Why God Gives His Church Preachers  
Romans 10:14-17

“O Spirit, who didst once restore  
Thy Church that it may be again  
The bringer of good news to men,  
Breathe on thy cloven Church once more,  
That in these gray and latter days  
There may be men whose life is praise,  
Each life a high doxology  
To Father, Son, and unto thee. Amen” (Martin Franzmann, WS-758).

In one way or another God’s people have always prayed that majestic hymn of Martin Franzmann imploring the Lord of the harvest to send men into His harvest field. Today we are here with thanksgiving for the Lord has once again answered that petition as Keith Reeder is sent by the Lord. Dear saints of God here at Our Redeemer, your pastor-elect has been prepared by prayerful and careful study for this office. The old church father John Chrysostom once commented that no merchant in his right mind would turn over an expensive ship laden with precious cargo to an untrained sailor, how much more should the church of Jesus Christ exercise great care in preparing and examining those entrusted with piloting the ship of the church and delivering the priceless treasures of the Gospel. Your pastor-elect has demonstrated that he is now ready. The ordination service will attest to this fact.

Today Keith is sent to preach the Gospel that alone creates saving faith in Christ Jesus. Now there is indeed much to celebrate and rejoice in this afternoon. Keith (in a few minutes- Pastor Reeder) it is a day that you have prayed for, worked toward and anticipated for a long time. After three years of study and a year of vicarage, the Lord has brought you to this time and place. Challenges have been faced and hurdles overcome and you are here. Likewise this is a great day for your parents and grandparents, family and friends who have prayed for you, supported you with their gifts, and encouraged you with their words and prayers. Surely it is a blessed day for the Christian people of this congregation as you receive another shepherd. But when all is said and done, the focal point of this day is not Keith or his relatives. It is not Our Redeemer Lutheran Church but the Lord Jesus Christ who sends men to preach the Gospel of peace obtained by His own blood.

The Apostle Paul says that if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, that is, the pastoral office, he desires a noble task (I Timothy 3:1), but such high aspirations and sanctified yearnings do not make a pastor. “How are they to preach” Paul says “unless they are sent?” It is the Lord who does the sending. Remember that first Easter evening as the
Risen Lord Jesus Christ stands among His disciples in the upper room. He makes of them apostles, that is, sent ones. After He shows them His nail-marked hands and unveils the puncture of spear in His side, He says “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” The Lord’s sending is not a mere dispersion or dismissal. It is a sending with a purpose. He sends them to forgive and retain sins. He sends them to preach the Gospel, to speak a word that justifies the ungodly and gives life to the dead. Jesus sends His men to deliver the gifts of Calvary’s cross and Easter’s empty grave.

Keith, you are not self-commissioned. The preaching office is not a work that you have chosen for yourself. You are sent. You are sent for a particular purpose. You are sent to preach. You are not sent to tell your story or put on display your spiritual insights. You are sent to preach the One who is your Lord. You are sent to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul put it like this: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (II Corinthians 4:4).

Now the Jesus whom Paul proclaims is the Jesus who was crucified. This is the Jesus you are to proclaim. The Lord knows that we live in an environment where there is all kind of talk about Jesus! Witness the interest in the Gospel of Judas and the Da Vinci Code. May be even more of a temptation are all false and deceptive Christs made up by human imagination. Mark Twain once said that in the beginning God created man in His own image and that ever since man has returned the compliment! Luther could speak of the fact that the human mind is busily engaged in making idols. He also observes that when the true God vanishes, the fairy tales arrive. The evidences of Luther’s assertions are surely evident today are they not? We do not proclaim a god that we have dreamed up, a deity of the fairy tales, but the real flesh and blood Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontus Pilate, crucified on the cross and raised from the dead to live and reign as our Brother and our Savior.

