Ohio Region (Mission Districts) Convocation May 2017

Sermon – Opening Worship

**Unashamed of What?**

Romans 1: 16-17 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Hab 2:4)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – Amen

Ashamed is defined this way, “being embarrassed or guilty of one’s actions, characteristics or associations, reluctant to do something through fear of embarrassment or humiliation.”

What makes you ashamed?

Shame can be used for good or evil.

The great reversal has occurred in our culture. We live in a world that is no longer ashamed of sin but is ashamed of the Gospel, a world that makes us believe that we should not only be ashamed of Christian values but should be unashamed of the world’s values that are in direct opposition to Biblical values.

While preparing for this sermon one of our pastors from Iowa asked if I had heard of the ELCA movement called “Naked and Unashamed.”

These slides are just a few examples of the artwork from their website:

“Let’s Break our Holy Living Agreement”

“You, Me, and Other Relationalities”

“Be a Consenting Partner of Mine”

Specific changes we would like to see include:

No longer privileging marriage as the only acceptable form of sexual relationality

Updating ELCA policies to reflect marriage equality in the United States

Editing out language that perpetuates heteronormativity and sexual oppression

In honor of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation they add those familiar words of Luther – “***semper reformanda*”**

Ashamed yet?

Shame is a powerful force, that when combined with a healthy conscious can produce repentance, changes in thinking and changes in actions and behaviors.

It is always easier to point to the sins of others as a way to see ourselves as less guilty less embarrassed, less humiliated, and therefore, less in need of repentance, forgiveness and transformation. It is far easier to deny our sin. If we deny our sin we never have to admit our need for the Gospel. We pretend to be righteous seeing everyone else’s sins but not our own.

**Are we really unashamed of the Gospel** if we live our lives pretending that the Gospel is really for others but not for me because I don’t need it, as I rely on my own self-righteousness.

Are we really unashamed of the Gospel? Some pastors and theologians are embarrassed by the Gospel’s lack of sophistication so they make it seem complicated and complex, often justifying their own existence in creating complexity. If the Gospel seems too easy and accessible, we fill it with rules and regulations. If it seems too personal we turn it into a distant philosophy. If we fear being transformed by its power, we turn the Gospel into a blessing of the status quo. Because of our deep-seated sense of inadequacy we make the Gospel about us instead of Jesus – we make it about our wisdom and our perfection.

Don’t be so sure that we are unashamed of the Gospel. Let me ask you a simple question. Outside of worship, Sunday School, Bible study or small groups, when was the last time you talked about Jesus? When was the last time you talked about Jesus with your family, friends, neighbors or the people you work with?

The Gospel of Jesus connects us to Him through faith. The Gospel is a life-giving relationship with Jesus but the truth is that many in our congregations aren’t really connected to Christ. Perhaps they are really ashamed of the Gospel.

In the research completed by Willow Creek one of the largest segments in our congregations are those exploring Christ, those still searching for God. They do not see themselves as followers of Jesus but searching for answers of what that might mean. They are explorers or passive attenders. They go to church but are content with a shallow spiritual life marked by minimal faith-based beliefs, relationships and activities. They show little or no signs of active growth. They come mostly out of habit or social acceptance. They attend but have no personal faith relationship with Jesus. They believe in general but it has little effect on them personally. They fail to see faith as a relationship, but as belief in concepts about God. The spiritual growth of this group is the slowest of all. Here is the real kicker. The research has shown that the longer they attend Church the less likely they are to become Christ followers, to see themselves as Disciples of Jesus. They often see themselves as spiritually stalled but their status has become completely acceptable to them. Their procrastination to move forward in Christ breeds passivity as a way of life. If you want to know why there might be struggles with changing the culture of your congregation, this may in part be the answer.

When Paul writes that the Gospel is the power of God, Paul knew it from his own experience. The dynamite of God blinded him and brought him to his knees in his own conversion on the road to Damascus. Every journey with Jesus begins with personal interaction. For many of us it began at the very early age of our Baptism for others it was at other times and places. But it is never just a once in a lifetime experience but a daily experience of walking with Jesus.

Paul is really saying I am proud of the Gospel. I have complete confidence in it. I trust it completely. I lean on it with my whole weight. The power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is able to save all who believe, both the Jew and the non-Jew. This Good News saves all who believe in Jesus Christ. It is God’s power because it is God at work. God is completely embodied by this Gospel. Where the Gospel is God is fully present. Faith in this Gospel completely delivers us from the power of sin, death and the devil.

