

Matins Homily – Pastors’ Conference – NWD – Stevens Point, Oct. 2022
Conference Theme: Cultivating a Lutheran Pastor’s Devotional Life (Dr. Dan Gard)
Jesus and His Pastors: Given to Be Go-Betweens and Intercessors
Texts: Hebrews 5:1-10; Luke 23:32-46

You might notice that gradually, even as Luther took note of the royal priesthood of baptized believers in Christ, that he moved away from referring to clergymen as priests, though their spiritual fatherhood continues to be put forth (see Large Catechism, Fourth Commandment). The Roman doctrine of the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass in the Eucharist, or more generally making the Mass or worship service all about human action toward God and losing the focus that Jesus continues among us as the One who serves in the Word and the mysteries, moves Luther to speak of the clergyman more as a minister of Word and Sacrament, a minister of the Gospel, a pastor, and a liturgist and teacher. It wasn’t so much about offering sacrifices as it was tendering or setting forth Christ and His gifts as a service to the public, especially the body of Christ. All Christians are priests, but not all are pastors. One is given in baptism the other is given by God through His call via the Church in addition to that, to certain men.

The liturgy is a two-way street and His action is primary and initiates. But now let us not forget there remains a sacrificial (responsive) aspect of the liturgy and the ministry, though not one in which we make atonement or redeem ourselves. But we learn early on to pray “in Jesus name,” and with the church to pray, “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” These are not simply punctuation to close what we wanted to say. It conveys the essential thing about genuine Christian prayer. Christ is our High Priest, the one mediator between God and men. He brings prayer about. Jesus makes the “our” in the Our Father, long before we existed. A priest isn’t about representing himself. He represents the people before the Lord – as Israel was carried with the Levitical priest at tabernacle and temple. And in turning toward the outer courts and beyond, the priest carries the Word of the Lord, and indeed, Christ Himself to the people. Classically we spoke of that as *sacrificium* and *beneficium* – the sacrificial and the sacramental. And in our redemption, there is the once-for-all atonement through the offering up the Lamb of God upon the cross of Calvary, but there is the ongoing distribution of its benefits in Christ until the end of the world, repeatedly so. Both Rome and the Protestants get that mixed up variously. We speak to God because He first speaks to us. As we sing from Psalm 51: O Lord, open my lips; and my mouth will declare your praise. *Sola gratia* means the Word always initiates. We speak to Him because He first speaks to us.

But the priesthood of Jesus for us which is at its pinnacle is the blood of Jesus shed, is continued in His exaltation, seated at the right hand of God. And even in the exaltation which is the cross, the High Melchizidekian Priesthood is evident radiating from Him who is the Light no darkness can overcome. Pleading forgiveness from the holy and eternal Father, He intercedes for you too. You know not what you do – especially when you do not listen attentively to the clear Word of God. But nonetheless He speaks for you as advocate eternal and His blood pleads a better Word than the blood of Abel, even for foolish and weak pastors, who want to please men rather than God.

When we approach the holiness of God we moderns so casually we divide His garments. We think we can abstract Jesus from His holiness. Or we think we approach on our merits or that holy God is safe for us sinners. And we question His kingship when we doubt whether His Word is enough to keep the church alive, one, holy, catholic and apostolic – thinking we need to prop it up with our crutches and packaging. And our cheap stewardship of leftovers and afterthoughts is to offer the Lord sour wine. And yet unworthy servants as are, we have this ministry by the mercy of God. And crushed under the law of God we preachers beg in prayer, “Jesus, remember me.” And this remembrance of Jesus toward you is no empty remembrance of symbolism, thank God. He bodily remembers the criminal right into paradise. Present, active, bleeding suffocating, dying Jesus is there in solidarity with that man who is a thief and then some. Jesus is there bearing his sin unto death. Do you see that the criminal dies with Christ our intercessor, joined to Him, and is taken down from the cross, to be raised on the Last Day with Christ and in Christ. How very baptismal! His old Adam is put to death there, and in the Word from bloody, sweaty, dying Jesus, the criminal arises to new life even before He dies on a Roman cross. Jesus attends to the greatest need and answers prayer even upon the altar of the cross. For the altar is where we offer up prayers – the altar and throne being joined together in the Lamb.

You, reverend fathers, as priestly under-shepherds and the overseers of our souls -- you are not alone. Your ministry is not yours. Your sermon is not yours. Your administration of the sacrament from the holy altar is not yours. You are not a Levite but serve in the stead and by the command of the One who is in the order of Melchizedek. And He reigns eternally. Fear not, He intercedes to His Father and your Father for you, your congregation, your family. And the Holy Spirit translates all your groans, weeping, and pains to conform you to the image of the crucified One. Jesus identifies with you and you with Him, from the altar, there and back again. Amen.

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