

Tuesday after Reminiscere



In Nomine Iesu. Amen.

Acts 5:27-32

I.i.

“Good sermon, pastor!” “Well, you did it again, pastor. You really spoke to me today.” “Oh, pastor! You have such a gift for preaching. I could listen to you for hours.” If there is anything preachers love, it is for their vanity to be stroked. What present can you give to the preacher who has it all? Well, compliments, of course, and plenty of them. After all, preaching a sermon is hard work, in many ways the sermon is the most public, most visible part of what you do, and where pastors tend to be most sensitive. And we preachers are no different to other people; we enjoy praise as much as the next guy, and we want the listeners to benefit from the sermon, want it to speak to them, want it to touch them; it is good that pastors tend to be concerned about the needs of their hearers, but perhaps not so good that pastors want to be appreciated for their concern, want to be liked, need to be loved.

Unfortunately, this means we pastors tend to preach in ways that will make people like us. To include quotes and eloquent sayings to impress the educated; to tell jokes to make the people laugh; to indulge in witticisms that make you sound profound; anything to make people remember the sermon for more than 15 minutes, anything, anything but the law. You see, the law offends people. Telling them where they do wrong, that they are sinners and in breach of God’s justice – stings. Preaching the law of God is offensive. It hurts. And most pastors don’t like to hurt people. One of my preaching supervisors once told me: I don’t preach the law. The law beats people up, and when the people come and sit under my pulpit, they’ve been beat up all week. They’ve been beat up enough. I don’t have to make it any worse.”

Well, that's a noble sentiment, and it was certainly well-intentioned, and almost certainly the people love you even more for making them feel good Sunday after Sunday. But – is that what you are called to do, pastor? Is it your calling to make people feel good? Whose need are you fueling really? Their need to feel good – or your need to feel liked and your desire to be loved? The problem that you keep running into – doggone it – is that the Word of God is just so downright offensive sometimes. In fact, it's often offensive. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Beautiful words, comforting words, inspiring words. John 3:16 is the most popular verse of the Bible. But have you checked out John 3: 18? “Whoever believes in [God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Ouch. “Whoever does not believe is condemned already...” That's strong stuff. It's a hard teaching. That will not make you popular or bring the crowds flocking in. Preach John 3:16, and people will love you; preach v.18, and it will get you accused of intolerance, radicalism, and even hate speech.

This is just one example among many. So then, dear preachers, you have two choices. You can cherry-pick the Gospel nuggets out of the Scripture and have the people lap it up and love you; or you can preach the Word as it stands, preach both Gospel and Law, and run the risk of offense.

Would you like to guess which one Dr. Luther chose? Luther once gave advice to his friend and colleague, Philip Melancthon: “Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you.” When you preach the law, it will convict the people of their sin. And they will either accept that conviction, or they will become angry at you and hate you for pointing out their sin. Luther went on to say elsewhere: “[A preacher] must nourish, defend and teach; he must have teeth in in his mouth and be able to bite and fight.” And Luther led by example, “pressing law/gospel; God/Satan; sin/grace. ... He frequently offended by language and action. He spoke of ‘stink’ and ‘manure’ from the pulpit. At Eisenach on one occasion he hammered away at a text while preaching so that he split a three-inch board.” (David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998, 1:157-159)

CFW Walther's excellent book on Law and Gospel teaches the exact same thing: “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when,

on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel” (Thesis VI). Here Walther makes a crucial point. The question is not *whether* you preach the law, but *how*. When preachers try to suppress the law, then the law makes it ways into the Gospel. It becomes “Lospel,” salt that has lost its saltiness, lukewarm water good only to be spat out. When you as a preacher try to protect your people from the law, to shield them, when you try to sweeten the law to make it more palatable to them, then, to use Walther’s words, you are injecting poison into the medicine, which renders it ineffective and neutralizes its operation. The law bites; the law tears; the law kills; the law condemns. This is its work. And your work, dear preacher, is not to make excuses for the law, but to give the people the law and let it do its work, even if that results in them rejecting you. Your job is not to talk about people’s sins; it is to show people their sins and to let the law convict them and condemn them.