In this Gospel Paul reminds us that the righteousness of God is revealed. In this incarnational Gospel we experience the righteousness of God in the person of Jesus Christ, in his birth, life, ministry, death on the cross and glorious resurrection and ascension. This is the righteousness that God has and it is the righteousness that God imparts to all who believe in Him. Jesus Christ is both our justification and our sanctification. No person could ever have conceived it but less attain it on their own. It is only God who can put us in a right relationship with himself and this he does through the life giving sacrifice of his only son. It is Jesus who pays the price of our sin. It is Jesus who dies the death we deserve to die. It is Jesus who takes our place on the cross and in doing so makes us right with God. Jesus brings us back into the relationship He intended, a relationship broken and destroyed by sin and offered as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ.

How does one receive this righteousness, this justification, this sanctification, this redemption and salvation, this deliverance from sin? There is only one way, only one means of salvation. It is through faith in the person Jesus Christ. Faith is the starting point and faith is the goal. I believe Paul is telling us that it takes a person of faith to be an agent of faith in the life of another. This my brothers and sisters is the both the meaning and the content of discipleship. In is not this imputed innocence that saves us but this new relationship, this restored relationship in Jesus Christ. Faith is the nature of that relationship and Jesus is the content of that relationship. Paul quotes the prophet Habakkuk. “The righteous will live by faith.” That is the both the way and the end.

Somebody asked Luther, Is the Word that Christ spoke when he was on earth the same in fact and in effect as the Word preached by a minister? Yes, Luther responded, because ‘He who hears you hears me. Paul says this is the power of God. Then the person asked Luther, is there a difference between the Word that became flesh and the word proclaimed by a minister. “By all means!” he replied. “The former is the incarnate Word, who was true God from the beginning, and the latter is the Word that’s proclaimed. The former Word is in substance God; the latter Word is in its effect the power of God.

The Gospel is Jesus Christ, not a report of past events and an exposition of theological doctrine. Paul tells us that the Gospel is the power of God not merely a witness **to** his power but an *expression* **of** his power. It is not that the Gospel was accompanied by mighty works, but that the Gospel itself is a mighty work. God’s singular purpose in exercising his power is to change our lives, to liberate us from sin and death, and to reconcile us to himself, to save us. The Gospel has power to effect the salvation it announces and to impart the life it promises. If people are to experience salvation they must hear and believe the Gospel. The Gospel is the place of the encounter between the sinner and the Savior.

Luther writes, “He who finds pleasure and enjoyment in the things that are of the flesh and of the world cannot have a taste or pleasure for the things that are of the Spirit of God. Therefore he is not only ashamed to proclaim the Gospel to others, but he fights against it and does not want it to be spoken to him. He hates the light and loves the darkness. For this reason he does not suffer the salutary truth to be spoken to him. Moreover, to be *ashamed of the Gospel* is a fault of cowardice in pastors, but to contradict it and not to listen to it is a fault of stupidity in church members. This is obvious when the preacher is afraid of the power, influence, and number of his hearers and is silent concerning the essential truth and when the unresponsive hearer despises the lowliness and humble appearance of the Word. Thus it becomes foolishness to him and an insane thing, as I Cor. 2:14 says: “The natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God. For they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them,” and Rom. 8:7: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot. Thus we arrive at the conclusion: He who believes in the Gospel must become weak and foolish before men so that he may be strong and wise in the power and wisdom of God, as I Cor. 1:27, 25 tells us: “The weak and foolish things of the world God chose that He might confound the strong and wise. The weakness and foolishness of God is stronger and wiser than men.” Therefore, when you hear that the power of God is soon rejected, you must recognize this as a manifestation of the power of men, or of the world and the flesh. Thus all power and wisdom and righteousness must be hidden and buried and not apparent, altogether according to the image and likeness of Christ, who emptied Himself so that He might completely hide His power, wisdom, and goodness and instead put on weakness, foolishness, and hardship.”

Luther’s writing is just as relevant in our culture as it was in his.

I am always amazed at those who object to discipleship that lifts up the value of growing in our faith when Luther writes this: “We are being changed … from one degree of glory to another,” and also in Ps. 84:8: “They go from strength to strength.” So also “from faith to faith,” by growing more and more, so that “he that is righteous, let him be made righteous still” (Rev. 22:11). In other words, no one should be of the opinion that he has already obtained (Phil. 3:12) and thus stops growing, that is, starts declining. Blessed Augustine says in chapter 11 of his *On the Spirit and the Letter:* “From the faith of those who confess with their mouth to the faith of those who are obedient.” Paul of Burgos says: “From the faith of the synagog (as a starting point) to the faith of the church (as a goal).”