You are being sent, Keith, so that people might hear the word of the cross. The message entrusted for your speaking is not a set of techniques for spirituality or principles for purposeful living. You are not given a sure-fire evangelism strategy that will set the world on fire with holy zeal. “Preach one thing” said Luther “the wisdom of the cross.” That it is. That is the ultimate theme of every Christian sermon: Jesus Christ the justifier of the ungodly, the friend of real flesh and blood sinners. But this Jesus is a stumbling block to the Jew who lurks within our nature always seeking some sign to validate the truth. You know how that goes. If the Gospel is true it must produce measurable results, growing groups of the committed. Or I’ll only believe the Gospel if I see with my own eyes people who really demonstrate Christian love in their own lives. Sight takes the place of faith and we are left with another gospel.

Faith lives by what it hears and not by what it sees. Some of you know the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis in April of 1945, just before the end of World War II. Earlier in his career Bonhoeffer preached a sermon entitled “A Church of the World or a Church of the Word” based on Exodus 32., the story of the golden calf. In this striking sermon, Bonhoeffer develops a contrast between the “church of Moses” and the “church of Aaron.” He raises the rhetorical question to the
congregation, why is it that Moses and Aaron must be in conflict? “Why cannot they stand side by side in the same service? Why must the church of Moses and the church of Aaron, the church of the Word and the worldly church break apart time and again?”1 Then Bonhoeffer devotes the remainder of the sermon to developing the answer. These two churches represent competing religions that cannot live in reconciling diversity. Hidden under the cross, the church of Moses is the church that lives by Word that is spoken but not seen. The church of Aaron relies on sight. Moses is vanished and with his disappearance there is now the need for something tangible, hence the idolatry of the golden calf.

My young brother, Keith, you are not being ordained into the church of Aaron but the church of Moses. You are put into the preaching office not to entertain or organize, not to say what people might want to hear but to speak faithfully the Word of the crucified Christ, the word that alone is able to create faith. The church of Aaron might appear more exciting, more effective, and more relevant but it is only the church of Moses, the church that proclaims the message of the cross that has Jesus’ promise that the gates of hell will not overcome it. But you are ordained to the ministry in the church of Moses, the church that lives by the Word of God alone. You will speak that Word when all that you or your hearers can see is sin and death. Ordination ties you to that Word. You are bound to it. That is the reason the church has the men who are ordained to make solemn vows, to take an oath of office.

In just a few minutes you will make some God-sized pledges. You will vow yourself to preach and teach the Gospel in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions because they are a truth exposition of the Bible. You will promise to proclaim the Gospel in season and out of season, to absolve sinners of their sins, to baptize, and administer the testament of Jesus’ body and blood. You will promise to catechize with patience, visit the sick and dying. You will promise to watch over the flock that God is committing to your care. Your sufficiency to keep these vows does not come from yourself but from the Lord who sends you. In that knowledge, you have freedom and courage. It is all from the Lord.

When God sends a man, he never goes alone. Remember the prophets of the Old Testament; they never walked alone. The Lord was with them-Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest. He was with Paul in the Philippian jail. The Lord was with Luther at Worms and the confessors at Augsburg who spoke the Lord’s testimonies before kings and were not put to shame. The promise is yours, Keith, as well.

You have that promise from the lips of Jesus: “Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age.” He puts His words in your mouth and with the name He has already given you in Baptism, He stands with you. The Lord who sends you will never leave or forsake you. You have His promise as sure and certain as His empty tomb.

With that promise you are sent, commissioned as the Lord’s ambassador. You do not speak for yourself but for the Lord who sends you. Of that you will be reminded every
time you speak the absolution “in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sin.”

You will speak not your own cleverly devised words but the Word of the Lord, the Word that does not return to God empty but creates faith in the hearts of those who hear it when and where it pleases God to paraphrase the Augsburg Confession. That is, after all, why God has established the preaching office so that the good news might not be left in silence but proclaimed for faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. God strengthen you for this work, give you joy in the ministry to which He has called you, and bless you with all that you need as you serve His people to the end that they might hear the good news that their sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. God who calls and sends you is faithful. He will do it. Amen.

-Prof. John T. Pless