

Keynote Presentation II

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Presented at the 2017 Institute on Liturgy, Preaching and Church Music
Wednesday, July 26, 2017

THE JUST LIVE BY FAITH: MAKE THIS PLAIN IN SERVICE

Thank you for the invitation to speak here today. A special thanks to William Weedon, Dan Gard and our hosts here at Concordia University Chicago (or as I knew it from youth group days when we swam in their pool, Concordia University River Forest), and Sandy Bowers and everyone else who is sweating the details of a conference like this. Having served for several years as president of Higher Things, which organizes youth conferences on college campuses like this, I am aware of how much sweat is involved. Unlike youth conferences, though, at least you don't have to worry that everyone winds up in the right dorm room at night. Hopefully.

I turned sixty this year, which means I am now entitled to the synagogue designation *presbyteros*, elder. Yes, that's right. I now have my "old guy" card and take my place with the elders at the city gate. I also celebrate the 25th year of my ordination on August 2.

Sixty is the biblical age of wisdom. It comes with the hoary head and, in my case, an even hoarier beard. In my younger days, I thought wisdom meant that you became smarter. I've since learned that it means that you've forgotten a lot of stuff but you've figured out how to compensate for it by seeing the forest when you can no longer see the trees or remember their names. I've become like the author to the Hebrews who cites things by saying, "It is written somewhere," which explains why this paper has very few footnotes. I know I've read it somewhere, I just can't remember where.

In my increasingly revisionist memories of the "good old days," this conference calls to mind those heady days of the 1990s and the real-life worship conferences, the liturgical road show put on by the Commission on Worship. What a great time we all had! Betsy Warner, Mark Bender, Paul Grime, Ron Feuerhahn, Peter Bender (no relation to Mark), even a youthful and idealistic Matthew Harrison. We were on fire back then, gallant warriors in the worship wars (we now fight culture wars), and cleansing the temple with our formidable whips of chords and counterpoint. Some of us, like Ron, have gone to the greater and yet more glorious worship of the angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven. Others went on to higher things. And the rest of us loiter with the old guys at the local Starbucks.

My assigned title is: *The just live by faith: Make this plain in service*. It reminds me of the advice David Scaer once gave to fellow speakers, "Use the title they give you and talk about whatever you want." That seems applicable here. I will speak to this topic out of my experience as a liturgical presider, that is, president of the liturgical assembly, to you, my esteemed brothers in holy office and my dear church musicians as co-equal coworkers in this business of leading God's people in worship. I'm a preacher by vocation, so for me, a keynote address is just a very long sermon. Sermons always begin with a text, so here goes:

"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28).



And this:

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Romans 3 and 4) (Augsburg Confession 4).¹

Does anyone here have an issue with that? I certainly hope not! Even in our contentious day when we seem willing to contend over nearly anything, this article should be beyond contention. It should not even be in contention with any baptized believer who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and who claims to stand in the apostolic succession of doctrine. The unrighteous sinner stands before his or her righteous God justified, that is, declared righteous, holy, innocent, blameless and acquitted by grace (unmerited gift) through faith (trust) for Christ's sake alone. *Sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus*. It doesn't get more Lutheran than that.

But this is not a distinctively *Lutheran* teaching. It is a distinctively *Christian* teaching. It sets Christianity apart from all the other mutts in the dog pound of religion. What is distinctively *Lutheran* is that we put the article of justification first and central. It is the "article upon which the church stands or falls," the hub from which and to every spoke of the doctrinal wheel is attached. It reflects the radical Christ-centeredness of the faith and puts Jesus Christ in His proper place at the center of everything and not simply as one thing among many things.

This, I believe, is why God continues to put up with us Lutherans five hundred years after we ignited this rumpus of the Reformation. Someone in this world needs to remind the church, and the world, that Jesus Christ alone is the focal point of our faith, life, and worship, and that the just live by faith in Christ before God, or we are simply no longer Christian much less Lutheran.