Friends, Paul understood what it is like for a person to live in a culture where the gospel is despised. Like all human beings, he wanted to be loved and accepted by his peers. Nobody wants to be laughed at; nobody wants to be rejected or be an outcast. But he was willing for all of that to happen, because the gospel was so valuable and so important. Why? **Because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.**

Paul is not ashamed because his message was not simply information, but the power of God. He was not ashamed to preach or teach it because it is through the proclamation of this Gospel that God has chosen to save the world. It is the power of salvation. This responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply for Pastors, but the Pastor has the responsibility of equipping every disciple of Jesus to proclaim this Gospel in the context of every relationship. This is Life-to-Life Discipleship.

Remember these words of Jesus to his disciples, to each and every one of us from Matthew 10:32-33. “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

I am not ashamed of Jesus

I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus

We profess it…Let us live it!

In the name of Jesus

A-men

**What does this mean?**

Toward a Lutheran understanding of Scriptural Interpretation

In our current culture what is the greatest challenge we face and what do we have to offer from a Lutheran perspective regarding Christian faith?

I believe our desperate efforts to deny all authority are a cry for ultimate authority. In as much as we deny authority we are constantly lifting up alternative sources of authority to guide our life, to establish values and create a culture that is life-giving.

Reflect with me on the host of alternatives that we have explored:

1. We have looked to technology as a source of authority, to computers, the internet as a means of connecting us and creating community, artificial intelligence. We turn to the Internet for authoritative information. Many contend that if it is on the Internet it must be true. And yet we have learned that these same sources have also been used to divide us, spy on us, to deceive and undermine our security.
2. We have pursued science as a source of ultimate authority. What was once a system of theories constantly being tested and changed based on new evidence has become absolute doctrine that must be believed in order to be included in the scientific community. (Darwin’s theory of evolution)
3. Education is another source of authority. We turn to people with degrees in a variety of subjects as if the degree imparts true wisdom regarding the application of truth to life. They assert because they have degrees, they are experts and others must follow their direction even on matters they have never studied.
4. Some believe that the medical community holds the ultimate authority to help us live longer even if we aren’t living better. Some are foolish enough to believe that if we solve every health problem we will achieve eternal existence here. So we follow every word of our doctors placing our complete trust in them. The movement toward, diets, fitness and health consciousness is not far behind.
5. Many believe that political power and party platforms and agendas is the ultimate authority to secure our future. All the problems in the world and in our own nation can be solved through the right party politics.
6. Some are pursing the authority of the self. Self-centeredness, self-fulfillment, self-actualization, is never far from pure selfishness, grounding meaning in feelings, sexuality, using relationships for getting what we need or desire.
7. Not far behind is the authority and power in the accumulation of wealth, money, possessions, etc. We honor and envy those who have more and live our lives in the wrestles pursuit of gaining the authority that comes with wealth.

Nothing could be more important for the world and the ministry of the Church than our understanding of this question of authority.

When Jesus gives his disciples the great commission in Matthew 28, he starts with these words., “All power and authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” I want to ask you today, do you believe that? Everything else he says in the great commission depends on our belief in this truth. Our going, making disciples, baptizing, teaching and the consolation of his presence are all dependent on this one important truth, Jesus has all power and all authority. Perhaps you can already see the problem. In our culture we believe in political power and the authority of people who simply claim it for themselves. Dallas Willard writes, “The deeper issue here is the authority of the knowledge institutions of our time and what shall and shall not be taught under the flag of that authority. Many atheists and agnostic critics of Christianity lay claim to that authority and believe their higher degrees license them to talk grandly about things they have never studied, theology, Jesus or the Christian spiritual life.

Even among Christians, I am amazed at how few believe that Jesus is a reliable source of information about our lives. We often consider our sophisticated wisdom far superior to His outdated knowledge. In our culture Jesus is automatically disassociated from brilliance or intellectual capacity. It is no small wonder that people are not flocking to become his disciples. Dallas Willard writes, “Far too often Jesus is regarded as hardly conscious. He is taken as a mere icon, a wraith-like semblance of a man living on the margins of the "real life" where you and I must dwell. He is perhaps fit for the role of sacrificial lamb or alienated social critic, but little more.” What lies at the heart of this astonishing disregard for Jesus is that professing Christians are uninformed about His nature and identity and therefore have little respect for Him. If we don’t respect Jesus how can we worship Him? Why would we follow Him, give our lives for Him or make disciples of all nations?

