Preach One Thing: The Wisdom of the Cross
I Corinthians 2:2

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2)

I don’t know anything at all about Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Golden and St. Paul Lutheran Church in Bowen, Illinois – the congregations that you have been called to serve, Michael- but I would venture that whatever warts they may have, they are a long, long way from the situation of the congregation in Corinth. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reads like a catalog of disasters- internal divisions based on apostolic personalities, sexual immorality rampant with no church discipline, members hauling one another into court, charismatic problems, open communion abusing the Lord’s body and blood, women taking it upon themselves to preach, and even denials of the resurrection! Yet into that chaotic and disordered congregation, Paul comes with a singular message: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

When Martin Luther declared that “the cross alone is our theology” he was not advocating that the Christian message could be reduced down to a few words about Jesus’ death. Rather he was saying that everything we know about God and everything that we preach about Him is set in focus by the lens of the cross. Michael, the theology you have learned and the truth you today will vow to preach and practice is not a theology of glory that traffics in human wisdom and achievement but a theology of the cross that confesses that God uses the despised and weak things of this world to shame the strong, even the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are.

You have not been given a set of principles to implement a successful and victorious life for yourself and those who heed your teaching. You have not been given a recipe to make the church grow and prosper in the way of a business. You have not been given a philosophy of self-help that will bring healing and wholeness to those who get with the program. You have only been entrusted with the Gospel, the word of reconciliation – that word that declares that God was in Christ making peace through the blood of the cross, not counting men’s trespasses against them but pardoning their sin and promising them resurrection to life everlasting. In short, you are to preach as an ambassador of Christ Jesus. In His stead and by His command you are to announce God’s Kingdom, you are to proclaim that God justifies the ungodly, rescues the worthless and gives life to the dead.

The cross is your message. Week in and week out, you will proclaim Jesus Christ as the friend of sinners, the Lord of heaven who came to earth to seek and to save the lost. In season and out of season, you will tell His story so that people might come to trust not in their own achievements of piety, not in self-made spiritualities, but in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. You will baptize, absolve broken sinners, administer the gift of Jesus’ last will and testament –His body and blood so that people
might live by Jesus’ death. It is to that preaching office that you are being ordained, that is set under orders to carry out, this afternoon.

Yes, you will preach the law in all of its strength so that sin might be exposed and sinners held accountable to God. But the law which with laser-like precision can diagnose sin, is impotent to bring relief from sin. You are ordained today as a minister of the Gospel, a servant of the good news. And that good news is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. How in the world could the bloody and gory death of God’s own Son be good news? How is that the sinless Son of God being made sin for us, left hanging on a cross under God’s own wrath, be good news? How is it that the day of that inhumane death would be for all time known as Good Friday? It is only because that in His death, God does us good. In His death, God declares us sinners to be holy and righteous. On account of His death on the cross, we are rescued. Our forgiveness is won.

Fresh out of the tomb, Jesus comes to His disciples on Easter evening making them apostles, sent ones. Showing them the nailed scared hands and the spear-pierced side, the Lord breathes on them with the gift of His Spirit. With His wounds and words, His Spirit enlivens them, sending them even as He was sent from the Father. The Father sent the Son to suffer and die for the sins of the world. Now the Son sends His men to deliver the forgiveness, He accomplished on the cross: “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them and if you retain the sins of any they retained.” That is what the office of the ministry is here for. It is into that office that Michael is today placed. It is not your task to make the good news relevant or to accommodate it to the whims of your hearers, but to let it lose, to proclaim it, to let the Word fly!

And fly it will! This word of the cross that the Lord opens your mouth to speak will nor return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which the Lord sent it. The word of the cross, Brother Michael, is not only the message that you are called to preach but the consolation that God gives you. You have a sure and certain message to proclaim. No one can pull Jesus Christ back into the grave again. The Lord’s own preaching from the cross, when He declared “It is finished” is our certainty that salvation is achieved; it is an accomplished fact. There are no missing parts of a puzzle for us to find and put into place. It is given to us to proclaim it as the word of power that it is. More often than not you will not see its results and even when you catch a glimpse of what the Lord is doing, it is only that glimpse. He does so much more than we are able to comprehend. But like good seed planted in the ground, it will germinate and yield a harvest in God’s own time.

It is the Lord’s word that you preach, not yours. That is why Luther says that when a preacher has preached the Gospel he must not return to his seat that pray in relation to the sermon “Forgive us our trespasses.” You can only heed Luther’s admonition when you preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. To preach anything else leaves you and your hearers in uncertainty. Uncertainty is the enemy of faith. What the Lord does gives us certainty. Jesus Christ crucified for sinners and raised again for our justification is the Lord’s doing. It is this Jesus that you are to proclaim from pulpit and classroom, from bedside and in your study, at the side of a grave and over a cup of coffee.
“Preach one thing, the wisdom of the cross” said Luther. Let this be the motto for your work as well. It has never been an easy task. The flesh always prefers another kind of wisdom - a fleshly wisdom that focuses on self and trusts in what we are able to accomplish or achieve. Even as you confess the cross of Jesus, you will bear the cross. This ministry that you are undertaking today will be the death of you. But in such dying you will live by the promise of God who raised Jesus from the dead. We have this ministry, the Apostle says, by the mercy of God so we do not lose heart. Your confidence is in Jesus Christ crucified. Yours is not only a theology of the cross but a ministry of the cross but always with the cross, there is the resurrection. So today, Michael, you are ordained by Christ to preach the wisdom of His cross and we send you on your way with glad and full hearts using the words of the Apostle: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Amen.

-Prof. John T.Pless