How then do we make this plain in service? I offer you five ways:

1. By distinguishing Law and Gospel
2. By reliance on the external Word
3. By how we handle holy things
4. By living in the now and not yet
5. By priestly vocation of love to the neighbor

THE DISTINCTION OF THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

The just live by faith. We make this plain in service by the proper distinction of the Law and the Gospel.

The distinction of the Law and the Gospel gives preaching, teaching, and hymnody its distinctive Christ-accent. You know that if you place the em-*pha*-sis on the wrong syl-*la*-ble, the words just don't sound right and may not even make sense. So, it is with the Word of God. The Law is the penultimate accent of

¹ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 30.



God's Word, the Gospel its ultimate accent. The Law serves the Gospel as the tutor to lead us to Christ, and Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe. This is not some hermeneutical matrix we lay atop Scripture or a set of bifocal lenses through which we read the text, least of all some poor preacher's outline for painfully predictable Sunday sermons. Rather, it is the bipolar, paradoxical inner tension of the two-edged sword of the Word that both accuses and acquits, kills and makes alive. The Word is like a guitar or violin string that must be kept taut in Law/Gospel tension or it will not sound properly.

The proper distinction of Law and Gospel gives Christian worship a distinctive accent in sermon, service and song with its paradoxical tension of wrath and mercy, sin and grace, death and life. The Lord kills; He makes alive. He brings down to Sheol; He raises up again. You know it when you hear it, even when the church or the preacher or the hymn does not carry the Lutheran label. We Lutherans hold no copyright monopoly on the distinction of Law and Gospel. Others do it too, sometimes even better than we do it. We just do it intentionally and consciously.

If the just shall live before God (*coram Deo*) by faith alone, then faith must be distinguished from works, and Christ's work must be distinguished from our works, otherwise the whole thing becomes muddled and terribly confused. This is immediately apparent in the Apology to Article IV of the Augsburg Confession which links worship to faith:

It is easy to determine the difference between this faith and the righteousness of the law. Faith is that worship which receives God's offered blessings; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers. (Ap IV 49)²

Faith is worship! We tend to think of worship as our activity, what we do because God is worthy of our attention and praise. The confessions think of worship as God's activity, what He does for us for Jesus' sake. The worship of faith receives what God offers; the worship of the Law offers God our merits. "It is by faith that God wishes to be worshiped." It's not only *who* is worshipped as God but *how* God is worshipped that matters. To offer the one, true and living God one's own merits under the law is to treat God as an idol. Bribery will get you nowhere *coram Deo*.

Here we see why Lutherans do not hold "prayer and praise" services. The *em-pha-sis* is on the wrong worship syl-la-ble. The emphasis is on our doing, our prayers, our praise, our thanksgiving, our confessing, our piety. We do this, we do that, we go "we, we, we" all the way home. Sadly, even the venerable *Te Deum Laudamus* comes into English as "We praise you, O God," rather the "You, O God, we praise." The ever-intrusive worshipping ego always seeks to have the first word and run the show.

God's Word comes before our words. His speaking before our speaking, His gifts before our gifts. "I am the Lord, your God," says the Lord. "You are the Lord, our God," say His people in response. Prayer and praise are the exhalation of faith. But there is no exhalation without a prior inhalation. The first act of speaking is not speaking but silent inhaling, taking in breath. God must breathe His spirited-breath into us and open our lips before our mouths can sing His praise. Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

² Tappert, 114.