In the early days of the Church they worshipped Jesus, boldly proclaimed Jesus, followed Jesus, believed in Jesus nature and identity as revealed in the Scripture. They not only respected Jesus but as Paul clarifies in Colossians 2:3, they believed that “in Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

In the midst of a world bombarded by misinformation that leaves us to be manipulated into misery by our own selfish desires and the wills of those who would misuse us, Jesus offers us vital information of who we are, why we live, the nature of the problems we face and the source of hope and transformation through the water of life that longs to well up in us through faith in Him.

In His sovereignty over every aspect of life, Dallas Willard referred to Jesus as the smartest, most intelligent person who ever lived. If He embodies such sovereignty what subject is he ignorant of or uninformed? It is impossible to have a high view of Scripture and a low view of Jesus, just as it equally impossible to have a high view of Jesus and a low view of Scripture.

Does it change things if you really believe that Jesus is not just a lovable cynic, as some have described him, but in Him all things hold together! His power was demonstrated by His miracles and the greatest miracle of all His resurrection. He is Lord of all and as such He indeed has all authority. Rather than condemning the world for their failure to accept Jesus, I think it better for us to simply ask what place does Jesus have in our lives? Do we acknowledge him as the one with all power and all authority? Is He Lord over your family, career, sexuality, finances, morality, politics, values, priorities, thoughts, actions, words? Rather than acknowledge His power and authority, I would rather claim some power and authority for myself. And this creates the struggle that keeps us from going too far, if we move at all. His Great Commission calls us to teach others to obey all He has commanded us.

Luther’s words are helpful. “For a Christian life consists entirely in the following: First, that we believe and trust in Christ our Savior, being fully assured that we are not deserted by him, whatever need or danger may betide us. Secondly, that every Christian person also conducts himself toward friend or foe in the same way, as he sees Christ does, who is so willing to help everyone. Whoever does this, is a Christian; but he who does it not, is no Christian, though he calls himself one. For these two cannot be separated; faith must be followed by its fruits, or it is not true faith.”

Dietrich Bonheoffer writes, “The only proper response to the word which Jesus brings with Him from eternity is to do it!” Jesus repeatedly emphasizes doing what he says and not just listening to his words or endlessly discussing them. Remember Jesus concludes His sermon on the mount with the contrasting images of the man who builds his house on the sand and the man who builds his house on the rock. One is destroyed while the other stands firm. There is only one thing that separates them. One knows the teaching but refuses to do it. The other knows Jesus teaching and obeys it. This is the way we acknowledge His authority in our lives. If Jesus is the one with all authority what is to be gained by remaining disobedient? Being a disciple, a follower of Jesus involves us in that confession and obedient response.

We have been taught many things about Luther’s understanding of the authority of the Scripture. There is a little book I commend to you by Reu, “Luther and the Scriptures.” It is one of the most helpful books I have ever read concerning Luther’s understanding. Let me offer you several quotes directly from Luther in this work.

"All light must come from revelation, the human understanding is unable to understand supernatural matters."

"What pasture is to the beast, the nest for the birds, the stream for fish, the Scriptures are for believing souls.To the arrogant, of course, they are a stumbling block; he will have nothing to do with them, since they offer him nothing. But to him who approaches the Scriptures with humility they open themselvesand themselves produce humility andchange man from a desperate sinner into a child of God. They give everything, which the soul needs,and it is to tempt God, if anyone will not be satisfied with the Scriptures. They are the fountain from which one must dip.Each word of the same is a source which affords an inexhaustible abundance of water to everyone who thirsts after the saving doctrine.God's will is completely contained therein, so that we must constantly go back to them. Nothing should be presented which is not confirmed by the authority of both Testaments and agrees with them.It cannot be otherwise, for the Scriptures are divine; in them God speaks and they are His Word."

To hear or to read the Scriptures is nothing else than to hear God.They are His sanctuary in which He is present. Therefore we dare not despise one single word of the Scripture…

We read in the Prophets, "The Word of the Lord came to me." This is the friendliest and most intimate inspiration there is.Every word of the Scriptures must be precious to us because it comes from the mouth of God, is written for us, preserved for us, and will be proclaimed to the end of days.

