

What Lutherans Have to Offer Mission in Preaching Clayton J. Schmit

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, the school hosted a conference on the future of mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.¹ One of the key questions asked at the conference was whether there is a distinctive Lutheran homiletic and if so, does it stand as a resource for mission as the church moves into a post-Christian era. What follows is one Lutheran homileticians view of the question. It comes from the hand of a teacher of preaching at a non-Lutheran institution, Fuller Theological Seminary.

To ask the question, “What do Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching?” suggests that there is a discernable Lutheran homiletic. I am pleased to pursue this topic, but by doing so, I do not pretend to have discovered what is truly particular or exceptional about Lutheran preaching. A few years ago, the homileticians of the ELCA attempted to work on a book on Lutheran preaching along the lines of the book produced by our liturgical counterparts, *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*. The project failed to take flight because we could not agree as to what was characteristically Lutheran about our preaching or our teaching of preaching.

Yet, there are some distinctive theological, rhetorical, and hermeneutical qualities with which much Lutheran preaching is imbued. My attempt here will simply be to draw out some of those distinctive threads, especially those that relate favorably to the renewed missionary work of the church in North America. In the first portion of this essay, I propose to present is a snapshot of what Lutheran preaching is (or, perhaps, should be). In the second part, we will review a few characteristics relating to the state of mission and evangelism in the North American context. Here,

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some non-Lutheran voices will serve as our guides. Specifically, we will consider the insights of one of my colleagues at Fuller Theological Seminary, Eddie Gibbs. Gibbs is an Anglican scholar who has carefully studied the state of mission and contemporary culture in North America. His work provides useful insights as to the mission opportunities that might be met through Lutheran preaching today.

What is distinctive about Lutheran Preaching?

As a means of ordering our thought here, let me borrow a theological image from a strong Lutheran preacher, Gordon Lathrop, who has helped us to understand the power of liturgical and theological elements placed in “juxtaposition.”² The image is useful here for it suggests that when things are placed in juxtaposition, they achieve a certain balance of tension. They pull at one another like twin suns, each with its own gravity, yet held apart and distinct as they revolve interdependently around each other.

The distinctive qualities of Lutheran preaching that I propose to be useful tools for mission are these juxtapositions: Word and Sacrament, mandate and promise, and oration and art. These paired categories are certainly not uniquely Lutheran. As Lathrop reminds us, these kinds of juxtapositions “have been the method of the liturgy down through all the ages. Word has been set next to sacrament . . . , texts to preaching . . . ,”³ and so on. Yet, they are among those pairings that are at home in the Lutheran church and have historically been related to Lutheran forms of proclamation.

Lutheran preaching rests in a balance between Word and sacrament. Lutherans begin with the word: *sola scriptura*. Words have power and meaning. We trust in this. William Jefferson Clinton would probably not make a good Lutheran, for he cannot settle on what the meaning of is is. Lutheran

² See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993)

³ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 204.

preachers know that words have meanings. And they understand the power of words and have relied upon them to shape our theology, craft arguments, to sing the faith, and to proclaim the Gospel. In a day when words are losing their meanings and can be bent to the purpose of any philosophy or sophistry, Lutheran preachers still speak powerful words boldly: sin, forgiveness, community, liturgy, life, death, faith, resurrection, Heaven, even Hell and Satan. Words build structures of meaning, not so much as walls to divide peoples, but formations of thought by which people can be enlightened, identified, and through which they find community. Lutheran preachers know this and speak words that strive to create understanding and a sense of belonging. “The spoken word still has a vocation,” says Rick Lischer in the 1999 Beecher Lectures. He was the first of two Lutherans in a row called upon to give that prestigious Yale address on the state of preaching. Yale seems to have figured it out that in a time when words are highly devalued and when three of its prominent graduates have recently ascended to the apex of politics by winning the presidency, in part through the careful manipulation of shifting oratory, you can count on the words of a Lutheran preacher. In an age where words are mistrusted and meanings are muddled, we would do well to follow David Tracy’s advice regarding conversation: “Say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can”⁴ This is the kind of trust that Lutheran preachers have for the power of the spoken word.