With the distinction of Law and Gospel comes some other necessary distinctions, namely the distinction of sacrament and sacrifice and of propitiatory and Eucharistic sacrifices, or to put it simply, God's work and our works. God runs the sacraments; we do the sacrifices. Except one, that is, the once for all sacrifice that atoned for the sin of the world in one death on one good, dark Friday on a cross. Christ the victim, Christ the priest. That sacrifice only the Son of God in the flesh can offer.³

The sacrifices we do are our way of saying "thank you" for the sacrifice that Christ did. The sacraments are the means and instruments by which God bestows on us the blessings and benefits of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice in the here and now. This is how Luther could say, "Don't run to the cross for forgiveness but run to the Supper. On the cross forgiveness was won for all; in the Supper, it is offered to you."⁴

"We are all beggars," Luther reminded us from his death bed. We come empty to be filled, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, poor and miserable. We pray, *Kyrie elieson*, Lord, have mercy, the way the beggars at the side of the road greeted the king. And our beggar king feeds us, fills us, and lifts us up. In response to His mercy, we say, "Amen, gifts received." Again, in the *Agnus Dei*, we pray for mercy and peace to God's Lamb, in the very presence of His body and blood. We are indeed beggars all.

Through the ministry of the sacraments, as through instruments and means, God delivers, offers and applies the gifts of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice to faith, and faith responds by saying "thank you" in eucharistic sacrifices of prayer and praise. We call this "Divine Service," or as our German forefathers called it "*Gottesdienst*," God's service, Divine Service. God's service is a two-way street of sacrament and sacrifice properly distinguished, God serving us sacramentally; we in turn serving God sacrificially.

Equipped with these Law/Gospel distinctions, the Lutheran Reformation reformed the western mass without discarding it. It cleared away any notion that the priest offered a sacrifice for sin, and yet fully retained the sacrament of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sin. Gone too was the notion that the sacraments were a meritorious work that could be credited to another just for having been done (*ex opere operato*), yet the objective certainty of God's justifying grace in Christ revealed in the sacraments was held in highest regard, not as a power to do meritorious good, but as a revelation and sign of God's undeserved kindness and mercy to sinners for Christ's sake.

The Lutheran Reformation cast away neither baby nor bath water, but saw in Baptism the hand of the triune God working through the Word. It cleared away the clutter of the pontifical priesthood yet retained the sacramental office of the holy ministry all the while extolling the royal priesthood of every baptized believer. It could boast "we celebrate the Mass better than our opponents, and we gladly keep the traditional liturgical forms, the lessons, the feast days, the prayers, and vestments," (Ap XXIV 1) and still confess that the true unity and identifying marks of the church are the works of God – the preaching of the Gospel and the administering of sacraments – and not in the ceremonies and traditions of men. (AC V 2).

Unlike the Reformed and more radical elements of the Reformation, the Lutheran Reformers did not see a need to begin with a liturgical blank slate and produce something new, but could gently and surgically reform the received tradition so that the works of Christ would not be obscured by the works of men. They did it by the proper distinction of the Law and the Gospel.

³ See Apology 24 for the confessional basis of this section and its distinctions.

⁴ The quotation from Luther's Work in this publication are from the American Edition: vol. 40 © 1958 by Augsburg Fortress.



The just live by faith by properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. Some questions we face today are these: Are we properly distinguishing Law and Gospel, Christ's work and our works, sacrament and sacrifice? Are the accents and emphases in the right place and order? My greatest concern today for Lutheran worship is that we are forsaking the worship of faith, which receives God's offered gifts, and are placing our emphasis on the prayers and praises we offer God. The accent is that of the Revival not the Reformation.

I fear we are at risk of losing the dynamic tension of Law and Gospel, God's wrath and mercy, fear and faith. Does our service engender a healthy fear of the Lord as well as a living faith in Christ? Without fear of God's wrath there will be no faith in the mercy of Christ. Does the flow of the service lead to the font of our Baptism and the Supper of the Lamb or are we busy congratulating ourselves for putting on a good show? We want our service to be "edgy," but is it the sharp two-edgedness of the Word as the Law and the Gospel?

