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Muck Which the Lord Uses (Graduation Sermon)

Marcus Wagner

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Wagner: Muck Which the Lord Uses (Graduation Sermon)

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

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Muck Which the Lord Uses

A Graduation Sermon *

John 9:6,7

By MARCUS WAGNER †

In Nomine Jesu

MY CHERISHED FRIENDS, ESPECIALLY MY DEARLY BELOVED NEW BROTHERS IN THE MINISTRY:

Surely this hour is a great hour for every one of you. An important chapter in your life closes with this service, and a new chapter, the most important one, is about to be written. For years you have been preparing for the work in the church of Jesus Christ. Now the great time has come when you may enter the vineyard of the Lord as workers and thereby take over the most important office on earth. Certainly it is of vital importance, both for you and the church, that you take this important step in the right spirit.

When a pious man who had done great things in the field of Christian mercy and benevolence was being praised publicly, he interrupted the speaker with the words: "Really now, we are only the muck, the

* EDITORIAL NOTE. — Contrary to the usual policy of this journal, we are publishing two sermons in this issue. They are dedicated particularly to the current graduates of our two seminaries and to those pastors who have grown old in their service to the Lord.

The first sermon, preached for the graduation of the Class of 1927 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, was found among the manuscripts of Dr. Marcus Wagner, pastor emeritus of Saint John's Church, Forest Park, Ill., when he died early in 1960. It is presented here, in a translation by one of the members of the Class of 1927, Dr. A. R. Kretzmann, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Luke, Chicago, Ill., who writes that "with all the rest he was very much inspired by the sermon and its earnest delivery."

clay, the mire, the mud, which the Lord uses to help the needy." Evidently he was reminding himself of the words of the text. Certainly he was expressing the basic feeling of the soul which is pleasing to the Lord, which depends on God for blessing, and which must be the rule of life for all true servants of the church. In the few moments granted to me let me endeavor to impress this truth on your heart:

"WE ARE ONLY THE MUCK WHICH THE LORD USES TO HELP THE NEEDY"

I

I emphasize this first: "We are only the muck." The Savior saw a beggar, born blind, sitting by the wayside, and He had pity on him. Previously He had allowed the hem of His garment, or little loaves and fish, to help the distressed. This time, however, He wanted to use the very lowliest means to prove that with this Helper there was no reliance on the type of material but only on His power alone. The day was hot, and on the street there was a great deal of dust—dust and dirt which was trodden under the feet of the people and which was especially offensive to them because it was the Sabbath and they had on their very best clothes. This dust of the ground was also no different from any other in other places. It was not mingled with gold or shot through with powerful healing minerals. It did not come from especially rich ground, but it was just the plain, ordinary dust and dirt of the highway. This was exactly what our Lord

wanted to use in this case — the least, the lowliest, the most despised on earth — dust, dirt, muck, and mud!

Will you feel offended if I compare you with this dust of the ground and declare, "We are this muck"? Did not the Creator make our forefather out of the dust of the ground and remind him at the time of the Fall: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"? Did not the Father of the faithful confess before his Lord when he pleaded for the men of Sodom: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). Are we more than Adam and Abraham?

Dust clings to our clothing and is brushed away as something that does not belong there, as uncleanness, dirt. Even there we are like the dust. Or is that a further insult? Does not the prophet plead: "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags"? (Is. 64:6) Are we better than Isaiah? He who believes himself to be an exception certainly does not know himself and does not believe God, who declares: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one." (Job 14:4)

We are just like the dust of the ground — this conviction cannot be dodged in the God-pleasing disposition of the true servant of Christ. As you go about your service in this holy office, never forget it. You have studied at schools of higher learning for so many years. Now you must gather them all in, even the unlearned and the sick of mind. Shall that be beneath your dignity, since you are only the muck and the mire of the wayside?

You are God's honorable people and now you should concern yourselves with

sinner, even criminals. Shall this actually cause your pride to be wounded when you know that you are only the muck of the road?

You are young, strong, and in the bloom of life. Now you are supposed to sit down with the aged and the infirm, the distressed and the suffering, with loathsome sicknesses. Shall that be called self-sacrifice when we know that we are only the dirt of the road?

From your environment at home and here, in your beautiful seminary, you have become accustomed to comfortable surroundings. Now in faraway places and in foreign lands you are to suffer privations and even attacks. Is this asking too much when you know that you are only the dirt in the road?