The ultimate word, of course, is God’s Word. Above all, we rely on this. It is the source and norm of our preaching. When we preach, it is not mere interpretation of Scripture, but our sermons bear the very weight of Scripture. Luther got us started in this direction: in our preaching, he said, “with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets . . . ‘Here God speaks.’ God himself has

⁴ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 30.

said it. . . . whoever cannot boast like that about his sermon should leave preaching alone, for he surely denies and blasphemes God.”⁵ For Luther, Fred Meuser reminds us,

preaching was not a preacher’s ideas stimulated by the prod of a text. It was not human reflections about God and life. It was not searching around in one’s personal religious insights for some kind of contemporary message that one thinks people need. Christian preaching—when it is faithful to the Word of God in the Scriptures . . .—is God speaking. . . . It is God’s very own audible address to all who hear it, just as surely as if Christ himself had spoken it.⁶

This is the Lutheran understanding of preaching. It was path Luther pioneered. In the main, Lutheran preachers have not veered far from this familiar trail. We rely on God’s Word as we begin and we carry it forward with great care because we know that our words are not our own. Lischer says it clearly: “. . . it is Jesus himself who is the preacher, blessing our sermons with his presence.”⁷ And, Bonhoeffer adds the poetry: “The proclaimed word is Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.”⁸

Juxtaposed beside this strong pole is sacrament. This is a distinctively Lutheran posture. While twentieth century Protestant liberalism tended to set aside the Word of God as the source for preaching, Evangelical Protestants made a counter error in devaluing the place of sacraments in the life and up-building of the church. The Catholic Church has historically erred in a third direction, the depreciation of preaching altogether. A Roman Catholic preaching student at Fuller recently asked me to address the question, “Why is Catholic preaching so bad?” I was tempted to quip, “Because your priests don’t go to Lutheran seminaries.” The one thing that our Catholic brothers and sisters have always had a good grasp of is the place of mystery in the life of faith. What seems almost uniquely Lutheran, however, is that we have always highly valued the sacramental elements of faith as equal and interdependent upon the Word. We learn this early on in our theological

⁵ As quoted in Fred Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), p. 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1992). P. 74.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Proclaimed Word,” in Richard Lischer, ed., *Theories of Preaching* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1987), p. 28.

education. Recall Luther's explanation of the sacraments in the Small Catechism. "How can water do such great things?"

It is not water that does these things, but God's Word with the water and our trust in this Word. Water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is a life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit."

For Lutherans, Word and sacrament work together. The nineteenth century Lutheran liturgical reformer William Löhe spoke of the Sunday service as having two peaks: the reading and proclaiming of the Word of God and the eating and drinking of communion. Word and sacrament are placed, as Lathrop says, in juxtaposition.⁹ The preaching of the Word is embedded in the liturgy of the meal. They function differently, but serve a similar purpose. "The use of the texts," he says,

to say the same thing the meal says is the Sunday business of the church. The meal set next to the texts deepens and focuses the breaking that should occur in the Christian word service. . . . the texts call the community to eat the meal of thanksgiving with wider meaning than it had thought possible. In the meal we stand before that God to whom the texts witness."¹⁰

What do Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching? We offer the North American post-Christian world a most needed word: not our words, not the preacher's opinions, not what one of my students called "refrigerator magnet theology," but God's Word. It is a living Word, read from Scripture each Sunday morning, proclaimed anew from the pulpit, incarnated through the flesh and voice of the preacher so that Christ walks among his people. And it is a palpable word, rooted in the mysteries of the liturgy, alive in the washing work of baptism, and tangible as real presence in the bread and the wine of the eucharist.

⁹ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 50.

¹⁰Ibid.

The second pairing: *Lutheran preaching rests on a balance between mandate and promise.*¹¹ Again, a homiletical balance between mandate and promise is not a uniquely Lutheran stance, yet, Lutherans have understood this, and brought it forward in our preaching as well as any tradition.

It is clear nowadays that not everything that passes for preaching is proclamation of the promise of the Gospel. Stanley Hauerwas is well known for having railed against the effects of the liberal Protestantism of the twentieth century. It has yielded, he once said, preachers who offer a range of ministries from the pulpit: teaching, marriage counsel, social commentary, pastoral care. This has led Hauerwas to ask, what is the Protestant minister, but “a quivering mass of availability?” Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde echoes the problem: “Proclamation gets displaced by explanation, teaching, lecturing, persuasion, ethical exhortation, or public display of emotion about Jesus.”¹² To be “preached at,” as anyone knows, is no pleasure. To be “preachy” in our speech is to cast our discourse in an unwelcome, accusing tone. What Lutherans strive for is honest preaching that addresses the futility of the human condition, in all its fallen forms, and proclamation of the promise of the Gospel that gives hope and brings salvation.