THE EXTERNAL WORD

The just live by faith. We make this plain in service by our emphasis on the external Word (externum verbum)

The Word to which justifying faith clings is an external Word (*externum verbum*), a Word that is outside of ourselves (*extra nos*). So, reliant are we upon the external Word that no other word is to be trusted. "God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil" (SA III.8).⁵ The external Word is our bulwark never failing against the enthusiasms of old Adam. Original sin is man curved inward on himself. We need to be turned inside out. The outside-of-ourselves external Word does precisely this. It turns us inside out.

The external Word is an objective Word. It comes to us from the outside because what is inside of us cannot be trusted. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:19). "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). The saving Word must come objective from the outside if it is to be trusted. Feelings cannot be trusted. Feelings are the seasonings and spice of life but they are not the meat and potatoes. They are certainly God's gift, but they have no nutritive or theological value. A faith based on feelings needs feelings to keep it going and quickly wilts in the heat. Saving faith in Jesus clings to facts. And this is the trustworthy fact to which faith clings, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15).

The objective Word is the Incarnate Word. It is transcendent Word that speaks out of infinite eternity, by whom all things were made, who called light from darkness, who separated sea and dry land, who brought forth life in all its grand diversity, became Flesh and made His dwelling place among us (John 1:14). We don't reach up to God; God reaches down to us to embrace humanity's flesh from the womb to the tomb and to lift us up out of the dust of death and raise us to glory at the right hand of God.

⁵ Tappert, 313.



The incarnate Word is a sacramental Word. It is earthy and creaturely. Sounds in mouth and ear. Words on papyrus, parchment and paper. Bread and wine in mouths. Stories and songs of salvation handed down from generation to generation through the ages. In the Word the incarnate Word meets us where we are and lifts us up to where He is. He who once tabernacled in the Virgin's womb, in Bethlehem's crib, in the Jordan and on Calvary's cross now pitches His tent among us in the mouthed and written Word, the water of Baptism, the bread and wine of His Supper. We sometimes hear talk of "making the Gospel real" for people. God makes the Gospel real by the incarnate, sacramental Word. The Son of God tabernacles among us. It doesn't get more "real" than that.

The external Word is a sure and certain Word over and against our doubts and distractions. The Gospel and sacraments remain efficacious even when they are administered by wicked men, or in the words of Luther "the devil or his mother." The evil of men cannot mitigate the power of God's Word any more than the darkness can oppose the word "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). You can be confident of your Baptism, your forgiveness, the body and the blood, your justification before God, not because the pastor is holy or the church is holy but because the Lord is holy.

We have all heard the sordid stories of scandal among the clergy. They cause deep spiritual pain, suffering and doubt among the faithful. It probably comes as no surprise that in a list of the top ten professions that attract sociopathic personalities, the clergy rank eighth, generously below CEOs and lawyers, but above chefs and civil servants.⁶ (Curiously, organists and church musicians don't show up in the top ten. You're better adjusted than I thought!) The good news is that your salvation rests not on our works but on Christ's. The heavenly meal is good and salutary, and the divine chef is holy and saving, even when His waiters turn out to be scoundrels and sociopaths. The devil would love to drive any wedge between you and Christ. The external Word guards against it.

The creed is an exercise of the external Word. Whether as a summary of the faith prior to the sermon, or as faith's response to the hearing of the Word after the sermon, the creed represents the faith that is believed (*fides quae creditur*). "We all believe in one, true God" This is the faith once delivered to the saints, the faith, in which standing firm, we resist the wiles of the devil. It is the external faith to which internal faith clings.

The *Gloria in Excelsis* is the first creed of the divine. Christ's birth announcement sung by angels is joined to the Church's confession of the triune God, focused on Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who is seated at the right hand of the Father as our intercessor and mediator. Christmas joy is the joy of the external Word incarnate, a joy that endures beyond the Christmas season.

The external Word shapes the attitude and mindset of its servants. It's not about the servants but about the servant of all. It's not about us, but Christ. In a good restaurant, the table server never overshadows the meal or the chef. The best servers are nearly invisible; they appear only as needed and are forgotten when the meal is ended. You don't even remember their names, unless they are one of those intrusive types: "Hi, my name is Trevor, and I will be your server this evening." Good table servers extol the food and the chef, not themselves. In the way of John the Baptist, Christ must increase, we must decrease (John 3:30).