You know that you will be loved and respected and honored by your fellow citizens. Can you allow this to make you conceited, or proud, when you know that you are only the dirt of the road?

God has given you good gifts; on your faithful labors the choicest blessings of God will rest; in congregation and mission fields you will accomplish glorious things. Can you take credit for all this yourself when you know that you are only the muck and the mire of the road?

Many of you, as the years go on, will play major roles in the conference and in Synod. You may even be honored as president, professor, and doctor. Can you draw yourself up proudly and look down on others when you know that you are nothing but the muck and the mire?

Young Jeremiah declares at his call into the prophetic office, "I am unworthy." Young Isaiah declares, "Woe is me! . . . I am a man of unclean lips," and our dis-

tinguished man of God, Luther, wrote in the year of his severest testing, 1527, a deeply moving letter to his friend Justus Jonas, in which he signed himself "Martin Luther, *Christi lutum*" (the Latin word for "mud"). These men of God had the right viewpoint. The Lord could use them in His church. He did great things through them. My dear young brothers, sons of Luther, now that you are leaving your alma mater and going forth into all the world in order to take up your lifework, I can give you no better, no more God-pleasing and blessed slogan than our father Luther's word *Christi lutum* ("the mud of Christ").

II

Let me emphasize, in the second place, "We are only the muck, *which the Lord uses.*" Remember, the Lord bowed down to the ground, to the dust of the street. From the spittle of His mouth He lets a little fall into the dust, and then He stirs this spittle into a salve which He lays on the eyes of the blind man. This Jesus did—the everlasting Son of God, the great Lord from heaven, who has all power in heaven and on earth, who with one word raised up the dead and stilled the storm and sea. Yet He deigns to use this humble, lowly muck as a means of performing one of His greatest miracles. This is an amazing condescension; yet I know something even more wonderful: to us, who are only the dust of the ground, Immanuel has come down in love and mercy; He has united Himself with our flesh and blood; He dwelt among us here on earth and worked among us here. Through His Word His Spirit has been poured out over us; through His working in us, we have become a new leaven and have new life and spiritual power. Yes, He has allowed His holy

theology to come into our flesh and blood; and all this only in order to use us as His own means to perform the miracles of grace for the glorification of His holy name. I wish that I could find words to praise this astonishing graciousness of God that you are able now, because of His goodness, to go forth rejoicing, to allow yourselves to be used by the Lord.

You realize that the wonderful days of preparation, with their joys, their companionships and friendships, the instruction of honored professors, are over. But do you say farewell with tear-filled eyes when you know that the best days of life are coming now; when, after your preparation, the Lord will use you as never before to serve Him whom angels long to serve?

Many will have to leave for faraway fields. They do not know whether they will ever see their loved ones again, and this farewell will not be accomplished without tears. But should not, even alongside of the tears, great joy fill our hearts because the Almighty and ever-present Lord is pleased to use us for His work? Should this joy be lessened because the place is far away? Or can you even speak of being disappointed, since the great Lord, to whom heaven and earth belong, wants to use us—and no faithful servant of His has ever suffered want?

You certainly cannot expect that you will be received everywhere with open arms or that you will be welcome with music and song, or heralded as heroes. You must certainly know by now that many will scoff and some will despise you and say, "What does this fellow want to tell us?" Should this discourage you, that the Almighty Himself wants to use you, who has promised to be with us always, even

unto the end of the world, and leads and guides the children of men?

Now that you have your diploma, the evidence of your maturity, in your hand, you may even get the notion that you lack nothing to be fully equipped and efficient in your ministry. But later on, in your difficulties and frustrations, with the apparent fruitlessness of your labors, it may even strike you that you are completely unprepared and unworthy. Should you then fulfill Satan's wish and give up your ministry when you know that you are means in the hands of our wonderful Lord, who can work miracles with mud and can make something out of nothing?

Here, in your advanced school, you were under the care of strict teachers. You had to attend classes, learn, prepare, take tests. This will all be changed; you will be left strictly on your own.

Will you be able to be lazy and indifferent; will you not have to be busy, faithful, fiery, since the heavenly Lord uses you, who will soon come with His recompense and give to everyone according to his works? God's servant Moses would rather suffer with the people of God than rejoice in the palaces of Pharaoh. The great martyr apostle Paul cries out in astonishment about his own unworthiness, "He appeared last of all to me, the least of the apostles."