Luther drew a distinction between what he called God preached and God not preached.¹³ God not preached is the one that, as Forde says, “we can never quite get off our backs. . . . God is the name for whatever is ‘out there,’ ‘up there,’ ‘in the depths,’ ‘transcendent to us,’ and messing with us.”¹⁴ God not preached is seen as in some way responsible for the bad stuff that happens, like, say, the terrible events of September 11. Or, if God is not responsible, then at least God is not caring enough to stop them. God on our backs “is a threat to us: the ruler, the judge, the almighty

¹¹ The terms “mandate and promise” are used here rather than the more familiar “law and gospel.” in order to avoid some of the ordinary freight that comes loaded on those particular hand carts. See Eric W. Gritsch, *Fortress Introduction to Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 101 ff.

¹² Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

One who has the final say.”¹⁵ This side of God is what Luther called the “hidden” God, or the absconding God (*deus absconditus*). He also spoke of this side of God as having to do with alien works (*opus alienum*), through which God uses darkness to accomplish God’s proper works (*opus proprium*). In more familiar terms, this side of God is that which has to do with the Law. And, as Luther saw it, there is only one way to get past the God not preached. It is to make proclamation of the God preached. Luther’s problem, as Forde describes it, “was neither how to find God nor even to prove God’s existence, but how to get God off our backs. Yet only God could do that.”¹⁶ Therein lies the grace. Therein lies the gift: “Only God can deal with God.”¹⁷ Proclaiming *that* creates the balance that holds the mandate in tension and juxtaposition with the Gospel. The rhetoric for proclaiming the God preached is, as Lischer says, the rhetoric of promise. “What is it,” he asks, “that emerges from the grace of God, and what is the language we now seek to express? It is the promise. . . . God’s true preference for the kind of discourse he wishes to perpetuate with the church.”¹⁸ This comes as proclamation of the good news of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

“Lutheran theology,” Eric Gritsch summarizes,

. . . insists on proclaiming both law *and* gospel, the two aspects of the one Word of God. But it also insists that the focus of the proclamation must be on the gospel—on the divine promise, embodied in Jesus, of a new future beyond sin, evil, and death, and of a never-ending relationship with God.¹⁹

And, Lutheran theology naturally leads to Lutheran preaching. Forde concludes,

A sermon does indeed include explaining, exegeting, and informing, but ultimately it must get around to and aim at doing, an actual pronouncing, declaring, giving of the gift. In proclaiming the Word our goal is absolution, the doing of the deed that ends the old and begins the new.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard Lischer, “Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise,” in *Word and World*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 71.

¹⁹ Gritsch, p. 102.

²⁰ Forde, pp. 149-150.

The great problem with preaching, in my observation, is that it confuses the basic dialectic that Lutheran theology so well understands. It confuses the thrust of the promise by pushing Gospel texts in the direction of moral guidance. When I first began to teach preaching and listen to beginning sermons, I quickly learned the truth of something Richard Lischer once said: “at least half the sermons I read are moralistic.”²¹ They become so because they use the story of Jesus to set the bar for moral behavior. If Jesus died for our sins, how, then, can we not be willing also to do something for him. “Moralism,” Lischer says,

holds up the virtues . . . and makes a deadly transposition. Instead of offering its list of virtues as possible goals or consequences of the gospel, moralism subtly prescribes them as the means by which the grace of God is apprehended.²²

This false interpretation of the Gospel is not only subtle, it is also an easy trap to step into. In beginner’s sermons, I call this a form of “creeping Pelagianism.” It is a sneaky corruption because it derives directly from the text and from the notion that Jesus died for our sakes. What could be surer than proclaiming the cross? But, it is a cross emasculated, removed of its power to bring life. Christ crucified is a paradox; it is precisely the point of power in the Gospel. But, in moralistic preaching the cross is reduced to a pole upon which is hung the challenge to a more virtuous life. A sure sign of a sermon in trouble, I tell my students, is one that piles up imperatives in its conclusion. “Therefore, we ought, we need to, we should, or we must do this or that,” the preacher will say, and the listener is left with yet another list of impossible things to do. “What would Jesus do” might be a good question for a Christian to ask, but it is a lousy premise for a promise. Clearly we cannot do what Jesus would do, or we wouldn’t have needed to come to church for sustenance and strength.