⁶ Kevin Dutton, *The wisdom of psychopaths: lessons in life from saints, spies and serial killers* (London: Arrow Books, 2013).



The pastor/presider is there not to draw attention to himself or even to his office, but to the Lord in whose stead and by whose command He speaks. There is a way to be so informal, so casual that one draws attention to one's informality. The people generally love that. "He's one of us." And there is a way to be so formal, so rubrically robotic, that one draws attention to one's formality. Most people don't like that so much. "He's too formal and cold."

I heard this story firsthand from Dr. Kenneth Korby's wife Jeanne. While visiting Notre Dame in Paris, they attended service there. Kenneth noted the precise and dignified manner in which the presider conducted the service. Every movement was clean yet natural, dignified yet relaxed. After the service, he said to Jeanne, "The presider was so precise and yet relaxed, you barely noticed he was there." In my own pastoral practice, I strive for "informal formality," or what might be better described as "relaxed dignity,"⁷ an admixture of comfort, reverence, fear and awe. The children of God are together in their Father's house. The Lamb has been slain and lives. It's thanksgiving dinner of God's family. Solemnity and joy come together. I am there to serve in the name of the Lamb. I am His waiter; He is both chef and food. I would like people to say of me after the service, "You barely knew he was there."

The same can be said for you dear church musicians – organists, cantors, choir directors, choir singers, and players of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe and every kind of musical instrument. Your music making is a servant's act of love of neighbor that is sympathetic to the tin ears and creaky voices that populate our congregations. You drive the vehicle that carries the Word to our ears and carries our prayers and praises to God. You are the driver, though, not the destination.

Your task, as musicians in Divine Service is to help us sing all together. It's your service of love to the neighbor. We are not accustomed to singing all together with one voice. The music of our day is tribal, divisive and individual. We don't sing all together. At best, we sing along at many sporting events where a handful of people still try to follow the American Idol wannabe crooning what is supposed to be the national anthem. At the end of your service, we should say not "what a great organist (or choir or musicians)," but "what a great Savior we have in Jesus and what wonderful psalms and hymns and spiritual songs we sang all together."

The questions we need to ask in our day are these: Do our services hold forth the external, objective Word? Are we drawn to the personality of the pastor or the musicality of the musician or the person of Christ? Does our music manipulate feelings or does it deliver the objective word of the faith? Is our focus directed to a concrete God in the flesh who comes to us in words, water, bread and wine, or to an abstract awesome God who is so big not even the heavens themselves much less our minds and hearts and mouths can contain Him? Are our prayers and praises anchored in the objective works of God - creation and redemption - or do they dwell on what God has done for us lately? In short, are we drawn outside of ourselves into Christ or inside ourselves back into Adam?

HANDLING HOLY THINGS

The just shall live by faith. We make this plain in service by how we handle the outside of holy things. God does the holy things; He relies on us to handle the outside of holy things. He sets His treasure in

⁷ For a good discussion of liturgical manner, see Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (Pueblo Books: 1990); Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving, and Wise: Presiding in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).



common vessels of clay. We write sermons, read lessons, pour water, distribute bread and wine. And “in, with, and under these things,” God is at work. How can water do such great things? How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things? How can the absolving words of a fellow sinner do such great things? You know the answer: Not the water, not the eating and drinking, not the speaker, but the Word of Christ and faith that clings to the Word of Christ in the water, in the Supper, and in the mouth of the pastor.

We handle and adorn the outside of holy things. We adorn our churches with symbol. We adorn the sacraments with ceremony. We have fancy fonts and gilded chalices. We adorn the office of the ministry with vestments, symbols of authority. We adorn faith’s praise with music and instruments and poetic text. Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving. We have rubrics, red-letter rules on what to say and where to stand, which way to face, when to bow, and what to do with our hands and thumbs. We do all these things in a *non-necessary* way, recognizing that these do not commend us to God nor do they make the Word and Sacrament more efficacious.