The outstanding, humble, fiery, tireless, young director of our practical seminary who went home to his eternal rest at 39 in 1849, had pasted on his desk the passage from Gal. 1:8: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed!" Accursed, why? Because God's beloved Son, His only Child, my Lord Jesus, re-

deemed me with bitter suffering and death, with His holy precious blood. Such preachers of Jesus Christ were men after the heart of God. Such examples of faith and labor and faithfulness take to heart and imitate. That's the way it is according to the will of God. Remember always: "We are only the dust of the ground which the Lord uses!"

III

In the third place let me emphasize: "We are only the muck, or the mire, which the Lord uses to help the needy." What a hardship it is to be born blind, to sit in wind and weather by the wayside begging, at the mercy of the passers-by. And that, day by day, year in and year out, hopelessly beyond medical care, because you were born blind. It was small wonder that the disciples, seeing such misery, thought of the stern judgment of God.

But this wretched man the Lord helped. And to bring such marvelous help out of such abject misery—to bring the gift of such good fortune—the Lord used the dust of the ground, made into mud, and laid it on the eyes of the blind man to be washed off in the pool of Siloam. Keep in mind what we have to do in our ministry, for which you have prepared for so long and are now ready. The wretched and the needy must be helped—those poor people whose wretchedness is so much greater than the misery of the poor blind beggar, even as eternity is longer than time; those wretched ones who, just as the blind man did sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, know nothing of God and heaven; who like those born blind and completely poor and useless cannot help themselves; who are exposed to the terrible tempests of the judgment of God; who if nothing is done in time will be cast into outer dark-

ness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

"The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." They should all be brought to the eternal light, all be filled up with peace and joy, all recognize their Lord and Savior, all come to see their everlasting, blessed Lord, all come to rejoice eternally. And for that, to bring such splendid help, He wants to use you, the muck and the mire; use you to make seeing people out of the blind, to make rich men out of beggars, to make sinners righteous, to make the dead alive, to make the miserable blessed, to make the sorrowful rejoice. Therefore the command comes to you: "Preach the Gospel to every creature." Should we not be moved to new wonders constantly — to lift up our heads and to go rejoicing on our way? God used Joseph to feed the hungry, David to free Israel, the angel to lead Lot and his family out of Sodom — those were great things. But think how much greater it is that He wants to use you to lead the immortal souls of men out of darkness into His marvelous light. Many of your schoolmates will become prominent businessmen and rich manufacturers. Do not envy them. What is that compared with the thought that you are winning precious souls, bought with the blood of Christ, for eternity?

Many of your own age group will soon be college and university professors who are leading studious youth in the arts and sciences. Do not look at them askance as though you were wasting your life as a simple missionary, teaching poor heathen children, because over against the overwhelming heavenly knowledge of Jesus Christ all other wisdom is only a heavy yoke and worthless encumbrance.

Seen in the light of eternity, that which the Lord does through you for the needy is rated higher than all the achievements of the great, the famous, and the celebrated of this world, even as the heaven is higher than the earth, and this is no exaggeration!

There will, undoubtedly, be days in which your entire endeavor to help the needy will leave you frustrated and worn out, because everything seems to be in vain; when you will want to cast everything aside with the sigh "It is enough, O Lord!" Will you remember in that hour how eternity will reveal what you cannot see now? For example, how you showed some lost soul the right way; how you held back the despairing from death; how you sowed the little seed that brought the good fruit; how you lifted up the weary soul. "And the righteous shall shine as the stars forever and ever."

The angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that repenteth! "Here am I, send me, send me," cried Isaiah when he recognized that there was need in the work of the faithful. "I want most of all," stammered a dying missionary after 40 years of faithful work — "I would like very much —" he could not finish the sentence, finally he summoned up all his last strength and said, "I want very much that all souls might be saved," and so he died. Even on his deathbed the old fire of love for the needy glowed in his heart and soul. Oh, that this fire might burn in you, in bright flames now, and never die down until your last day! In order to help with this I have called to you and tell you now once more: "We are only the muck and the mire, the dust of the earth, whom the Lord uses to help the needy." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!