²¹ Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, p. 63.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

Holiness is no virtue, as I have said elsewhere.²³ It is not something we do: it is pure gift. Lutheran preaching understands that.

What do Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching? A clear balance between Word and sacrament, and a firm understanding of how mandate and promise are held in tension to proclaim the good news that in spite of how we may desire to live, we cannot live as we ought without the promise of God acting to get God off our backs.

The third juxtaposition that characterizes Lutheran preaching and stands as a service to mission is this: *Lutheran proclamation embraces oration and art*. Note that I have switched here from the word preaching to proclamation. “Preaching” is not only loaded with negativity, as in being “preachy,” but it is also a narrower expression that suggests oral discourse as its only form. “Proclamation” is an open term that suggests that the Gospel promise can be brought forth, or proclaimed in a variety of ways. We spoke of one way in our first point: the Word is embedded in the liturgy and the sacraments are those visible words that proclaim the action of Christ. But there are additional ways in which proclamation presents itself to our senses. Michael Aune has shown how the theology of Lutheran Reformers, especially Philip Melanchthon, was aware of the value of ritual juxtaposed with rhetoric for the development of faith. In *“To Move the Heart”* Aune explores the theological implications of this phrase that Melanchthon used frequently and included in Article 13 of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Here, Melanchthon says, “Simultaneously through the Word and the rite, God moves the heart to believe and take hold of faith. . . . As the Word enters the ears to strike the heart so the rite itself enters through the eyes to move the heart.” It is through rhetoric and ritual, Word and rite that the promise is proclaimed and faith is apprehended. Elsewhere, Melanchthon wrote, “As the will of God is shown in the Word or in the promise, so also is it shown in a sign as in a picture. As the Word is perceived in our ears to arouse faith in our

²³ Clayton J. Schmit, “Holiness is no Virtue,” in *The Living Pulpit*, vol. 10, no. 3 (July-September 2001)

hearts, so a sign occurs to our eyes that it may also arouse faith in our hearts.”²⁴ This accords with what Luther has to say in the Large Catechism: “Yes, [the object of faith] must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart”²⁵ It is this openness to image, symbol, and the receptivity of the senses that put the early Lutherans at odds with the Swiss Reformers who saw non-scriptural music, art, and symbol as dangerous to faith and worship.²⁶ Luther saw them as vehicles of proclamation and wrote what hymns he could to disseminate the faith. We know that his Roman adversaries deplored him for ruining more souls with his hymns than his preaching. This theological stance created a warm climate in the Lutheran Church for symbol, art, ritual, and liturgy to be used as means for the expression of the mysteries of the Gospel. How else could Bach come to be declared the Fifth Evangelist if his music were not seen as equal to the preached word of a sermon. The climate remains in our church to this day and we seek numerous ways to proclaim the Gospel. We embrace the liturgy, immerse ourselves in the sacraments, process with robes and banners, dance in the chancel, perform our roles of worship leadership with grace and elegance, paint and sculpt our faith, and sing it with joy and strength. Lutherans, in many cases, are slow to warm to so-called “praise choruses.” Perhaps this is because we trust words and symbols, texts and music to proclaim our faith and our theology with depth and integrity. Lutheran music tends to be more substantive than that which merely expresses personal sentiments about Jesus. One might argue that Bach’s “Jesu, Joy of Man’s desiring” was the first praise chorus. It is brief and repeatable, as Bach’s elaborate accompaniment demonstrates, and it is a pious personal declaration of faith. Still, in good Lutheran fashion, the music bears the marks of incarnation, as it comes from the *Volk*, the voice of the people. And, the sentiments have depth.

²⁴ From “Answer to the Anabaptists,” as quoted in Michael Aune, *“To Move the Heart”: Rhetoric and Ritual in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1994) p. 57.

²⁵ As quoted in Aune, p. 58.

