

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 1:4-10
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
THE GOSPEL: Luke 4:21-30

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019

“Clarity in God’s Word”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I suppose I could shorten my message to just say what I think the Gospel just said as Jesus had been at a high point, he continued preaching, people hated it and wanted to throw him off the cliff. So goes the life of a pastor. I’ll go a little bit more than that though, the pastor’s job is to proclaim the word of God and sometimes it is upsetting to us. Sometimes we like it when God’s word is comforting and certainly that is the full aspect of God’s word, but there is also challenge. The clarity in God’s word comes in tension between law and Gospel, or instruction and grace. That tension provides a clarity, but we as people of faith, especially the Lutheran tradition, have this understanding that the word of God comes in three forms. I’m reading now from something that most people would probably not look at as a spiritual document, but parts of it certainly are. It’s the ELCA constitution. Chapter 2.02 the church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

So first, Jesus Christ is the word of God incarnate through whom everything was made and through whose life, death and resurrection God fashions the new creation. So Jesus is the word of God. Then the proclamation of God’s message to us is both, law and Gospel is the word of God. Preaching and proclaiming, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed beginning with the word, and creation continuing in the history of Israel and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Third, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written word of God, inspired by God’s spirit speaking through their authors. They record and announce God’s revelation, centering on Jesus Christ, and through them God’s spirit speaks to us to create and to sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. Inspired by God’s spirit. So these three form our understanding of the word of God, the clarity that is found in the word of God, but it comes with a little bit of a tension because God’s word for sure creates a dynamic of usefulness to our life, but it is relentless to take those things that take away from our joy.

2 Timothy, Chapter 3, verse 16 says it this way, and I am using the message which is Eugene Peterson's beautiful interpretation of Scripture. Every part of scripture is God breathed. Inspired, that's that word. And useful in one way or another, showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. I wanted you to have this as maybe a refresher or perhaps new to you, is the word of God is not just in the scripture. Sometimes I have some debates with people about, Lutherans use the word inspired, they don't use the word infallible. Infallible meaning without error. Certainly we understand this is a powerful statement of the Gospel, the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. But I would just say to you that as a pastor it is strange when you take a look at all the scriptures and you say "Is this beautiful poem that's in the scriptures infallible, or is this parable infallible?" It doesn't really make sense, it's a word that to me drive this word inspiration. God breathed. I think is the right word and no reason to be ashamed of that.

Now as I come to the message for today, God's word created tension within the congregation through the synagogue there in Nazareth and he had read words, proclamation for Isaiah, he read from the scriptures, to bring good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and to set the oppressed free to proclaim the year in the Lord's favor. But then there was a pivot, everybody agreed with that, but it appeared just for us. He pivots to describe in scripture where the prophets Elijah and Elisha were ministering to people outside of the synagogue, outside of the faith, outside of the country in Syria. Both of these are in Syria, Naaman being the powerful minister of war, head of the Army. So these are the enemies historically, and they were enraged. Why were they enraged? Because God's love is for all. It's probably one of the most distinctive parts of our message. We gather here to be fed and to be encouraged, and the beauty of the relationships here is very important. But, bluntly, we have to know that it is not about us, it is about God's word. That means out into the world.

The word of God is very wonderfully challenging. Professor Gerhard Forde, who has been passed away for many years but still resonates in his teaching at Luther Seminary. He says it this way, that when God's instruction comes in, when it confronts us, when it creates clarity and it upsets us, he has these important words. *So the Gospel does not tell me that God will love me if I repent and have faith, it tells me I can repent and have faith because God loves me.* That's our starting position, God loves. *But the preaching of the law is not just talking about the law,* and he uses this metaphor so when you feel defensive or when you feel like the word is really challenging you, he says it this way. *The preaching of the law is a thrusting of a sword through the proud defender within me.* Isn't that amazing? Taking down the defenses that we have, it is a fantastic way to understand that God's love for you and for me will take away anything that stands in the

way that joy is dependent upon ourselves. God's word takes away, I'll call it in the Second Lesson the reading of the 1 Corinthians text that you know, and to end the childish ways, that it's all about us. It's all about God. I am nothing, I gain nothing, I'm just a noisy gong or a clanging symbol when I lack God's love. So God's love frees us to be able to see more clearly this incredible faith.

