

"Faith: Gift of God" -- Ephesians 2:8-9

Funeral Sermon for Carl Gabert

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho

29 September Anno Domini 2000
The Minor Festival of
St. Michael and All Angels

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Lord God - in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear Dorothea, Carl's Family, his friends, neighbors and members of the Family of God at Our Redeemer ...

Years ago Carl indicated that his funeral sermon should be on the topic of faith and how important faith is. Nearly two years ago, he filled out this half sheet of paper describing a few of his preferences for this Divine Service of the Word ... on what he wanted you to hear about this day in terms of the hymns, Scripture readings and sermon text, he wrote nothing else but "Faith" ... faith alone.

Therefore, please listen to Ephesians 2:8-9 as we consider the theme of ...

"Faith: Gift of God" ...

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast.

Thus far the Word of the Lord our God.

Truly we must begin by acknowledging that Carl H. Gabert really knew how to get to the heart of the matter. In his assigned theme of faith, he takes us right to that First Commandment ... those first Words permanently etched in that Head stone by the omnipotent finger of God. "I am the Lord thy God, ... 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'" (Exodus 20:2-3). What does this mean? Simply this, "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." God demands perfect fear all the time and perfect love all the time and perfect trust all the time -- perfect faith. Jesus, Who is God, stated the same truth like this: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37).

Now you might be wondering to yourself, well, nobody is able to do that. And this is true, most certainly true, absolutely true. Each one of us has failed to have the kind of faith that God requires ... this perfect trust. In fact, if anyone thinks that he or she is able to keep the First Commandment

perfectly, then that person is a liar. So please understand that faith that has its source in us falls short of the Lord's Commandment. Faith that is our doing doesn't get the job done. God requires perfect faith and we can't do muster such a faith as that.

"God looks down from heaven
upon the sons of men
to see if there are any that are wise,
that seek after God.
They have all fallen away;
they are all alike depraved;
there is none that does good,
no, not one." (Psalm 53:2-3)

But notice what our sermon text declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast." Now dear friend, that is good news. Faith is numbered among the gracious gifts that God gives. The faith that will prevail unto eternity is not man's work but God's bestowed blessing. Faith is not a conscious decision of man but a gracious benediction of and from God. Faith is not a giving of one's heart to God lest any man should boast. Rather faith is God's gift wrought by the Holy Spirit through the Word of Promise. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3) and "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6) and the faith that God requires is the faith that God gives.

The Lord God Almighty gave this gift of faith to Carl on September 19, 1915 in Bethany Lutheran Church on the Alberta plains when baby Carl was crucified with Christ in Holy Baptism ... that gracious "washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by His grace" (Titus 3:5- 6). Baptism is not man's work, not our doing; but the gift of God and at that moment 85 years and 10 days ago, the Lord gave the infant named Carl H. Gabert the gift of faith. Indeed, "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16); "and this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast." This faith the Christian has when an infant, when asleep, when unconscious, when under anaesthetic, when afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease, when in awful pain and suffering. This is so because faith is not man's work but God's gift.

One characteristic of faith in general is that it always has an object ... faith is always focused on someone or something. The atheist has faith in a religious system of human reason. The advocates of Hinduism and other religious systems have faith in various progressions whereby one becomes better by doing good deeds. There are those who focus their faith on their emotions. There is faith in money, faith in a church, faith in a charismatic leader, even faith in faith. The legalist has faith in obeying the Law and doing good works. But remember what the Scriptures declare, this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast.

In Christianity, faith is God's gift to the person ... a trust that is focused on the Lord God and His promises given in His Word that are taught and proclaimed. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Carl heard the Word of Christ crucified for the sins of all people and trusted in the Lord and His Good News. He lived in that truth about the Person and the Work of Jesus the Christ.

All the transgressions of God's Law ... 1st through 10th Commandments ... sins of thought, word and deed ... sins of commission and sins of omission ... sins of weakness, ignorance, stupidity and willful disobedience ... all were placed upon the Incarnate Son of God as He faced death in your place in the Garden of Gethsemane "and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44); when He was scourged in your stead as the whip flayed His back open and His Blood poured forth on your behalf; when the King of kings received the coronation you deserved -- a plaited crown of thorns jammed into place further spilling His Blood on your behalf, when Jesus was enthroned on the cross and all your sins became His so that all His perfect righteousness might become yours. He endured hell that you would not have to spend a single second in that God-forsaken place. In truth, Jesus was forsaken at the Place of the Skull so that you would be with Him forever in Paradise.

Dearly beloved, do you not behold God's grace? The Father's Gift is His Son. The Son's Gift is His Life. The Holy Spirit's Gift is faith given through this Good News. Do you understand what this means? "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast." Is it any wonder that the Christian seeks the forgiveness of God because of God's grace in Christ's suffering and death? In the words of the historic liturgy: "I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being" (The Lutheran Hymnal, p. 16).

