

# 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon: Preach the Gospel!

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Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15,16).

About a year ago the seminary engaged an architect to come up with plans to renovate the seminary chapel. The committee told the architect, “Feel free to be creative. There is nothing that must be preserved, with but one exception: In some way the Greek words *κηρυξατε το ευαγγελιον*, “Preach the gospel,” words that have been before the eyes of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students over the years, must continue to occupy a place of prominence.

It probably will come as a surprise to most of us (it did to me) that, as we discovered from photos we have received for this anniversary, these words were not present in the chapel when the Thiensville/Mequon seminary was dedicated in 1929. They were added later, exactly when, I'm not sure.

Yet it is clear that preparing men to preach the gospel has been the mission of the seminary throughout its 75 years in Mequon, throughout its 141 years of existence as a seminary, in fact. The 1929-30 catalog of the seminary states: “The graduates of the seminary are to be qualified to preach the pure gospel of Jesus Christ in conscious agreement with the confessions of our church, this gospel to be their controlling guide in all their future pastoral work.” The current catalog of the seminary speaks of leading its students “into a reverent, thorough, and scholarly study of Holy Scripture as the inspired, inerrant Word of God and to a clear apprehension of its contents, especially of its basic messages of law and gospel.” It speaks of sending out into the ministry men who are “confessional in stance” and “evangelical [gospel-centered] in approach.”

So, even though the words *κηρυξατε το ευαγγελιον* haven't been displayed in the seminary chapel throughout these 75 years, we can say with certainty that the seminary's focus has been and continues to be to prepare men to preach the gospel, to proclaim it unashamedly, to guard it zealously, and to extend it aggressively.

## **PREACH THE GOSPEL**

In an article I wrote recently for the seminary's new *κηρυξατε* magazine, I called attention to the remarkable similarity between the seminary's curriculum of 1929 and 2004. The similarity is intentional, because there is a remarkable similarity between the people of 1929 and 2004, between people of all times, in fact. When you study the Scriptures, it doesn't take long to discover that people way back in Bible times were no different from people today. You don't have to dig very deeply into your own heart to find remnants of a hateful Cain, a greedy Lot, a deceitful Jacob, a jealous Esau, a dishonest Laban, a defiant Pharaoh, a grumbling, ungrateful Israel, a self-willed King Saul, a lustful David, a treacherous Absalom, a materialistic Solomon, a covetous Ahab, a self-righteous Pharisee, a traitorous Judas, a Christ-denying Peter, a cowardly Twelve, a doubting Thomas, a hypocritical Ananias and Sapphira, a lukewarm Laodicea, a chief of sinners Saul of Tarsus.

We hear much about how the world has changed and keeps changing; and it has, and it will continue to do so. But one thing hasn't changed: the need for people, the need for you and me, to hear the gospel, the sweet good news that God looked down on this world of sinners—on us—not with anger but with mercy, that God stepped into this world in the person of his Son, not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved from condemnation. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that . . . we might have hope” (Ro 15:4). And that is what the gospel gives. It gives hope. It gives certainty. It gives life.

So, that is what we do in the ministry. We preach the gospel. And that is what we do, and have continued to do for the past 75 years, at the seminary: We have been preparing men to go out into the world with the gospel. It is a world that needs more than a band-aid to cure what ails it, a world that needs more than pious platitudes and philosophical gobbledygook, a world that needs more than exhortations to shape up. It is a world that needs rescue and reviving. That can come only through the gospel, for the gospel alone is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16).

We train our students to proclaim the gospel unashamedly.

### **Proclaim the Gospel Unashamedly**

Why might we be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel? Sometimes it doesn't seem to be working. The results are slow to come or perhaps invisible to our eyes. So we become discouraged and look for other ways to get God's work done, ways that promise to produce the results we long to see. We forget that the gospel always works. When the gospel is proclaimed, says Jesus, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” For some, St. Paul tells us, those who reject the gospel, our preaching will be the “smell of death,” while for others, those led by the Spirit to accept the gospel, our preaching will be the “fragrance of life” (2 Co 2:16). But either way the gospel is working, producing life or death, never leaving people in the same place they were before they heard it.

May God, for the sake of the shed blood of Jesus, forgive us for ever apologizing for the gospel. Don't apologize, brothers. Proclaim. Proclaim unapologetically. Proclaim unashamedly in the spirit of St. Paul who himself says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Ro 1:16), and who urges his co-worker Timothy, “Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord” (2 Tm 1:8). I like the way Martin Franzmann puts it, “Preach you the Word and plant it home, to those who like or like it not” (Christian Worship, 540).

Don't be defensive about the gospel. Don't be ashamed that it is all you have to offer. That would be like a doctor who holds in his hands a cure for a dread disease apologizing, “I'm sorry. That's all I have.” You don't need anything else. You don't need anything new. Christ hasn't changed his commission to his church and he never will change it, for people's greatest needs haven't changed and they won't change. Preach the gospel. Proclaim it unashamedly.

At the same time, guard the gospel zealously.

### **Guard the Gospel Zealously**

The word *κηρυσσατε* in the phrase *κηρυσσατε το ευαγγελιον*, “Preach the gospel,” contains the picture of a herald, one who makes official announcements on behalf of another, particularly a king. Heralds of the gospel are heralds of the King. We have no right to put our own spin on the message. We tell what the King tells us to tell.

