word and the Word is, "Die, sinner! Live, saint!" The apostle Peter writes, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.' And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25). "This is the word that was preached to you." Another stunning statement. The Word preached to you is: "You are pitiful, pathetic, worthless, dying, dead grass." Or, as Paul said to the Corinthians, "Neither the sexually immoral nor idolators nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were*" (1 Corinthians 6:9b-11a, emphasis mine). Whoa! Killed. To death. Because as Paul says, "The letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6). Or, hear his words to the Galatians, "Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed" (Galatians 3:23).

God's Word and God's preachers declare me unelectable. God could not, would not, and should not choose me. And then He does. In preaching God declares that He will, in fact, elect the unelectable. He does in time what He did in eternity: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the

likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30). Again, in the poetry of Franzmann, through the preaching office, God "bespeaks us righteous, unrighteous and unelectable as we are. He says, "Lazarus, come out!" And when we hear the voice of the Son of God and believe in the Father who sent Him, we cross over from death to life. The time has now come. It comes each Sunday, in the context of the liturgy preaching God's Word in lessons and song, in the sermon where we hear God speak for an extended time and in the visible Word of God's body and blood under the bread and wine for you, for the forgiveness of sins. There God says to you, "Done, finished, and accomplished! My Son did for you what you could not do. He gave His life into death for your sins. He died so that you can live. He rose from the dead so that you will never die! It's yours, have it. Live! Come forth! Now! Again!" And in that preaching God, through His preachers, does that very thing to you. Just as the father said about his prodigal son, we say each week, "[I] was dead and [am] alive again" (Luke 15:24).

To preach the Gospel is the chief service of God. We started with that thought from the Apology. This is, in the words of Arthur Carl Piepkorn, the peculiar "genius" of the Lutheran church. In an article written in 1947 for the *American Lutheran* Piepkorn noted what sets the Lutheran church apart from the other western churches. We are not united around our liturgy, as Anglicans are around the Book of Common Prayer. Nor are we united around our political head, as the Roman Church is around her pope. We are not united in our emotional evangelistic revivals as many Arminian, decision theology churches are. Piepkorn concludes: "The

Church of the Augsburg Confession, however, when she is true to her own genius, is not a liturgical Church or an hierarchical Church or an ethical Church or an evangelistic Church, but primarily a confessional Church. This, plus the fact that she is also an historic Church, a sacramental Church and a teaching Church, determine her specific character" (Piepkorn, 7). A confessional church confesses things, says things, uses her lips, and speaks words. She speaks words to be heard, words that in the hearing of them bring faith and salvation. In other words: the Lutheran church preaches, because faith comes through the preaching.

We must ask then, "Without a preacher, where are the believers?" Paul asked that too: "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14). Preaching, then, is the *sine qua non*, the thing that without which something does not exist. In this case, faith, and thus believers, thus the Holy Christian Church. The context of the sermon then, is not just the Divine Service and all that comes with that: the readings, the hymns, the Sacrament. It's also the Divine Call that brings the preacher given and sent by Christ to his congregation with such beautiful feet, feet that proclaim peace, good tidings, and salvation, the feet that bring the lips that say, "Your God reigns!", the lips that cry out, "Come forth!" For they cannot hear except someone preaches to them, and faith comes through the preaching!

Hence, as one preacher said, the sermon is really "thirty minutes to raise the dead" (Riess, 8-9). Or fifteen, or twenty, or forty-five, as the preacher determines and the situation dictates. It is not the length that counts, but the content. Because in true, Christian preaching, which is what Lutheran preaching

is and ought to be, what it must be, Titus 1:3 comes true. God brings "his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior." And where there is light, our Savior says there is life (John 1:4), eternal life in Christ. 2 Corinthians 1:20 also comes true, for in the preaching of the Word, in the work of the pastor in the pulpit, God says "Yes" and "Amen" to all His promises. And the preacher speaks that "Amen" as He speaks not just about Christ, but actually speaks Christ to you and does Christ to you. He gives to you and does to you in the sermon what he gives and does moments later in the Sacrament: Christ given for you, Christ shed for you, for your forgiveness, because the Word is no dead word or empty letter. It is a living and active thing (Hebrews 4:12) that cannot be chained (2 Timothy 2:9). It lives and moves and has being, life, and breath. It does what it says it does, because it is God doing it, God bespeaking many righteous and at the same time condemning some to death, God locking and unlocking heaven, God forgiving and withholding forgiveness, God justifying and condemning. All right there in the preaching of it. All right there on the lips of your pastor, in the speaking of the words, in the hearing of them.

