

“Preaching about Preaching”

Mark 1:29-39

Epiphany 5

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Ver. 02-31-18

This morning I would like to preach about preaching. Our lessons from First Corinthians and the Gospel of Mark lead us to this topic. Paul says, “...**woe to me if I do not proclaim (preach) the gospel!**” And Jesus left those who were looking for him, answering, “**Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim (preach) the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.**”

Permit me to begin by making a few observations about **preaching**.

- **Preaching has been around for such a long time that there must be something to it.** One might think that in a day of high-tech, audio-visuals, preaching would have gone out of fashion. And, in fact, in some churches, it has been replaced by wide-screen, multi-media presentations. But for most of us, there is still the Sunday sermon to be anticipated with interest or, in some cases, dread. The Word of God proclaimed from the pulpit remains central to worship for a very good reason to which we will turn our attention in a minute. But first, a few more observations about preaching.
- **People say interesting things to preachers about their sermons.** Usually, if they say anything at all, they say, “I enjoyed the sermon.” You can preach about the fires of hell and people will say, “I enjoyed the sermon.” Or, they may say, as a lady told me one Sunday, “You know, Pastor, every sermon you preach is better than your *next one*.” Several people have told me I should publish my sermons. I told one person, “I was thinking about having them published posthumously.” He said, “Oh good. The sooner the better.”
- **Short sermons are better than long sermons.** That’s all I have to say about that.
- **Interesting sermons are better than boring sermons.** In the interest of preaching a short sermon, I won’t *bore you* with all the reasons why.
- **There are a lot of jokes about preachers.** None of them are funny. Let me just give you an example.
 - A pastor who always preached very long sermons, noticed a man get up and leave during the middle of his message. The man returned just before the conclusion of the service. Afterwards the pastor asked the man where he had gone.

"I went to get a haircut" was the reply.

"But," said the pastor, "why didn't you do that before the service?"

"Because," the man said, "**I didn't need one then.**"

Now, you see, that's what I mean. That's just not funny. I don't know why you laughed at that.

- **People mainly remember the illustrations.** This is a problem for preachers. If they use the same tired old sermons over and over and just change the illustrations, nobody hears anything new, but they think they have. If they preach a new sermon and use an old illustration, everybody thinks they've already heard that one.
- **For us Lutherans the sermon is the narrow place in the hourglass of the liturgy.** Imagine that hourglass and watch as the sand moves from the top half. In that sand you can see the Confession of Sins, the Hymn of Praise, the Prayer of the Day, Lessons and Psalm all approaching the middle of the glass. Then comes the Sermon, The Word of God, that receives all that has flowed through it from above and interprets it for the hearers and challenges them to live that Word as it flows out below enabled, supported and fed by the Prayers and Communion and Benediction flowing out below, strengthened for the days to come.
- **A final observation is that, so far, you haven't heard a sermon here today.** An awful lot of what passes for preaching **isn't**. Seriously now, preaching is a *sacred* responsibility, not just for the *preacher*, but for the *listener* as well. And, I mean "sacred" just like you think of Holy Communion as "sacred." Sacred just like the Bible is sacred. Sacred for me as a preacher. Sacred for you as a listener!

Preaching is-or at least always should be-more than an attempt to say something interesting or educational or clever, although we can all be grateful when at least occasionally one of those things happens. Nor is it only about explaining the word of God. That's a lecture, not a sermon. Preaching is much more importantly about *doing* the Word of God. I don't mean hearing about what we are supposed to do to be good people and then going out to do it. I mean **having the Word done to us.**

Gerhard Forde said it best:

"(Preaching) does the Word to the hearers. The spoken Word is as much a doing as is the sacrament. Preaching, (according) to Luther, is pouring Christ into our ears, just as in the sacraments we are baptized into him and he is poured over our heads and into our mouths. Indeed, preaching is as much a *physical activity* as Baptism or Communion. Without (this) sacramental character, the Word degenerates into information about which ...we are supposed to do something...A sermon does indeed include explaining, exegeting, and informing, but ultimately it must get around to and aim at a *doing*, an actual pronouncing, declaring,

giving of the gift...We must learn to speak a Word that not only explains but *does* something.”¹

This “physical activity” about which Forde writes involves both speaking and listening. Both are critical to the task of preaching. Good preaching depends as much on the listener as on the preacher, perhaps even more. The Word cannot do its work in us if it is not spoken by the preacher; but neither can it do its work if it is not heard by the listener. Good listeners have often said to me, “You know, I felt as though your sermon was written just for me today.” Well, thanks; however, in almost every case, it wasn’t. But, here is evidence of the work which the Word does in those who are open to hearing it.

Quite an amazing thing can happen to that Word from the time it leaves the preacher’s mouth to the time it reaches the listener’s ears. In between, while the Word is floating in mid-air, after it is spoken and before it is heard, there in mid-air something happens. The only explanation I know is that Holy Spirit grabs that Word in mid-air and molds it until it fits precisely into the differently shaped ears of every listener who is open to receiving it. It becomes the Word that every listener needs to hear. I am absolutely convinced this is true because I know I have preached some poor sermons on occasion that God was yet able to use to speak to his people. It could be that is what’s happening right now! That’s up to you. My job is to speak the Word, to send it out. Your job is to listen *believing that this could be a Word for you*. A Word from God intended just for you.

While the Word can speak to the needs of individual listeners, and does so with the *direct authority* we talked about last Sunday, the work it does in all of us is the same. It both “kills” and “gives life.” It is both Law and Gospel. It both convicts us and pardons us. What is that Word? The Word is always this: **“Jesus Christ died for you.”** *That* is the Word made flesh in Jesus. My grandfather, a curmudgeonly old Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, only ever gave me one succinct piece of advice about preaching. He said, “If, by the time you get through with your sermon, there is anybody sitting out there who doesn’t know Jesus died for them, then that was a lousy sermon!”

“Jesus Christ died for you.” In those few words, we hear **The Word** that we have sinned against God, that *we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves*. And, *that Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his only Son to die for us and, for his sake forgives us all our sins*. And in that forgiveness we are set free to be the People of God. **The Word has been done to us** and now we are able to respond to that Word by doing the work of **The Word** in our world.

So, to turn this into a real sermon, I proclaim to you that *Jesus Christ died for you*. And I pray that the Holy Spirit will grab those words in mid-air and mold them into The Word for each of you today.

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¹ Forde, Gerhard, Theology is for Proclamation, pp.149-150.

