

The Third Sunday in Advent – Pr. Faugstad sermon
1 Corinthians 4:1-5: “Jesus’ Work Is the Measure of Our Success.”
December 16/17, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord Jesus Christ, who at Your first coming [sent] Your messenger to prepare Your way before You, grant that the ministers and stewards of Your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready Your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at Your second coming, to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in Your sight: who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 52)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. We read selected verses in Jesus’ name:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who continues to carry out His mission of redemption through the efforts of His faithful people, dear fellow redeemed:

His work had started so well. The thirty-something preacher came in with tremendous energy. He maybe wasn’t the greatest looking guy, and he had some strange habits, but there was a magnetism about him. People came from all over to hear him preach – young and old, church and unchurched; even important people in their expensive clothes came to see “what this is all about.”

He didn’t let anyone off the hook. With biting words, he exposed their sin as though he could see into their hearts. He was not afraid of anyone, from peasant to prince. He preached like there was no tomorrow. “*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees,*” he cried. “*Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*” (Mat. 3:10). But it wasn’t all doom and gloom. He also told them about God’s grace toward sinners. “Repent and be baptized,” he said; “receive the forgiveness of sins.” Some even wondered if he might be the promised Messiah.

But John was not the Messiah. The real Messiah came to John while he was baptizing at the Jordan River. He urged John to baptize Him, and when he did, the heavens were opened, the

Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the Father spoke from above to His “beloved Son,” with whom He was well pleased (Mat. 3:16-17). What an experience! Preacher John now pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Joh. 1:29).

Just imagine what these two great men could accomplish. Imagine how many people they could reach by working together. But that isn’t exactly how it went. They did work simultaneously for a little while, and then John’s disciples started to see the crowds shrinking. They realized the crowds were leaving John and going to Jesus! But John was not upset. “I am the friend of the bridegroom,” he said. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Joh. 3:29,30).

John did decrease, very quickly. He called out the adultery of King Herod, who had taken his brother Philip’s wife for himself. So Herod arrested John and put him in prison (Mat. 14:3-4). That is where we find him in the Holy Gospel for today – in prison (Mat. 11:2-10). What good could John do there? He longed to be back out in the Judean wilderness, preaching by the Jordan. A few faithful disciples continued to visit him through his bars. Perhaps that’s why John sent them to question Jesus; he knew his time was short. It was the Bridegroom who mattered.

Would you say that John had a successful ministry? Since He pointed out Jesus as the Messiah, the answer must be yes. But if that had happened in this church, if a fiery preacher had attracted such crowds that all the pews were filled, and it was standing room only. If that preacher helped put your church on the map where it belonged, but then the crowds started thinning and the cars stopped pulling up for Sunday service until it was back to just you. And then to top it all off, that once-popular preacher ended up in prison. Would you be glad for the high point, or would it just depress you to think about what you used to have?

It is tempting to think about success in the church by numbers. You might think back to when each row of pews had people in them, when every member’s social life and spiritual life were largely intertwined and centered in the church. For example, the Young People’s Society had enough kids to raise money for Jerico’s large stained-glass windows. There wasn’t enough room in our church basements for congregational dinners. What has changed? People have more commitments away from home, more on the schedule. Families are smaller than they used to be. Fewer people live near the churches. Church attendance is falling in all mainline denominations. These things are true.

But perhaps you also wonder if the church would do better if it changed a little more with the times. Maybe if we weren’t so strict about moral issues, or if we gave a little ground on our Communion practice or our style of worship. Or maybe it seems like the pastor could do different things to connect with the members and the community – get a stronger youth program going, offer more classes, do more to reach out.

Every pastor wants to be a good pastor, but he often has doubts. “What could I be doing better? Has my presence here really made a positive difference? Would the parish be better off if I left, and someone else stepped in?” How is a congregation supposed to measure its pastor? How is a pastor supposed to assess his own work?

The apostle Paul outlines the standard. He does not mention a trajectory of growth in membership. He does not identify the level of happiness and satisfaction that should be felt by

parishioners and pastor. Paul says this about how people should think of pastors: *"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."*

So the important question for parishioners is not first and foremost, "Do I like my pastor?" or "Is my pastor a really good preacher or teacher?" or "Has he brought in new members?" The important question is, "Do I recognize that my pastor, even with all his weaknesses and quirks, is a *'servant of Christ'*? Do I acknowledge that God has put him here to distribute His gifts through His Holy Word and Sacraments?" That is the true measure of a pastor, that he faithfully carries out these duties the congregation has called him to do.

And a pastor should not focus on the appearance of success through things like an increase in church activity and involvement. Paul continues: *"Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy."* To be found *"trustworthy"* means that pastors are faithful to the Word of God. They must be faithful to the Word before they are faithful to any member of the congregation, no matter how influential those members might be. Sometimes that faithfulness to the Word requires them to confront members with their sins and call them to repentance like John the Baptizer did. A pastor's faithfulness to the Word might even make him some enemies both inside and outside the church.

So there can be tension at times between pastors and parishioners. Paul expresses this tension by telling the congregation in Corinth, *"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.... It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment."* The times when it is certainly proper for a congregation to judge its pastor and call him to account is if he is preaching false doctrine, if he is leading an openly sinful life, or if he refuses to carry out the duties he is called to do. But it is not proper to judge him for personality shortcomings, for unrealistic or unmet expectations, or for declines in offerings or church attendance.

Most pastors do a good enough job judging themselves without needing parishioners to do it too. Many would have a hard time saying with Paul, *"For I am not aware of anything against myself."* Pastors are well aware of their mistakes and failures. So here we are: a sinful pastor preaching to sinful parishioners. What hope do we have for the future? What reasons do we have for optimism?

Today's reading reminds us that we have *"the mysteries of God."* God's own mysteries have been revealed to us! These mysteries all have their source in the one central mystery of God. That central mystery is Christ, *"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Col. 2:3). It is the mystery of the all-powerful Son of God nestled as an infant in Mary's arms. It is the mystery of this person maintaining perfect purity according to the holy Law throughout His life. It is the mystery of this perfect man willingly taking the place of all sinners under God's wrath. It is the mystery of a dead man coming back to life after three days to declare His victory over sin, devil, and death.

These mysteries have been revealed to you and to me through the Word of God, along with still more mysteries: Jesus' righteousness, grace, and life bestowed by simple water and His Word. Jesus' forgiveness imparted through the Absolution. Jesus' body and blood tied to the elements

of bread and wine by the power of His Word. These gifts of Jesus all come to us through faith, which the Holy Spirit has worked inside us.

What a mystery that the Son of God was willing to suffer and die to save us sinners! What a mystery that He calls us His own, even though we are so often weak and cold-hearted! What a mystery that He remains patient with us, visits us with His mercy through the means of grace, and sends us out as His own stewards and representatives to do His work! What mysteries! What blessings!

Because Jesus is at work among us according to His promise, we are assured of success. It may or may not be success in attendance numbers, offering amounts, or admiration from the people in our community. To many people, it may appear that what we are doing does not matter, just as it may have appeared to the people around John that his work was all for nothing once he was put in prison. But that is not how God sees it at all.

Paul writes that when our Lord Jesus comes, He *“will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation—his praise—from God.”* God sees things as they really are. He sees the humble support and encouragement that parishioners give their pastors. He sees the often unheralded but crucial work that pastors do for the people they serve. As unimpressive as all of it seems, it all flows from the love of Christ, and it all points back to Him. That makes the work we do together in Jesus’ name the picture of success.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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