Let me continue and then words of encouragement. This important message that Jesus was not just for the small group, but out into the world is a statement that provides energy and enthusiasm for us. Our understanding is God's love is for the world.

Last year, we fell short. Our benevolence dollars were truncated, they were cut off because of the financial challenges. It makes sense to right-size, doesn't it? Let's not spend resources when we have to get our act together. I got a phone call from somebody, a guy named Jerry. He is the synod treasurer. That's an interesting thing as a pastor, "Hi this is Jerry, I'm the Synod treasurer." Usually not happy talk. He said, "You had pledged last year to give \$40,000 to the Grand Canyon Synod, and it looks like you gave \$20,000 or slightly less. Will you be able to make that up?" So I said, "I've got some good news and I've some bad news. Which would you like?" He said "Just tell me what's going on." I said, "We're not going to be able to make that up, but this year, in 2019, we as a congregation have committed to tithe, to give 10 percent of our offering dollars out into the world, including to the Grand Canyon Synod. So if we continue to do this, which our pledge is to do, that we should be at least \$17-18,000 over what we had committed to last year, around \$57-58,000." That's the good news.

Now, if we do not understand God's love for us, we will feel defeated. But we should understand God's commandment that it's not just about us, it's out into the world. This is the tension that the clarity that God brings through the word. I want you to know that this clarity is based upon nothing separating us from the love of God. It is based upon this incredible statement *God's love for you and for me*. When we turn inward, which is another way to say sin, God's incredible love allows us to move forward.

Let's do a quick test of Bryan's beautiful reading of 1 Corinthians. Faith, hope and love abide, these three, which one is the greatest? **Love**. Yes, remember – we fall short, sometimes we are the clanging gong, sometimes we fall short in the way that we relate to our neighbors, certainly the way we relate to our spouses, to the families that we love, this is Christ's love, this is the ability of Christ to love us deep to the core, to be able to see us. I want to say, just a little bit of imagery, after Jesus gave this message that upset so many people, he's on this brow of a hill, it says. But he passed through them and in the midst of them and went on his way. I had heard somebody say, "Yes, it's almost like he got to be a ghost, he just magically went through them." The Greek word there is not

that way, it's with force, with a goal, he went through. Can you imagine the look he gave to these people he knew? He knew them from his childhood. Sometimes I think about this angry Jesus when I have fallen short, but I think that was a look *that I have a purpose here and I love you, but I'm not going to let you contain my message to just you, my mission is to the world.* So as he passed through, I don't think it was of anger, but it was of tremendous focus for the love of God. As he looked at each person, I pray that there was an opening of their heart to understand the broader mission. That's what the clarity of God's word does. Every piece of scripture is beneficial to us. I hope that every sermon is beneficial to you, and certainly this understanding that the scriptures are beneficial to us is the ground of this.

Let me summarize this. As a pastor, we are trained. If you are experiencing affliction in your life, my job is to comfort you, to come along side with Chuck and both Garys, and to come along side. But if you are getting way too comfortable in your life, and thinking it is all about you, my job is to afflict you. It's to help wake you up – that it's not about us, our maturity in faith is, it is all about the love of Jesus and that frees us up. You can do the same with me, because of course I fall short too. This is not meant to be relentless, it is meant to be clear that God's love is for all of us. It starts here and it is deeply personal, but it is not private. Does that make sense? Deeply to the heart of our lives, but it is not private, it is out into the world, and that is really clear.

When we want clarity, God gives us a call. When we want a road map, God gives us relationships. When we want answers, God gives us his hand and shows us the hand of someone else in hurt. Voskamp wrote this, and this type of message for me is absolutely this message of God, *it's all about love.* Maybe the Beatles had it right in some of their songs. I pray that this has been clarifying to you, we are going to work together for the strength of this congregation, to move out into the community, and share this message.
Amen