The non-necessaries have a way of becoming divisive. In his 1525 letter to the Livonians, Luther exhorted the pastors and people to come to some common agreement on worship, and at least regionally, to be on the same page with each another. Yet he refused to establish any universal custom and order or turn them into a dictatorial law. He recognized that there are two ditches in the road of handling of holy things – the one is to bind men’s consciences where God has not spoken, above and beyond God’s Word; the other is to indulge the self-centered old Adam in license to do whatever he pleases. Luther recognized that ceremony was the devil’s playground. “Yes, he will even use external divisions about ceremonies to slip in and cause internal divisions in the faith.”⁸

Luther charged the pastors "in consideration of all the good we have in Christ, the comfort, the encouragement, the Spirit, the love, the mercy, and the example of Christ, to establish and preserve a unity of mind and spirit among them and come to a common agreement" in ceremony.

“Now even though external rite and orders – such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing – add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your region instead of disorder – one thing being done here and another there – lest the common people get confused and discouraged.

For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people”⁹

This is reminiscent of Luther’s earlier writing *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520), in which he describes the Christian as perfectly free, lord of all subject to none and at the same time perfectly bound servant, subject to all.¹⁰ The liberty of *adiaphora* - the things neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s

⁸ LW 53:46.

⁹ LW 53:47.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520).



Word - is tempered by the law of love. Before God (*coram Deo*), faith is perfectly free. Before men (*coram hominibus*), love is perfectly bound in service to the neighbor. Faith's freedom before God and love's submission before neighbor are two sides of the one and the same coin. This has meaning for our ritual life together.

Our rites, rituals, ceremonies and traditions are services of love for one another. They bring us together, they teach, they focus our attention. Yet we can get it right for all the wrong reasons. We can have elegant pulpit oratory, magnificent music, glorious liturgy, but if we have not love, it's all a bunch of self-serving noise. We don't do these things because God has commanded us to do them a certain way. Nor do we do these things because we necessarily like them. (I like to say that in our free time, we sing the songs we each like to sing, but when we get together in church, we sing songs no one likes to sing. At least in that we are united.) We do these things because they serve our common life together. They teach us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. They extol the gifts of Christ. But we do *not* and must never do these things to commend ourselves to God or to justify ourselves before Him. "The just live by faith."

How we handle the outside of holy things confesses what we believe concerning the holy things. Flippancy and casualness at the altar undermine the words of Christ this is my body, this is my blood (Matt. 26:26–28). Extravagant arrangements and egocentric preaching draw attention to the messenger and away from the message as much as poorly planned and prepared music, shoddy preaching and unnatural gestures.

We need to ask ourselves two basic questions: Is it faithful? Is it loving? Are we being faithful to the Word we serve? Are we being loving to the people whom we serve? One never drives rigidly on a road. Where a congregation has grown rigid and legalistic in its ritual, it needs to experience the fresh air of freedom, lest we begin to think that these things justify. And where a congregation has grown casual and indifferent and prides itself in being sloppy, it needs to learn the discipline of ritual and formality. This calls for sensitive situational awareness on the part of presiders and musicians alike.

How do we handle the holy things? Are these acts of faithful love or academic egocentricity? Are we indulging ourselves or serving our neighbor's needs? Is the spotlight on us or on Christ? If an uninformed unbeliever walked into one of our services, would he or she have some notion of encountering the holy and other, the transcendent yet imminent? Do our music, our demeanor, our words and manner suggest holiness? Do we do these things in the freedom of non-necessity, or do we leave the subtle but distinct impression that if we don't do things "just this certain way" (whatever that certain way is) then it doesn't work or God can't work? In short, do we handle the holy things of God in freedom tempered by love?

