

Gospel truth, Gospel freedom

A sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 1:43-51

There was Phillip and Nathaniel, and the Lord said: "Follow me," and they followed. It was like a military matter. It was not a matter for discussion; it was a command. The Lord spoke and it was done. It is like a military commander who tells recruits what to do, and that is the way it is.

More directly, it is like the first chapter in Genesis. The Lord spoke and it was done. That how creation takes place. The problem with this is that when we talk about the Word of God and how it is working as we in our culture look at this, we become confused.

We tend to think the Gospel is a private matter, a matter for the individual, and if it works for you, O.K. It doesn't really matter for other things. It's individualistic. That's the question: Is it? Recent events among Lutherans show the problem with this view.

In the 1990's ELCA leaders urged the church to adopt a unity agreement with The Episcopal Church. Because Episcopalians regarded Lutherans as defective, the bottom line of the agreement was that the ELCA would have to change. No longer would the ELCA have one office of ministry, equally shared by bishops and pastors (CA 28:30, 53, 55; Treatise 61, Smalcald 10:1-3). The ELCA had to change its constitution and adopt a ranked holy hierarchy of clergy, each rank with different powers, but only the rank of bishop having the fullness of grace and power. Only bishops could ordain pastors (and deacons). Only priests/pastors ordained in this way would have the grace needed to make Christ present in the Lord's Supper. In 1999 the ELCA adopted the agreement and the constitutional changes it required.

At the time many ELCA pastors said: "I don't like the agreement, but it doesn't affect me and my congregation. No ELCA official has told me to stop preaching the Gospel according to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore, I can go along and I must go along because I can still proclaim the Gospel." That is then the question: Can this be done?

Is the Word of God a private message, an individualistic message? That is one view.

A second way of answering this is to say: "Well, the Word of God is the Book, the Bible." The Word of God is then a thing, and we can use it like a club. Here it is. It says this. And I can find individual things texts, and so to speak, hit you over the head. The problem with that is that when you look across the whole spectrum of Protestants, they all say: "Of course we use the Bible." In fact, many of them say: "We hold to the Bible as inerrant," or "infallibly inspired," whatever terminology is used. But the claim for inerrancy doesn't solve any

disputes, because when you look at various kinds of things that are said in the Bible, they are all over the map. What do we do then?

A third way handling this, which is the most common way we deal with it, is to say: "Who knows what it is all about? There are many points of view." The real Gospel for many is: "God is nice. We are nice. Isn't that nice. Just do the best you can." That is to end up in salvation by oneself, by works of some sort.

Out of the treasure of Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel was the rediscovery that the Word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ himself.

What comes next? Watch out for the mistake of saying the Word of God is in the second place "the Book." That's not the way it goes. In the second place the Word of God is the preached Gospel, the proclaimed Gospel, proclaimed also in our hymns, prayers, and the like.

Then in the third place, there is a record of this preaching, and that's "the Book." When Luther talked about this, he said: The church is not a "Book House" but a "Mouth House" because it's this living voice of the Gospel, the spoken, proclaimed word – that God in Christ died and rose for you and me – that we are talking about.

There are enormous implications from this that get lost when we think the message is individualistic and an internal matter of whatever one thinks and feels.

The first implication is that it comes from outside of us. In the fifth section of the Augsburg Confession, it says (paraphrase): "Against the Anabaptists we affirm the Word of God is the external Word, the Word that comes from outside of us and over against us."

We tend to think that words are spoken to us and then have to respond, to agree or disagree. As Toynbee said about human history and the rise and fall of civilizations: "It's challenge and response." We tend to think that's how the Word of God works, too. As a matter of fact, this is not the case with the Word of God because not only do we not want to respond, but we can't. We rebel against it. We don't want someone else to be Lord of our lives. Or as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, the Gospel is a scandal, an offense, foolishness. We would rather have something that we can manage and have a role in which gives us leverage. But with the Word of God, we don't and we can't.

How then do we rightly understand the Word of God? The way to help ourselves is to think of infant Baptism. That little infant, one or two months old – because with the water the Word of God is spoken, the Lord's promises given – becomes a child of God, receives the Holy Spirit and is given faith because God does it.

The same is true for us every time we come to worship and hear the Word of God. It's not that infant Baptism is the exception; there you as a baby passively receive, and as you get older, then you have to work at it.

No, it is just exactly the way it is for us as adults as it is for the infant. It is this way that God comes. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:17). It is not that we want to respond, or that we can respond, but that the Lord comes to us in his promise nevertheless. And that means a couple of things.

First of all, that means that it is dangerous to preach the Gospel, it is dangerous to go to church because something is happening here.

It also that the Word of God is a great comfort because it does not depend on how I think about it rightly or feel about it, but it's because the Lord is doing it, and therefore we can have confidence. It's just like infant Baptism. This is where the promise is, and we cannot say what happens. It is the Lord's problem what happens to people who don't have infant Baptism, just as it is the Lord's problem what happens to people who don't come to church.

But here in church is the promise. Here is this enormous gift that where the Word of God is proclaimed that produces the grace of God, the gift of faith and all that is with it.

That's why Luther, in 1537, thinking he was on his deathbed (he didn't die then as he expected he would), wrote the Smalcald Articles which are part of our Confessions. He wrote in Smalcald 3:4 about the Gospel and the gifts of grace and how that works. He wrote: "First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world." Then after that there is Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the like.

There is an enormous implication from this spoken word for the church. The Word of God is not some nice little thing but an awesome power which overthrows everything else. We are aware of the danger of using the Bible as little nuggets of proof texts for this or that. Nevertheless, we need to be reminded of certain texts. The first one is in Matthew 24:35 where Jesus, at the end of that long description of final things, says: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Or even more striking in Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, when again and again it says: Jesus said: "It was said of old (that means by Moses and the law), but I say to you..." Jesus comes and of all things overthrows the law; he overthrows the law of Moses.

This is exactly what the Gospel does. It overthrows all our trust in good works. It overthrows heaven and earth. All our works are broken, sinful. It means, too, that all churchly institutions are broken, sinful. We need institutions, but they too are all sinful, broken, and for this world only.

The problem comes when churches say: "Yes, the Word of God, and also something more" – a particular hierarchy of clergy, a conversion experience, etc. Preconditions or post-conditions. Anytime "something more" is required, that "something more" diminishes Christ. Then his cross and resurrection is no longer all-sufficient. Then his presence in Word and sacrament is no longer enough. Where this Gospel truth is lost, Gospel freedom is also lost.

Unless we are proclaiming that this is what the Gospel is about, we are undermining the Word of God. We are not being "straightforward about the truth of the Gospel" (Gal 2:14). That is part of the Gospel that we cannot cut short in our modern culture of individualism and private religion. Gospel truth and Christian freedom go together. We are free in our personal lives because all our works are broken; Christ is our righteousness. We as the church are free to change structures of ministry for the sake of mission. Because we are free, we reject making any particular structure required. That would be to lose our freedom.

The certainty of what we have is in what the Lord does and not in anything we do or any institutions that we have. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of bondage."

We have that certainty, that marvelous certainty, which gives us "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). As John 8:36 states: "When the Lord has made you free, you are free indeed." Amen