

**"The Gospel is God's Announcement of
Forgiveness"**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

26 October Anno Domini 2003

Reformation Sunday

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dearly Beloved,

There is a poem titled "The Ornament" that makes you wonder what it is all about. Listen to it and perhaps you might ask, "What does this mean?"

The Ornament is copied and Ornament'ly hung
With enthusiastic passion the Ornament is sung,
"Oh here and there, and everywhere!"
The Ornamental shout.
'Tis shared and cared, and so declared
To gift to those without.
"What is the Ornament?" you ask,
"What is it that is meant?"
The glassy-eyed have all replied,
"Why, 'tis the Ornament!"

There is a religious leader who makes you wonder what he is talking about. When asked what the mission of the church ought to be, his words of "doing the Gospel" speak for a generation of like-minded and mimic-mouthed religious people. Listen to his Gospel words and perhaps you might ask, "What does this mean?"

"I'm high on Lutheran Christianity. And that's because we have a powerful understanding of the Gospel, a proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Our Gospel theology is unequalled in all of Christianity. I believe our church is poised to make huge inroads with the Gospel."

Now, let's be up-front here. The word "gospel" is spoken of quite often and it is often pointed out that this means "good news." All fine and well, but simply saying those words do not tell us what the Gospel is. The Gospel is God's Word of the forgiveness of sins achieved for the world by Jesus Christ Who died on the cross and rose again from the dead. Talking "about" the Gospel and telling the Gospel are two very different things. In the words of a Christian theologian,

"The Gospel is this and nothing else: that in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness of sins, in Him alone and nowhere else in the world, but also truly in Him. A sermon that did not say that, a sermon in which this real Gospel was not mentioned would not be a Christian sermon." (H. Sasse, "The Lonely

Way II," 1943)

This is the truth of God's forgiveness ... His Word of the remission of sins that the LORD God Almighty wanted the Christian Church to hear in the days when the Prophet Jeremiah was His messenger. Please listen to the Old Testament Reading for Reformation Sunday and hear that ...

... The Gospel is God's Announcement of Forgiveness

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My Law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

The situation in the state and in the church in the days of Jeremiah were really no different than with us today. Corrupt national officials set the example for the citizens in the ways of the tolerance of immorality and the departure from that which was good and right in God's eyes. The fallen people, eager to do what was satisfying to the old sinful self, adopted the evil agenda and lived in the fleshly cesspools of society. Such seepage found its way into the church through the religious leaders. These false teachers and sinful leaders spoke with such passion that their lies found a fertile bed in ears that itched for something new and in hearts that hankered for other gods. Within such a religious organization that tolerates everything except the Truth and the pure teaching of the Word of God, the Church is hidden.

The LORD God is neither unknowing concerning the evil doings of man nor uncaring concerning His Bride, the Church. He will attend to both. The further a nation, a city or a people depart from God's will, the more impending is a wrathful visitation by the Living God. When those cities in the direction of Zoar exceeded the cup of sin, the LORD rained down fire and brimstone, destroying the Sodomites. Preceding such destruction the God's Church is delivered. The same destruction and deliverance happened earlier, at the time of the Flood. Thus, in the days of King Zedekiah, the One True God permits the hordes of Babylon to spill across the earth and descend upon the Holy City.

No wonder the prophets made such statements as we have recorded in the Bible from Elijah and Isaiah. The former said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5); while the latter confessed, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thy altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10).

Ah, yes, ponder what man does with God's covenant and what covenants man fashions to coerce God. As the city is besieged, the leader, whose days in office are numbered, in an attempt to staunch the impending tide and to rally the people and to ignite the fire of enthusiasm, started a new

program. "Wavering between despair and hope, the vacillating king, willing to strike a bargain with God as long as he did not have to humble himself by an unconditional surrender, sought to gain God's favor by persuading the people to do away, by a solemn covenant, a long-standing injustice (ch. 34:6-10), the enslavement of their poverty-stricken brethren, a flagrant violation of God's Law (Ex. 21:2f.)" (Laatsch's "Jeremiah," p. 4). Such man-made attempts at divine-coercion, covenant-making and reformation are an abomination in the sight of the LORD.

To the Church, in the midst of such a state of affairs, comes the Word of God via the mouth of His messenger. The prophet proclaims the Law and the consequences of sin, for this is the Word of the LORD, and declares the Gospel, for this is the Announcement of God's Forgiveness. "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My Torah (My Doctrine - My Word of Truth) within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

To know the Lord is not just to know the historical facts and not just to know about Him. Rather, the command to know the Lord is an evangelical imperative similar to "Take and eat - repent and be baptized - take and drink - repent and believe in the Gospel - depart in peace - know the LORD." In the House of Israel; that is, in the Church, it is not necessary for those whom God has wrought the gift of faith in Christ to know the LORD, for they shall know Him ... for we all here do know Him, from the least of them ... of us, to the greatest in the Church; from the newly born again infant baptized in the Name of the Holy Trinity to the aged soul about to enter eternal Paradise.