The primary message of heralds of the King is the gospel itself, the good news of justification by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. But there is an inter-connection between the gospel, the central message of the Scriptures, and everything else taught in the Scriptures. Every scriptural teaching in some way or other relates to its heart and center, the gospel. If you start chipping away at the fringes, eventually you affect the core also. St. Paul describes error as gangrene, which must be ruthlessly cut out or in time it can destroy everything. In one of our readings for this service he predicts this infection of gangrene: "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine .... They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tm 4:3,4). We don't have to do much study in the history of the church or of seminaries within the church to see how this has actually happened.

This service's first lesson reminded us that the Lord has made preachers watchmen, accountable to him for protecting their flocks from the enemy: Satan and his lies. They are, as Jesus put it in Matthew's version of the Great Commission, to teach their people to "obey everything" Jesus has commanded. For our seminary graduates to be able to do that, they need careful and thorough training in the truth. Our Seminary needs to do for its students what St. Paul did the students of his seminary in Ephesus. He reminded them, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27). May we as a seminary continue to be able to say just that to our graduates!

Already 2000 years ago, when the New Testament church was in its infancy, there was a body of doctrine that St. Paul felt constrained to pass on to the next generation of pastors. He calls it the "good deposit" (2 Tm 1:14). A seminary's call, our seminary's call, is to pass on to its students intact this good deposit, this body of doctrine, in other words, to indoctrinate our students. I know that in our day the word "indoctrinate" has taken on a rather negative connotation. People tend to use the words "indoctrinate" and "brainwash" interchangeably; but there is a difference between the two. A brainwashed person has mindlessly and uncritically accepted a set of beliefs. We don't want you students to be mindless and uncritical. We want you to follow the example of the Bereans who, when Paul taught them, "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Ac 17:11).

If that kind of spirit is to prevail among our students, it must continue to prevail in our faculty also, a spirit that does not uncritically accept and pass down doctrinal formulations from the past but rather searches the Scriptures anew each generation. The result will be a seminary faculty that can say, "This we believe, this we teach, this we pass on to our students, not simply because it is what our forefathers taught us, but because we know that it is what the Word of God teaches." We have beautiful examples of that kind of approach to the teaching of doctrine in seminary leaders of years gone by, men such as Adolf Hoenecke, August Pieper, J. P. Koehler, John Schaller, J. P. Meyer, and Carl Lawrenz. May we as a seminary continue to search the Scriptures carefully and then pass on its truths to the next generation. That is the proper way to indoctrinate our students and is a key way by which we guard the gospel.

Finally, as we consider these words of Jesus, *κηρυσσατε το ευαγγελιον*, "Preach the gospel," we need to remind ourselves to extend the gospel aggressively.

### **Extend the Gospel Aggressively**

Consider again the words of Jesus: *κηρυσσατε το ευαγγελιον*. "Be heralds of the gospel." Then think of the phrases that precede and follow this commission: "Go into all the world" and preach the good news "to all creation." This is quite a king for whom our seminary is preparing heralds. This King, by paying the ransom price of his own Son, bought back the whole world for himself—all creation, redeemed, restored, forgiven. That's our field: all creation, all the world.

We said earlier that the world has not changed in its greatest need: the need to hear the gospel of forgiveness. At the same time it is a world that is constantly changing. In many, many ways this is not our fathers' world. Let me give you three examples right from within the borders of the United States. Example number one: the movement from country to city. In 1890 one-third of our nation lived in urban areas, two-thirds in rural areas. Today, 115 years later, about 80% of our nation lives in the city and but 20% in the country. If you want to be a herald, you need to go where the people are.

A second example: the change in the ethnic makeup of the United States. I'll mention just the most noticeable one. In the past ten years the number of Hispanics in the United States has increased by 58%, or 13 million. Approximately 1 in every 8 Americans is Hispanic. Of the 35 million Hispanics in the United States 80% of those over the age of five speak Spanish at home. Do Hispanics need the same gospel as German Lutherans? Obviously. Do we need to figure out how best to bring the gospel to them? I think you know the answer.

A third example: the effect on our society of post-modern thinking, a philosophy which maintains that absolute truth is non-existent and therefore unobtainable. Do those steeped in post-modern thinking need to hear the gospel? Obviously. Do we have to figure out ways to bring the message of the one who says, "I am the truth," to those who insist, "There is no truth"? Again, I think you know the answer.

Aggressively extending the gospel in a rapidly changing world is one of the big challenges our Lord is setting before our church body and our seminary in these days. In general, I would say that our seminary is doing a good job of training our students to feed the faithful and also to guard the gospel. We perhaps have farther to go in helping them to find ways to build bridges to those outside of the Body of Christ. May the Lord lead our seminary to continue to make aggressive extension of the gospel in an ever-changing world a high priority.

### **A Final Word**

We give thanks to our gracious Lord for the 75 years of blessed ministry of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on the Mequon campus. May our seminary always be content with the status quo and yet at the same time never be content with the status quo.

Always be content with the status quo—with your message and mission: *κηρυξάτε το ευαγγελιον*, "Preach the gospel."

Never be content with the status quo. Constantly study the Word to make its truths your own and then pass them down to the next generation of pastors. And constantly study the world to find doors for entering it with the gospel, and then pass those insights on to the next generation also.

*κηρυξάτε το ευαγγελιον*, "Preach the gospel." Proclaim it unashamedly. Guard it zealously. Extend it aggressively. In the name of and by the power of Jesus. Amen.