²⁶ See William Dyrness, “Reclaiming Art for Worship,” in *Theology, News, and Notes: Art for Faith’s Sake*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Fall 2001)

The German words speak of a wide range of human experience and with honesty about Jesus' relationship to life's delights and disasters. And, the text does so with rich language that evokes the senses: gladness, comfort, fruity succulence, mirth, strength, sunshine, soul, treasure, and rapture.²⁷ Lutheran proclamation, the expression of the good news of Jesus Christ, comes in many forms and the Lutheran Church has always been a place where oration and art coexist as forms by which the Gospel enters through the senses to move the heart.

What do Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching? A balance between Word and sacrament, a clear understanding that the promise of the Gospel is to be held in tension with, yet has dominion over the mandate of the Law, and the appreciation that any form, oral or artistic, that serves the Gospel and brings about new creation is proclamation.

This brings us to the end of the first portion, where I have tried to distinguish the elements of Lutheran preaching that relate favorably to the climate of mission in North America that the Christian Church now faces. How do these characteristics serve mission in the current context? Consideration of that question is the next step.

Opportunities for Mission in the North America

Since we have been working at being postmodern for somewhere between thirty and seventy years now,²⁸ perhaps there is no need to carefully review those aspects of current philosophy and culture that make our North American post-Christian context a challenge to mission. Let me simply summarize the state of things, using Eddie Gibb's apt phrasing:

²⁷ The German text reads: *Jesus bleibt meine Freude/ meines Herzens Trost und Saft. Jesus wehret allem Leide/ er ist meines Lebens Kraft/ meiner Augen, Lust, und Sonne/ meiner Seele, Schatz, und Wonne/ darum lass ich Jesum nicht/ aus dem Herzen un Gesicht.*

²⁸ Eddie Gibb, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), p. 23.

In this deconstructed world there is no need for God. The search for truth has been abandoned, life is meaningless, there is no correspondence between words and what they signify, and the self has disintegrated.²⁹

It almost sounds hopeless for the church. And it would be, if we didn't recognize the vast shift in how we must do church in order to survive. But it is not hopeless if we can learn to understand the cultural forces that have come to bear on the church and the ways they represent both challenges for ministry as well as resources for the church's ongoing growth. And, there is hope if we can find ways to bring the challenges of culture into conversation with the positive and useful elements of our tradition that abide as tools with which to address our mission situation. As stated above, there are at least three things that Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching. Let us now consider how they fit into a scheme for mission. The scheme involves addressing three key aspects of our current culture, a foundational vacuum, the value of experience, and the exploration of mystery.

A key characteristic of the present age is the lack of truth or moral center. The assumption is that there is no foundational core upon which to ground meaning and there is no such thing as a constant truth. This could mean, as Ronald Allen has noted, either catastrophe or opportunity for preachers of the Gospel. The pessimistic view is that postmodernity

has opened a chasm between the pulpit and the pews across which meaning and truth are unable to travel. . . . [This] scenario would banish preachers to a homiletical Babel in which God is dead and our words have become futile signs wandering in a labyrinth from which there is no exit.³⁰

A more favorable interpretation of the situation comes from Allen's reading of postmodern philosopher, Jaques Derrida. "For while Derrida clearly contends," Allen says,

that we do not have access to a center that is fully present to us—a foundational core that gives rise to all our words and practices—neither does the philosopher argue that this center is utterly absent. Instead, Derrida prefers to speak of "a trace" and "a shadow"—a partial

²⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁰ Ronald Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1997), p. 74.

presence that stands beyond our self-manufactured centers—calling our assumptions about totality into question.³¹

Christians, as we know, have an understanding of that center that Derrida tentatively acknowledges. We are, as Scott Johnston says, “more intrepid in naming that center than Derrida would find philosophically comfortable.”³² Karl Barth certainly was. He knew that Jesus Christ stands at the center of all things. He said that “the gospel does not exist as a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths.”³³

What does Lutheran preaching have to offer a missionary context in which our potential listeners are only vaguely aware that there is something outside of their experience and perception that holds true? What do we have to offer those who seek fulfillment from a religious and philosophical menu that suggests all options will provide the same spiritual nutrition? We offer that one option that is without peer, that one name for the center of all things. We offer the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. We offer the Word of God with boldness, and we speak it with the power and authority of God. This is what Lutheran preachers know how to do. We rely on the Word as the source and test of our preaching. And we present our words as God’s Word, made so, as we dare to believe, by the imbuing work of the Holy Spirit.