In 1519, in the disputation with Eck Luther denied the infallibility of Popes and Councils and advanced the infallibility of Scripture as the sole decisive norm… Further Luther writes that while they have erred Holy Scripture is the inerrant Word of God *(verbum Dei infallibile).* Luther emphatically stated that the authority of Scripture is far above the rational capacity of the entire human race.

Comparing the authority of the Church to Scripture, Luther wrote, “The Church also has no power to establish new divine promises of grace, as some foolishly speak... God's Word stands incomparably high above the Church, in this Word she, as a creature, cannot resolve, order, or execute but can only be resolved, ordered, and carried out.

Scripture is the *primum principium;* it is "in itself the *most certain, the most accessible,* the *most readily understandable* (book) *which interprets itself* andapproves, judges, and illumines all (words) of all. Scripture cannot err. It is not the Word of God because the Church says so, but because God's Word said so, therefore is the Church.”

However simple the words of Scripture may seem, you should not doubt that they are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the high Majesty, power, and wisdom of God… Therefore let your own thoughts and feelings go and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as therichest of mines, which can never be worked out, so that you may find the wisdom of God that He lays before you in such simple and foolish guise, in order that He may quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and little are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them."

The Word of God is the touchstone, the rule and plumbline, that tells us what should be preached.

"In theology only one thing is necessary: that we hear and believe and conclude in our heart: God is truthful, however absurd what He says in his Word may seem to our reason."

“Let anyone who loves idle questions ask on. He will find more to question than he can answer."

You might find it interesting to read what Luther writes about the six day creation. Augustine contends that it happened instantaneously. Luther, writes, “Moses spoke literally not allegoricaly or figuratively, that is, the world and all its creatures was created within the six days as the words declare. Because we are not able to comprehend we shall remain disciples and leave the instructorship to the Holy Ghost." Give the Holy Ghost the honor of being wiser than yourself, for you should so deal *with Scripture that you believe that God Himself* is speaking. Since it is God who is speaking, it is not fitting frivolously to twist His words.”

As we celebrate this 500th anniversary of the Reformation the issues of authority in the Church are just as important today as they were in the time of Luther. This was the primary issue of the Reformation.

Luther contended that the Bible was not just for specialists but is available to the average person to understand its meaning. Some would say his greatest contribution is that he moved the Bible from the Cathedral to the kitchen table.

The issue was the silence of the Bible in the Church. “Let the Bible cease to be heard and soon the remembered Christ becomes an imagined Christ, shaped by the religiosity and the unconscious desires of his worshipers.”

Holy Scripture is the ultimate authority of the Church, the norm for all matters of life and faith, the norm that norms all other norms.

“The Bible alone is to be trusted because it is through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all.” All leaders must subordinate themselves to its witness… “The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven – these should not be masters, judges, arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture”

For Luther the Scriptures are:

Inerrant – “Men may err and be deceive but God’s Word cannot err.”

Infallible – “The Word of God will never fail you.”

Powerful – “Conquers the devil”

Connected to Jesus – “The Bible is the manger that holds the Christ.”

Connected to the Spirit – “Through the Spirit and the Word God lets himself and His will be known and grasped.”

“Through the Word, we come to Christ, the Kingdom of God comes to us, faith is given, we are called and converted, our sins are forgiven, our conscience is consoled, our hearts are comforted, we become the Saints of Christ, we properly worship.”

Treat them as a treasure and a jewel. Hear it, learn it and always have it in your heart, on your lips and in your ears. Remember our sin and the devil drives us to scorn the Word. (Luther always encouraged memorizing the Word)

Interpreting the scripture is not a matter of anything goes as some have interpreted it.

Luther’s method of interpreting the scriptures…

1. Literal sense of scripture is identical with its historical content. There is no going behind the text in order to discover a different event than the event reported.
2. We see both Law and Gospel in the text. It points to our sin and our need for Grace and then it provides the clear remedy through the Gospel of Jesus.

3.The Scriptures always point us to Jesus.

1. The Scriptures interpret themselves. Read the entire Word in order to understand and interpret the individual parts.
2. The Bible has a universal and immediate sense, granted by the Holy Spirit and recognized by the eyes of faith that transcends historical conditions and events and must be interpreted in the public reading and study by faithful people.

How did we get to the place where in our culture among “Christian” theologians we still question the truth of the resurrection of Jesus? It cannot be Christian and it is certainly not Lutheran no matter how many who call themselves Lutheran agree with such teaching.

In the midst of modern Gnosticism the need for the bold and unequivocal position regarding the ultimate and transcendent authority of the Word of God in Holy Scripture has never been more important not only for the Church but for the world!