Faithful God, Faithful Pastors  
I Corinthians 1:1-9

*God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord* (I Corinthians 1:9)

We’re talking about pastoral theology the Lutheran way here at this conference. So it is a happy coincidence that the Epistle appointed for this week in the lectionary is from these opening verses of Paul’s first letter to Corinth. It’s true that we generally refer to Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles but in a profound sense the Apostle really lays out his pastoral theology in the Corinthian correspondence. In fact, I would suggest that II Corinthians is actually Paul’s pastoral theology of the cross. There he speaks of how he bears in his own body the marks of Jesus’ suffering, the tentatio of rejection and disappointment, the apparently ongoing battle with that thorn in the flesh—whatever it was—that continues unrelieved. He lives only by dying. He triumphs only in defeat.

But before II Corinthians there is I Corinthians. It is in this letter that we see what Paul was up against: Divisions in the church, sexual immorality, Christians hauling each other into pagan courts, lack of church discipline, charismatic problems, open communion, women preaching, and even denials of the resurrection. Hardly a congregation marked by faithfulness! Hardly a congregation that could rate high on the sanctification meter! But Paul’s focus is not on their faithlessness but on God who is faithful.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that pastors should not complain about the congregations they serve either to man or to God for it is the Lord’s congregation and He has put a shepherd there not to complain that sheep are sheep, but to shepherd them. You are put there by the will of the Lord not to complain to God about the congregation but to intercede for them, to pray for them with thanksgiving as the Apostle does in our text.

God is faithful. Paul doesn’t complain to the Lord about the wretched mess that he finds in Corinth. Yes, he will be about setting in order all that is disordered and chaotic there. He will admonish with God’s law. But before he goes about that tough task, he gives thanks to God for the grace that was given to these sinner/saints at Corinth. To the eye, it can only appear that they are lacking every spiritual gift, every good endowment from the Father of lights. They hardly appear as those who are enriched in Jesus “with all speech and knowledge.” But they are for God’s Word says so. They are declared pure and holy in Christ. They are baptized believers. God has called them through the Gospel. They are His.
Paul therefore is confident that God who has called them is faithful. He will sustain them to the end guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our ministry, dear brothers, is grounded in that living hope. God is faithful.

Once Luther retreated into his room for a couple of days caught up in gloom and doom; he wondered if this whole Reformation thing was going to crash. When he finally poked his head out from behind the door, he saw Katie and their children dressed in black. “Who died?” Luther asked. Katie replied “God did.” Luther responds “What are you talking about? God can’t die.” His wife then said “well why are you acting like He is dead?”

Tonight, I am authorized to tell you that Jesus is not dead. His grave is empty. The Lord who was handed over to death has been raised again for your justification. He is seated at the Father’s right hand, installed as head over all things for His church. For the church to be destroyed, Christ first has to be destroyed. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church for hell lies powerless at the nail-pierced feet of Jesus. Jesus will have Himself a church even in Corinth, even in Wyoming!

Of course, there are all kinds of troubles in our congregations and in our Synod. We need not slip into a state of denial about that. But sober recognition of the sin calls for repentance and confession, not the mutual pseudo-consolation of an ecclesiastical pity party. It is not given us to live and act as though Jesus were still in the tomb, as though the God who raised Him from the dead is unfaithful to His promises.

God is faithful. The Old Testament records that faithfulness of the Lord God to Israel when she forgot Him and turned to false gods. Time after time, for the sake of His name, God sent judges to rescue His people and prophets to call them to repentance. He did not forsake Israel nor did He cast her off on account of her unrighteousness. Even when Israel was faithless, God remained faithful. As the Apostle Paul says in II Timothy: “if we are faithless, he remains faithful” (II Tim. 2:13). How faithful God is, we know from Jesus who was given over to our death. His is the faithful One. Faithful to His Father’s will, refusing to let go of us. He goes to the cross, the Righteous for the unrighteous. By His faithfulness, we are saved.

By His Gospel, this Lord Jesus Christ now says to you: “You are mine. You belong to me. By my innocent suffering and bloody death, I have purchased and won you to live under me in my kingdom, in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. He takes you as His own. You need no other lords, for He is your Lord.

He is your Lord and you are His man, put in the pastoral office not to your work and build your kingdom, but to be His instrument. You are His mouth in proclaiming His words and His hands in distributing His gifts. And as Luther reminds us in his hymn, “With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our lost effected.” But the right Man
is on our side, this man of God’s own choosing. He is Christ Jesus, the Lord. How faithful He is, you heard in the absolution: I forgive you all your sins. That’s how He sustains you guiltless to the end!

After their church was destroyed by the terrible bombing in Stuttgart in WWII, Helmut Thielicke gathered what remained of His congregation for a service. In the sermon he said to His flock, “He who has the victory of the last hour can endure the next few minutes.” We have the victory of the last hour for God’s promise is cure and certain, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Hermann Sasse told pastors in his day “The sect cannot way, it must have everything at once, for it has no future. The church can wait, for it does have a future” (Lonely Way II:328). You have a future for you are in Christ and His body is indestructible.

God is faithful. We taste of that faithfulness again tonight as He gives us His body to eat and His Blood, to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. In the strength of this, His New testament then live in perseverance and endurance for your labor in Him is not in vain. His Word is true and it will not return to Him empty. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His, Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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