The sermon then, our entire preaching ministry, really continues the preaching ministry of Christ. We have in our pulpits the signs and wonders of God (Berg, 2). It really is a healing service each week, for "the sick need medicine, not a lecture on medicine" (Markquart, 24), and thankfully, Jesus gives the medicine. Jesus sends soul-doctors, pastors, with the medicine. He, and they, "have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). Each week in the Word preached God calls forth not just sick but dead sinners to life. Through the preacher and the preaching, God makes the

unlovable lovable. He elects the unelectable. He justifies the ungodly. "Preachers seek to do again to and for others what has been done to themselves by the Word of God" (*Justification is for Preaching*, 10), to some for the first time, some for the one hundredth, some for the one thousandth, or more.

Thus, in a world that is hostile to and cynical about the Word of God, hostile to and cynical about Christ, we do something foolish (though, not foolishly). We preach Christ. We deliver Christ. We publicly display Christ as we publicly declare the wonders He has done. We do this for the sake of the weak and the strong among us, for the sake of both believers and unbelievers, willing to run even the risk of hurling pearls before swine, because we, like our Father in heaven, want all men to be saved, want all men to come to repentance. And so we (and through us, God) call preachers to occupy pulpits all across America, all across the world, in rural and urban settings, among the educated and the illiterate, in all times and in all places, despite the contrarily blowing winds. We call preachers to raise the dead. We call preachers to "give Christ to the hearer, to do the sacrament to them" (*Justification is for Preaching*, 149, emphasis mine), because faith comes through preaching and the preaching is Christ. And when Christ speaks, things happen.

And everything we have and are relies upon this preaching in which it is Christ speaking, because when Christ speaks He reveals God to us. He gives us the God preached, rather than the God we speculate upon and wonder about, the God we fear, and loathe, and try to appease with our own self-appointed works (cf. Toso, 18; Forde, *The Preached God*). And in the God preached, preached by God's pastors, we find Christ. This is God's service to us: to make clear to us, to reveal to us, Christ. As

Vatja says, "In all its earthly lowliness, the Word brings God to man" (Vatja, 69). We could say the same about our preachers. They are lowly, humble men. So lowly that we prefer to cover them in albs and stoles and pectoral crosses rather than see them as they are, for if we did, we would laugh and walk away. "Who are you to say such things to me?" But when our preachers perform "God's work of love" (Vatja, 109), when they "impart to us the fruits of the redemption in Jesus Christ," when they take the words of the Word made flesh out from between the covers of the Bible, and take and distribute that which could so easily be worshipped in some tabernacle on the altar (cf. Vatja, 109), then, then the word of the apostle is made more certain. Then we listen, because it is not merely some man speaking, but God speaking a message, and "faith comes from hearing the message." Faith comes through the preaching. "The Word is a message. It must be heard. It needs messengers. The Sacrament is a gift. It must be received. It requires administrators" (Vatja, 109).

Just as Jesus took five loaves and two fish and made it food for thousands, so our Lord works the miracle with the words we preach. He makes those words powerful. He makes preaching the Word of God the Word of God

(Ferry, 35; Chapell, 32). And faith comes through the preaching. For real. What happens on Sunday is not a show, or a play-act, or a memorial. It is a real execution, a real Good Friday, and a real resurrection, a real Easter. And this is offered to us and we receive it "not through the pope's power, but through the preaching of God's Word" (SA II:24).

And so we preach. We preach because we understand giving Christ to be the most important thing we can do. We preach because we know God's promises. We preach because we know what people need to hear and see and have. They need Christ. We have Christ. And God says, "Preach Christ," because faith comes through the preaching.

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