This situation is like a household - a family where the man who is husband and father, along with the woman who is wife and mother, provide for, care, feed and tend to all within the house. There is no need for any one of the children to say to another, "Know the father," for they all know him ... from the youngest of his children to the oldest. The master of the House calls them His own and this one cares for his bride and "this is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:32), for surely God "has a unique community in the world. It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God" (Large Catechism).

People become a member of this House by God's Word of the New Covenant. Now as God has declared through the prophet Jeremiah, this is "not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD." Indeed, the new covenant will neither be a two-party covenant nor a conditional covenant. The new testament is all dependent upon God and it will surely come to pass for He has promised.

This is the work done by the Messiah and accomplished by the Christ. Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, gave His Body unto the Sacrifice wherein God's wrath against sin was fully and completely vented, shed His Blood of the new testament in order for all to be sprinkling with the Blood that speaks more graciously than that which cries out for vengeance. This Jesus did in His Life for the world and in His death on the cross for all "for without the shedding of blood there is no

forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). This redemption Christ sealed when He rose again from the dead, without the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ we are still in our sin (1 Corinthians 15:17).

And within the Church, "no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will pardon their perverse depravity, and I will remember their sin no more." God will not visit your sins, for He has already visited them when Christ was crucified on the cross. He seeks to pardon the sinner and has provided an accomplished salvation for all. He will do this, not by us doing the deed and fulfilling the requirements of the old covenant of the Law given on Mt. Sinai, but by the new testament of the Gospel offered on Mt. Calvary. Indeed, "this is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:12).

Ah, what a glorious and wonderful proclamation of forgiveness of all sin on account of Christ is ours! Ah, how quickly it is lost if one is not mindful of the one thing needful! We are reminded of that with examples in history, particularly this day, whether Martin Luther posted the truth and remained steadfast in the faith. The message from the religious leader was the selling of indulgences to buy souls out of purgatory and earn or buy one's right to be in heaven. Luther would have none of this wicked chicanery and instead, proclaimed the full forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation by the grace of God alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in the Scriptures alone.

Each congregation is always within one generation of no longer being the Church and each Christian is always within one day of no longer being a Christian. The call of Christ is for each of us to remain steadfast in the faith, to hear that you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to "remain faithful unto death and be given the Crown of Life" (Revelation 2:10). The congregation is called to continue to hear and to abide in the Word of God preached and taught in all its truth and purity, and to be nurtured and nourished on the Sacraments as our Lord Jesus instituted them.

Such a sobering thought ought to lead us to a proper fear, true repentance and the fount of God's grace as we continue to be witnesses to what is happening in various religious bodies where the Word of God is denied and cast aside. In such places and at such time, we behold that the basis for reformation no longer exists in such groups. Beware, for base fellows have besieged the Church and are continuing to wreck havoc on many. God's Word remains true even when it is denied. Or as the Bible says, "the saying is sure: If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful -- for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

Remaining steadfast in the faith and abiding in the Church "can come only if our churches return to the diligent use of the means of grace, to a serious study of the Word of God and the confessions of the Reformation. And this must be done in all 'stations' of the church. Our church leaders must become better theologians and ... professors of theology again must have not only ecclesiastical experience, but must live and work in close contact with the pastor and congregation. Otherwise they teach an abstract theology which does not help the church. ... Just as the church government deteriorates into mere church politics if it is not based on sound and profound theology, so the theologian who loses contact with the real life of the church becomes a mere theoretical scholar who speaks of God like a shoemaker of his leather, as Luther characterized that professionalism which is the danger of all theology. The pastors who have no solid theological training and are not studying any longer become mere organizers, and their sermons or 'sermonettes' cease to be a preaching of the

pure Gospel. The lay people who do not live up to the divine 'stations' which they have by virtue of the universal priesthood may become good business managers in congregation and synod, church council and committee, but what they are building is not a Christian congregation in the sense of the NT and the Lutheran Confessions. It is rather a sort of religious society, a society for furthering of religious interests. They may be well-meaning, pious people, eager to build the 'kingdom,' but they know neither what the kingdom of God nor what the church of Christ is. They do not realize that it is 'God's' kingdom which 'we' cannot build, that it is the church of 'Christ,' who by his Gospel and his Sacraments builds his church. If these men try to establish church unity, they can think only in terms of human sociology" (Hermann Sasse, "The Lonely Way" II, p. 265).

This day is called Reformation Sunday and, though the Church continues to be attacked by foes from outside her walls and by traitors from within, yet she will remain steadfast in the Word and Work of the LORD God Almighty. She will live under the gracious promise of God in the new covenant. As His children, may God grant that you and I continue to hear the Gospel, the Good News, which is God's announcement of forgiveness, and to continue to trust in the LORD God Who has declared through His called servant, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." Amen.