The cross is offensive to so many people but it is there, in the suffering of Christ, that we are able to find God in His grace and mercy. The Lord God Almighty comes through weakness, pain and suffering -- first on the cross and then in the midst of our own weaknesses and suffering. Therefore, for the Christian, it is in times of personal suffering that the Lord God is closest. That may not make much sense, but please permit an example from the life of Carl.

At the age of 83 he underwent heart surgery. He survived the successful operation but his recovery was difficult and uncertain. In the first days after surgery, his heart had to be shocked into a regular rhythm. He remained intubated for a couple weeks before being trached for several more weeks. While in intensive care, he could see reasonably well and, even without his hearing aids, could hear a bit. However, he was not able to speak. In the first weeks after his surgery, conversation with him remained impossible. That was his condition for a month and then we began to talk.

"Carl, in the first weeks when you were in intensive care, were you aware of what was going on?"

"No, not really. Oh, I could tell when people were working on me. I could see and hear some, but people had to be close to me. If my mind was clear, I could think; but not concentrate for long. I couldn't talk or communicate with anyone. That was hard."

"Frustrating?"

"Oh yes."

"Was it like you were alone; with just you and the Lord?"

"Yes. What else was there? I couldn't talk to anybody."

"Tell me what you thought about during those times."

"I prayed, but they were not long prayers. I thought about God, my wife, my family and about what was happening to me, and why. I thought a lot, but I have to tell you, pastor, my thoughts were not always good thoughts. I questioned God and wondered why I was still here and why I suffered like this. I don't know what God wants me to do. I don't know what I will be able to do. I am so weak and I don't think I will be able to do anything. The improvement was so slow and I questioned God. Some were good thoughts, I think; but some thoughts were not good."

"Jesus had good thoughts for you and paid the price for all of your sins, including your bad thoughts, when He suffered on the cross. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, pastor."

"Carl, you are forgiven."

"Thank you, pastor. ... You know, when I was in the hospital and couldn't talk, I remember singing an old hymn in German in my mind. It was from a hymnal that my Uncle Bill, my father's brother, gave me when I was young. The hymn had words in it like God spreading His wings over me. But I couldn't remember all the words and I think I got them mixed up. ... I just know a few Bible verses that I keep repeating and thinking about. I don't know where they are at in the Bible. When I was little it was the wish and will of my parents that I went to church. I have to tell you, there were many times I didn't see much use in it. I went to catechism class and was confirmed and I still didn't see what good it did me. Later in life though, I see where it helped. The hymns and Bible verses come back to me and I thought about these things. I sang the hymns in my mind and recited verses. God has been so good to me." ...

"Carl, what would it have been like if you didn't have the Bible verses, the liturgy or God with you?"

"Oh, it would have been unbearable. There would have been no one with me. It would have been awful and horrible." (A Little One Amidst the Shadows, p. 158-160).

Our gracious God most clearly and surely manifests Himself to His people in weakness and suffering -- first, in Jesus' death on the cross and then in our weaknesses, pains, sorrows and sufferings. Perhaps for the first time in your life, here and today in the midst of your grief and suffering, you are beholding God in His grace and doing so with the tear-stained eyes of faith that God grants through His Word that you have just heard. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the Gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast.

A week ago Carl, as he had done so many times before, received the Lord's Supper -- the very Body of Christ broken for Carl on Calvary's holy mountain, the very Blood of Jesus shed on the cross for the remission of sin. This Holy Communion, given to the Church by Jesus Himself -- where He is both the Giver and the Gift -- strengthens the faith of the faithful. In awful pain Carl sat up and perched himself on the side of the bed in the nursing home. Here he confessed his sins in private confession and heard the absolution of the Lord. Then he received the Lord's Supper for the last time on this side of eternity. He looked forward to the day when he would be with the Lord forever, when there would be no more tears or death, "neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (Revelation 21:4). He replied, "Oh, won't that be something!"

Over the weekend Carl developed pneumonia and with other complications, became unresponsive and unconscious. Late last Monday afternoon he rallied a bit. I visited Carl and noticed that his eyes were opened though he was in horrible pain. I got close enough for him to see my clerical collar and he replied in his unique way, "Oh, it's the pastor." I lead him in the liturgy of the Church, beginning with the Invocation, the Word of God whereby he had been given the gift of faith so many years ago when he was baptized. At the Lord's Prayer, Carl moved his hands together. Then he heard the words of the Nunc Dimittis -- "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word." Following the Benediction, "The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace," Carl's lips, by the grace of God through the Gift of faith, formed and confessed his "Amen."

Dearly beloved such a faith as this truly is a gift of and from God:

"A faith that keeps the narrow Way
Till life's last spark is fled
And with a pure and heavenly ray
Lights up the dying bed"

(The Lutheran Hymnal, #396, st. 5).

The next morning, while it was still dark, Carl Gabert was called to be with the Lord in Paradise and to sing the liturgy of the Church along with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Indeed, he lauds and magnifies the glorious Name of the Lord God Almighty and singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Amen.

We pray, ...

"Lord, give us such a faith as this;
And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home. Amen" (st. 6)