But do not take my word for it. Nor Walther’s. Nor Luther’s. Look at how St. Peter preaches. The apostles have been arrested for doing signs and wonders in Jesus’ name, and for preaching the word of Jesus. The Jewish council had warned them not to preach and teach in the name of Jesus, but they do it anyway. And now they are up for charges of heresy; the council suspects them for trying to pin the blame of Jesus’ death on them. Now imagine that you were the pastor and these were your listeners. What would you say? What would you preach? “Oh, it’s not so bad, Jesus came back from the dead, it’s all good?” “You probably meant well. God knows that.” “You just do your best, God does the rest.” NO! Peter preaches none of those things. He preaches the law, and he preaches the Gospel. *You killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree.* That’s the law. Despite the sword hanging over his head, Peter proclaims the law, the denier becomes the proclaimer, and he says it unashamedly, unabashedly, unapologetically. You killed him. Boom. “Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you.” That’s what Peter is doing. And his listeners do hate him for it. But Peter is doing them a favor.

A favor? Why? Well, it’s like with a snake bite. If you put a bit of Zambuc or oil or muti from the iSangoma on a cobra bite, what good will that do? None, none at all, it will only make it worse. This is what it is to preach the Gospel without the law. It is to put a nice clean plaster on a cobra bite. To treat a cobra bite, you cut open the wound, draw the poison out, and apply antivenin. Only then can the poison victim heal. And God is all about healing. This is why the Great Physician came, to heal the world, to draw

into himself the poison of a dying world, and to let the law of God run its course and bring about justice in his own body, suffering the sins of the world and paying the ultimate penalty of death. And we know this because God raised him from the dead. His resurrection is the signal of the appeasement of God's wrath, it is why we have a Gospel. But to apply that Gospel, the words of life and the kiss of life, the law must first cut open the wounded heart and kill and lay the poison bare. Then the sick man can receive the medicine, be healed, live, rejoice, give thanks and celebrate.

This is why St. Peter preaches Gospel and Law. Even to such wicked guilty sinners as you. For you see, you killed Jesus. St Peter speaks the law to you. It was your sin that caused his death, brought him down from heaven and nailed him to the tree. But: Do not despair! Do not lose hope. *God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.* Yes, to give you the time of grace, the time to repent, and confess, and be forgiven, absolved, washed clean, healed of all sin. And the same goes for the Jewish council, even, yes, even to such wicked sinners as me. St. Peter shows how Lutheran preachers, yes, how truly Christian preachers preach the law. In the second person. Sinners must die; you are a sinner; you must die. Boom. But he also preaches the Gospel, the love of God, the forgiveness of God that is in yours in Christ, by grace, through faith. And so St. Peter models also how the Gospel is preached. To sinners cut open by the law. To dead people to bring them to life. To bring the good news of Jesus home to them. That they may live. *And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.* Obey here clearly means to submit to the law and to receive the Gospel and forgiveness in Christ's name, to hear, receive and do his Word.

“Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you.” The people listening to Peter's sermon decide to go for option 2. And it is only the wise council of Gamaliel that mollifies them to hold off and be satisfied with ‘merely’ beating and flogging the apostles and letting them off with a warning. *Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.* And you can be sure that that teaching and preaching of Christ was the faithful teaching and preaching of the Law, and the faithful teaching and preaching of the Gospel. Pray God that the Lutheran church, Lutheran pastors, indeed the church worldwide too would be convicted of error,

repent of sins – daily – receive forgiveness from the living Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit faithfully teach and preach *that the Christ is Jesus*. And only then rejoice when counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Amen. *SOLI DEO GLORIA* - Pastor Karl Böhmer

Reminiscere – The Servant of God
Acts 5:17-29

Watchword: Rom 5:8
HYMN:
PSALM: 41

Acts 5:17-29 (ESV)

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.