Introduction to Preaching: Mercy Time

The Lutheran Confessions. A public witness to the world of our biblical proclamation and faith. For Lutherans, those who enter into the office of the holy ministry are invited to join this public witness. They are called to preach and teach according to it so the Gospel will go out, *"plainly and purely."* Just as St. Paul said: *"For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The Scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame"* (Isaiah 28:16; Romans 10:10).

Our Lutheran Confessions are not canon law. The goal of a confession is to be confessed. That is, to free preachers to give the free word of God in Christ as a promise without any strings attached. Such confession comes, *"in these last days of this transitory world."* God has time and space we know not of. He gives this as a new creation and new time through sermon and sacraments. So then what time is it when His ministers come to preach? God's final judgment. You were dead in your sins, but now I make you alive by this good word, the Gospel of Jesus.

The Day of Wrath has already come into the world in the death of His Son. The whole world was found guilty of killing God. We can't go back and undo that. It is a historical fact. But then God does a new thing! He has mercy on the world by resurrecting His Son and promising what only He can deliver. The end of judgment and wrath. How? By giving a promise through His preachers that creates sinners anew, raising them from death as Christ was raised.

We call this time of preaching, *"mercy time."* The time when sinners stand guilty and yet are declared just in such a way as to actually make them right. God does this. He elects sinners to eternal life through His ministers in the preaching office when they give Christ unconditionally. That is, they leave *"if…then,"* speaking and move to *"because... therefore"* speech. This makes them move away from what they are doing to what God is doing to them and for sinners in His Son, Jesus Christ.

So, finally, what we have in these Lutheran Confessions is a cause, as in the Psalmist [43:1]: *"Vindicate me, O God and defend my cause."* We hold this not only to be our cause, but God's own cause. By subscribing to these Lutheran Confessions all those who enter into the office of the holy ministry enter the fray that is occurring at this time. The end of the times. Lutheran pastors are on the bandwagon of a cause. They joined it freely when they were ordained. Though they might have come to it violently, they are living by it and through it now. The cause is as St. Paul described it: *"for freedom, Christ has set us free, stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* (Galatians 5:1) This is a daring and bold proclamation. But none should take up this cause without

assurance that this cause is God's own. The rock, as the Formula of Concord VII goes on to say immediately, is not Martin Luther, but the *"holy, Divine Word,"* like the words of institution at the Lord's Supper, *"for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is our only teacher... hunc audite."* (*"listen to him,"* Matthew 17:5).

Confessing publicly is an office one may take up or not. We often pretend that we decide our own salvation, but can't decide our historical, denominational fate. That is, if one is born Lutheran he has to stay Lutheran. But here, in the Lutheran Confessions, if one hasn't faced that decision yet, this is where he must come to the question about whether he is Lutheran or not. Will he take up this public confession or let it lay.
Our cause is identified in the Lutheran Confessions as *"justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law."* This keeps all that we do and say finally as that which forgives sinners on account of Christ alone. Not just talking about it, but actually giving it. Are we ready to give the gift, no strings attached knowing that this kills the old sinner and raises the new saint? Knowing that this opens all to a true vocation? Knowing it ends us as spiritual questors so that God may make us some earthly good to our neighbors and the created world?

If so, why don't we just open the floodgates? Why not let would-be Lutheran pastors go to make the best of their vocation? Why do theology together at all? Why make public confessions, and have others join us by "subscribing" to them? Not to reform the church, which is *"always reforming,"* as the popular Calvinist slogan goes now. But so that preaching can actually do what it is intended by God to do in the world. Put out the words whose letter kills, but which by the Holy Spirit makes alive. We work on our theology, submitting ourselves to the authority of these Lutheran Confessions, these faithful expositions of Scripture, to improve our preaching.

Theology then has to break off explanation and *"interpretation"* at the right point to give what it contemplates. As Philip told the story to the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza Road, for example: *"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?"*

The glorious light we have in the Confessions for doing this is the distinction of law and Gospel. *"The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can*

sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law." (FC V. 581.1)

Here we come back to the matter of our subscription to the Confessions. Do we dare confess what they teach about Scripture? Are we that free to confess them? Do they free us to let fly an unconditional word of God in Christ? Do they free us from political and ecclesial hand-wringing to wait patiently for God to work the end of the law in our churches, while in Christ He makes all-in-all so that we have no other God than this man, Jesus? No other freedom than a death like His and a resurrection like His? Do we dare go out into the world and confess like that, and watch the Holy Spirit elect sinners through us in ways we thought were impossible. Those men who drafted these Lutheran Confessions dared to believe it. For what was impossible for them, and is for us, is quite possible for the God who gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall be saved. Do we dare submit ourselves to these Lutheran Confessions so that we may be freed to preach Christ Jesus in truth and purity? This is the question every generation that calls themselves *"Lutheran"* must answer.