NOW AND NOT YET

The just live by faith. We make this plain in service that is both now and not yet.

"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

We are baptized into a tension of time between the now and the not yet. We have one foot in the old creation and the other in the new. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ now reigns. The new creation



has dawned. The endless day is at hand. But the Son has not yet appeared on the horizon, and we have not yet risen from the dead. We have died before our death and have been raised before our resurrection. In Christ, but not in ourselves. Not yet. We have been declared by God to be dead to sin and death and alive to Him in Christ Jesus. Now. But we have not yet died and risen ourselves.

In the Divine Service, there is more, so much more, than meets the eye. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22-24).

It's all there now, yet we can see none of it. Our reason and senses are not attuned to it. We cannot feel it, taste it, smell it. It must be revealed by the Word to faith, and faith must believe it. By our own devices, we can know nothing more than bread is bread and wine is wine; the Word must reveal the hidden things, the mystery that bread is body and wine is blood. The hidden mystery of the Church must be revealed to faith, that wherever even as few as two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, there the Lord of the Church is in their midst, and with Him the angels, the archangels and all the company of heaven, and even that little gathering of two or three is the fullness of one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

This is the nature of the now and not yet of the end times. What is not yet already is now, but it is not yet seen. The foretaste is the feast, and the feast is the foretaste. It's not a matter of degree or quantity, a little bit now and a lot more later, but a matter of hiddenness. Now the feast is hidden beneath a humble morsel. A bit of bread, a sip of wine. But it is not yet seen for what it is - the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

In the Divine Service heaven and earth come together, eternity breaks into time, the infinite dwells in the finite, God and Man are reconciled and our notions of time get wonkier than Einstein's theory of relativity. What is now and what is not yet are caught up in the eternal moment of the One who is ever I AM as the "One who was and is and is to come." We are creatures of time (*chronos*) but God is eternal, before the beginning and after the end. For Him, all time is simply "now." "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

We hear this very clearly both in the angel's song at Jesus birth, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, and in the *Sanctus* of the Divine Service. "Glory to God in the highest, and peace among men upon whom His favor rests." Heavenly glory and earthly peace come together in Bethlehem's crib, Calvary's cross, and in word and meal. In the *Sanctus*, the "holy, holy, holy" of the seraphim in heaven is echoed by the "hosanna, hosanna, hosanna" here on earth as the heavenly King is welcomed to His city. Heaven and earth come together in Christ, just as God and Man are reconciled in Him.

There are no clocks in the church, and liturgical servants do not customarily wear watches. The tyranny of *chronos* is suspended in the eternal now of God's unhurried presence. Clocks and calendars have no place in God's unending day. Being in a hurry does not befit new creation people. In the new creation, we don't chase the sun because the sun never sets. There is no evening to close out the endless Day. We live our day to day lives punching and chasing the clock, racing time until night comes when no one can work,



and then we turn on the lights and work some more. Divine Service is the one place where time stands still, and the chronologically weary and burdened can find a blissful moment of true rest. Divine Service should be unhurried, regardless of what time it is, not simply a “sweet hour of prayer” with the clock ticking.

Now is a time of faith when we must stick our eyes in our ears and listen for what God is doing. “Faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17), and faith sees with the ears. The just live by faith in the Word that declares them now sinless saints even as they see and confess themselves to be poor, miserable sinners. Now we see our sin; we hear and believe our righteousness in Christ. We do not yet see it in ourselves, nor dare we try to see or measure it. Now we see a congregation of sinners; we must hear and believe that they are a communion of saints. We see the church in all its faults and foibles; we must hear and must believe that this is the radiant Bride of Christ, washed, pure, spotless and holy. We do not yet see any of this, but we will on the Last Day and not one day sooner.