To rely on any other source for our preaching and mission is to doom our efforts to futility. People have learned not to put their trust in individuals and institutions. “The confidence of witness must be in Christ alone. . . ,”³⁴ says Eddie Gibbs. And, as Lischer reminds us, “people listen to preaching only when they are convinced that it is the Word of God.”³⁵ Here, again, is the value of a Lutheran type of homiletic that relies on the Word of God and claims for itself the same authority.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 75.

³³ As quoted in Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, p. 75.

³⁴ Gibbs, p. 28.

³⁵ Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, p. 66.

A guest preacher occupied the pulpit of my church recently. He was a retired pastor from a neighboring non-denominational church with a Unitarian bent. He took an approach to his homily that Hauerwas would have disliked, as he spoke for 30 minutes on the useful topic of what God has to do with suffering and tragedy. It was a timely message for the day, being the Sunday nearest the anniversary of September 11. It was a masterful oration, filled with humorous and moving illustrations, three clearly delineated points, a solid theological conclusion, even a reference to the cross of Christ. There was one thing it did not contain. The sermon made no reference to, nor quoted a single portion of the Word of God. It was entirely the preacher's conclusions about what God has to do with and to say in the face of human tragedy. I have to admit that the message rang true for me. And, it did for the listeners about me. But then, we were primed for the conclusion as people of faith. We knew the scriptural points of reference from which such conclusions were deduced. But, how would the message fare in the mission community directly outside our church door? How would this preacher's theological opinion stand up against the other opinions wrangling for a hearing that week? What is certain and clear is that unless the center of our proclamation is the Christ of Scripture, we speak with no more authority than any other pundit with an idea or an op-ed piece. Lutheran preaching provides an unequivocal answer to the question of authority and truth. Paul had the courage to name the unknown god of the Athenian altar. Likewise, Derrida's "shadow" or "trace" presence is knowable and namable by preachers of the Word. To speak that name boldly and to proclaim it with God's authority is a gift to the mission of the church. A more palatable word these days might be to proclaim that God can be anything you want him or her to be, but insofar as mission is less about membership than it is about discipleship, a Lutheran-style bold approach to proclaiming God's Word is the only viable means for growing what Eddie Gibbs calls "Church Next."

A second characteristic of our age is the reliance upon personal experience. Again, Gibbs gives a fitting description:

Postmodernists . . . have redefined truth in terms of consensus and “whatever works for you”. . . . Each individual has to create his or her own meaning and associate with others to increase his or her power base in a fragmented society of competing interests. . . . They are concerned with the immediate rather than the long term because history is meaningless and the future is too scary and unpredictable to contemplate. Meanwhile the present is lived out as a tumble and tangle of fleeting experiences.³⁶

With people’s strong preoccupation with lived experience, preaching today needs to be honest about life events and not simply offer platitudes in the face of fragmentation. Preachers need to tell the whole truth about life, its range of circumstances, the points of disintegration, and the places where God seems distant. I have no complaint against a postmodern person who claims that preaching is irrelevant because it isn’t real. What is the point of listening to sermons if they merely plumb the depths of the nearest rain puddle. Preaching needs to be as honest about the human predicament as it is about the claims of the Gospel. And it needs to be forthright in dealing with *deus absconditus* and *opus alienum*. Here is where the Lutheran balance between mandate and promise will ring with truth. The thinker of this age will quickly see through the Victorian “sweet by and by” or the modernist’s historical Jesus. While the shallow, the sentimental, the half-truth will always have its appeal, the mission of the church will be accomplished only when the God of faith is presented fully in tones of judgment, mystery, and promise. The only proclamation that will make sense is that which takes the person seriously, in all his or her disillusionment and disintegration. The promise will only sing when it is placed against the harmonization of the mandate. Here, eternal rubs against the finite, hope answers despair, futility finds purpose. The habit among Lutheran preachers to speak boldly, to name sin as sin, and to acknowledge the hidden side of God opens the possibility that there can also be forgiveness, love, and mystery. The Holy Spirit does its work in the gap between where we

³⁶ Gibbs, p. 24.

are and what Christ did for us. Joseph Sittler once said of the text, “Where grammar cracks, grace erupts.” He then added, “What God has riven asunder, let not the preacher too suavely put back together.”³⁷ There ought to be a roughness about our preaching, where we struggle honestly, and never too suavely, with the fragmentation that frays the edges of human experience. We might say of our preaching: where obedience and reason crack, faith erupts. Proclaiming this is a gift to mission in the non-Christian western context.