Does our service convey this sense of time and eternity coming together? Are we hurried, rushed, racing in our conduct of the service? Are we so preoccupied with the now that we've lost sight of the not yet, as though coping with the problems of today is all that matters? Are we so preoccupied with the not yet that we have forgotten the now of God's grace in Christ, the old “pie in the sky by and by” religion? Do our services set our minds on things above rather than things below, on eternal things rather than temporal things?

On this point, I think music plays a special role. Music is the language of transcendence and beauty. It is no coincidence, I think, that the heavenly visions of the Revelation are filled with song. The angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven don't simply speak words, they sing. Music that is too time bound, whether in the past or the present, misses the point. The music of the church needs to be time-less, both in the now and not now, in my opinion. Our music should lift us from the contemporary age into the “now” of God's eternity.

THE SERVICE OF LOVE

The just live by faith. We make this plain in priestly service of love toward neighbor.

Divine Service is not limited to that time between Invocation and Benediction. The priesthood of Christ gathered in His name to receive His gifts is also sent into the world with His three-fold benediction to be priests for the world. You have tasted and seen that the Lord is good; you have received mercy. Now go and do the goodness and mercy of God in the world. In the Divine Service, God serves His people through His ministry, and they serve Him in prayer, praise and confession. In the world, God serves the world for whom Christ died through His royal priesthood.

Sent forth by God's blessing,
Our true faith confessing,
The people of God from His dwelling take leave.
The Supper is ended. O now be extended
The fruits of this service in all who believe. (LSB 643).



The work of a priest is three-fold.¹¹ A priest prays, teaches and offers sacrifices. He speaks to God on behalf of his neighbor, community, country and the world. He intercedes through the great Intercessor and High Priest Jesus Christ. He speaks to his neighbor about God, telling the good news of the kingdom and of salvation in Christ. And he offers living sacrifices of vocation in the home, community and congregation. He (and she, for all are priests in the same way in Baptism), does the goodness and mercy of God in the world as the hands, feet and mouth of God.

In the Divine Service, Jesus comes as our Good Samaritan to bend down and rescue us from the ditch of our death. From the Divine Service, we go out in the world in the same Samaritan freedom – baptized, fed, forgiven, free from the condemnation of the Law – to love our neighbor as we have been loved by Christ. Here we bend down to the broken, beaten man who fell among thieves and see in his scarred and bloody face the face of our Lord. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

In the Divine Service, Christ is there for us in Word and Sacrament to serve us. In the world, Christ is there in our neighbor for us to serve. “Who then is my neighbor,” the lawyer asked seeking to justify himself. But the justified by faith have no reason to ask such self-justifying questions. Your neighbor is whomever God has placed in your path at the side of the road. The little child, the feeble senior, the addict, the adulterer, the sexually confused, the lost, the despairing and despondent. Unlike our gated communities and suburban sanctuaries, the road to Jericho does not allow you to pick and choose your neighbors. But he is easy to spot. Just look in the ditches at the side of the road for those who have been left for dead, those whom the religious rush to the other side of the road to avoid. Look for the least, the lost, the lowly, the dead. There you will find Christ to serve.

We pray at the close of the communion:

“We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same *in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another* ...”¹²

Faith and love. This too is from Luther’s *On the Freedom of the Christian*. The Christian lives entirely outside of himself: He lives in Christ by faith and in His neighbor by love. Faith and love – both *extra nos*, outside of ourselves.¹³ The external Word brings forth external living; faith expresses itself before others in love. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The just shall live by faith. Distinguishing Law and Gospel. Relying on the external, sacramental, incarnate Word. Handling the outside of holy things in freedom bound by love, with reverence and awe. Living in the *simul* tension of the now and the not yet as sinner-saints. Loving others as we have been loved by God in Christ. This is how we make it plain in service.

The peace of Jesus be with you all.

¹¹ I am indebted to the sainted Rev. Dr. Kenneth Korby for this summary of the priesthood.

¹² *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: CPH, 2006), 166, 183, 201, 212, 218.

¹³ Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520).