Finally, let us consider *the mission opportunity that Lutheran preaching addresses vis-à-vis the current interest in mystery*. The culture’s fascination with mystery goes deeper than reading *Harry Potter* and watching the movie *Signs*. There is a profound longing nowadays for the transcendent, the spiritual, that which lies beyond sentient perception. When this longing is paired with a lack of center or determinative truth, the result is that people become spiritually eclectic. Much as in the culture into which the early church was born,³⁸ people find religious pluralism appealing. They can hold various, even contradictory notions and not be bothered by the incongruities. Accordingly, there is a strong interest in symbol and art, those elements of expression that are roomy in meaning. “Our age,” says Gibbs, “has more regard for the artist than for the orator.”³⁹ This explains the recent interest in chant and participation in Orthodox liturgies among people who would typically shun such hidebound traditional forms. They are highly symbolic forms that evoke what Frank Senn calls a sense of “enchantment.” In one sense, this spiritual longing is nothing new to our time. The psalmist recognized that his soul longed for the courts of the Lord (Psalm 84:2) and Augustine famously noted the soul’s inability to rest until it rests in God.⁴⁰ Mission opportunity comes about now, however, in light of the fact that modernity and its empirical approach to all questions could

³⁷ As quoted by Richard Lischer, “The End of Words: Preaching the Gospel in a World Come of Age,” Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School, 1999.

³⁸ See Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: the Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999)

³⁹ Gibbs, p. 26.

⁴⁰ *Saint Augustine’s Confessions*, trans., Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 63 and 277.

not penetrate the spiritual veil where mystery resides. For the person of this age, faith is not something to be proven, but experienced. It is not adherence to formulas, but participation in something beyond perception. It is not the making up of one's mind, but the transformation of that "soul deep"⁴¹ core that we call the heart.

How does this create opportunity for mission and how does a Lutheran approach to proclamation meet this challenge? It does so in two ways. First, because our preaching is embedded in the liturgy, it connects the orality of the Word with the mystery of the sacraments. Whereas the Word makes plain the narrative that reveals the God of history and the Christ of Scripture, the sacraments tangibly connect us to the mysterious presence of the One who is known in preaching and who walks among us as the Word is proclaimed. Through Word and rite, the existence of God is not proven, but the heart is reached and the person becomes a new creation. Second, because Lutheran proclamation is both oral and artistic, there is a valued roominess in the symbols with which we express our faith. "Worshippers will be enchanted," concludes Senn, "when there are sounds to be heard, colors to be seen, textures to be felt, odors to be smelled, breads and wines to be tasted, and when all these sensual experiences are correlated in such a way that they are consonant with one another rather than disjunctive and disruptive."⁴² For Lutheran preaching, this does not mean that we strive for a market-driven approach to proclamation whereby we stick out a wet finger to determine the direction of the cultural wind and then craft our discourse accordingly. We do not dial up the mystery quotient in our proclamation to match the mood of day. What we do, rather, is what we have always known to do, proclaim the promise in many ways, trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to turn our use of Word and rite, oratory and art, to means of faith and grace.

⁴¹ See Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997). P. 75.

⁴² Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 704.

Conclusion

The task of mission, the building of a global church, is a huge enterprise. As disciples of Christ, we undertake it willingly, yet we know that as Lutherans we cannot do it all. We do what we can, we share the Gospel as we are taught and as we are able. We do so trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to turn all our efforts to good purpose. Preaching the Gospel: this is one thing that Lutherans have historically done very well. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to a world confused, fearful of wars, fragmented beyond description: this is what we know how to do. This is what we will do as missionaries in a pluralistic and skeptical world. Still, we are not in charge of the results. And the shape of Church Next is not only out of our hands, it is even outside our view. To help us put our efforts into perspective, let us consider a few apt lines that are attributed to Oscar Romero:

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetimes only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete. . . .
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith. . . .
No program accomplishes the church's mission. . . .*

*This is what we are about. We plant seeds that will one day grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. . . .
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter
and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.*

We are prophets of a future not our own.

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