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Homiletics

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Pastoral Preaching in the Parish

INTRODUCTION

(Are you disenchanted with the parish? President Charles Mueller in this continuation of his Wenchel lectures contends that an understanding appreciation of the opportunities of pastoral preaching to people in the parish "can give life meaning and make you glad to get up in the morning." That's about as promissory a note as could be struck before an assembly of today's seminarians. In Protestant schools during the past few years there has been a prevalent scurrying for new forms of ministry that could paraphrase the passage from Scripture that "except ye find some new experimental ministry ye shall all likewise—parish." The drying up of denominational funds, and perhaps of courage as well, has so restricted the development of new forms of church work that ministry in congregational settings is increasingly the only opportunity being offered to graduating seminarians. The continued application of hundreds of men in our seminaries to preparation for work in the parishes of our Synod is a constant reminder of the grace of God who supplies these gifts for His church. Their pastoral work and their parish preaching indicate as well the strength of the believing community in which they studied and the solid grounding in the Scriptures which they received.

The key to effective parish integration and outreach, suggests Pastor Mueller, is a living relationship between a parish-oriented pastor and a preaching-oriented parish. And the keystone in this relationship arch, we suggest, is a straightforward openness on the part of all in the parish. The first part of President Mueller's Wenchel lectures appeared in the January 1971 number of this journal.

Arden Mead's initial sermon strikes such a note from the pastor's side. Perhaps it would be a good exercise for all our preacher-readers to study Mead's sermon with the question in mind, "What would I preach, knowing what I know now, if this were my first sermon in this parish?" It is an old line which claims doctors bury their mistakes. Parish pastors sometimes yearn to accept a call in order to escape the mistakes in their calling. It is difficult to create the occasion for making new beginnings in old relationships. A hypothetical "first sermon" might enable you to make your own chance for a new chance.)

GEORGE W. HOYER

CHARLES S. MUELLER

Many Christians today have a tendency to use the word "parish" as if it were a synonym for "church building," "congregation," or "church." Such linguistic vagueness has enabled them to make the word mean what they want it to mean. But for a growing number of pastors the word "parish" is taking on a more precise meaning. It has a geographical flavor and implies boundaries with somewhat definable limits. It has those connotations in government usage, in legal usage, and in other than Protestant ecclesiastical usage.

We were taught rather early in our exegetical studies that the *Sitz im Leben* plays a significant role in Scriptural interpretation.

Unless one knows the situation, the life circumstance, or the historical and political realities of the moment as they pertain to a text, his interpretation can be rather sadly affected. Much of the questionable right-wing theology in the world today emanates from an attempt to haul the Scriptures, intact, across more than 2,000 years without taking their original context seriously. It should be obvious that we need to have the same care and concern for the area, the time, and the circumstances in which we speak the Word today.

Once while traveling through Ohio, I attended a church service and heard a perfectly fine sermon preached. The sermon was textually sound and theologically correct, but the

application was tragic. The preacher had decided it was necessary to emphasize the prophetic anger in the text concerning oppression of the poor. He contemporized this concern by embarking on a lively analysis of rent-gouging and of slum-lords. I don't know, if I have ever heard a more eloquent indictment of slum-lordery. The pathetic fact was that he was preaching in a small town. After the sermon I inquired, out of curiosity, whether the little town had any slums and whether any of the congregational members had rental property . . . at all. The upshot was that I discovered there were no slums and there were no landlords of any stripe in the congregation. Yet most people who left the service must have taken with them the determination that if they ever caught one of those miserly men who milked the poor they would certainly give him what for! This, for me, is an example of irrelevant preaching, made so by a failure to acknowledge a parish and to understand the specific nature of it.

It is easy to make that kind of mistake in preaching. There are many people that want to tell us what the world, and thus our particular parish, is really like. If we are not careful, we will develop the capacity for irrelevant preaching not only through our own mistakes but also by absorbing the mistakes and the mistaken notions of others. Here are two illustrations of how that happens.

If, as a pastor, one preaches with the notion that ours is a uniquely mobile population and that he is, to use a cliché, "preaching to a passing parade," he could be accepting a view of preaching that is invalid from the outset. We have all heard the statistic that one out of every five people in America moves each year. Some, by a simple extension of statistics, seem to think that parishes have a complete membership turnover every five years! But that "one-in-five" is a highly deceptive figure. One out of five does move, but in that figure are people like students in

a seminary, who make at least two moves of residence each year. And how many millions of college students are there? Every time a soldier is given a change of station, every time someone moves from Apartment 4-B down to Apartment 2-B, he becomes one of the digits included in the statistic. The genuine mobility figure is 9% per year, not the 20% or more insinuated, as Census Bureau figures demonstrate.

As a matter of fact, this has usually been the average for the last 100 years. In the period from 1850 to 1860 (and think for a moment what that decade means to Missouri Synod Lutherans) the actual mobility figure was a significantly higher 11%. Only one period, from 1930 to 1940 (during the Depression), had a mobility figure that was appreciably lower, namely, 4% per annum. I cite this example to show how much statistical distinction is floating around that can badly *discolor* one's view of what it is like in the world.

Consider the statement, "The Lutheran Church is a middle-class church with a predominantly middle-class membership." Usually a person who makes that statement intends to spank us for being parochial, or misrepresentative of the country, or irrelevant in our theology, or devoid of significant social concern. No such thing! If the statement *weren't* true, there would be cause for that kind of evaluation. The fact is that our congregational mix tends to be representative of the national statistics, which indicate a high percentage of "middle-class" people. Similarly, the notion that suburbia consists of "bedroom communities" and mostly upper-class executives who are very mobile just is not true. Some move, and some move a good deal at certain times in their lives, but one of the least mobile segments of our community is that group of people who make \$15,000 and more. The most fluid segment is those who make \$3,000 and less.

As a second major example of how one

may misunderstand the world in his parish, which could affect his preaching, let me comment on the statements that by 1975 or 1980 the median age of the population of the United States will be 22 years of age or less. The insinuation behind these statistics is that youth are on the move. They are about to take over and effect all kinds of radical changes in our power structures. This "fact" foretells a period of great flux and confusion. Well, maybe. But that median-age figure will look a lot different if we consider several items from our past. What does that figure mean when we learn that in 1800 the median age was 16? That by 1820 it was 16.7? That at the time of the Civil War it was 19.4? That the opening of the 20th century was marked in our United States by a median age of 22.9? We need to consider also the significant historical moments our nation faced during the period of such modest median ages, the documents written then, the national policies formulated then, the movements to expand our economy and technology. Such considerations provide a different perspective on the future.

I mention these examples because they can deeply influence our understanding of the time in which we live and preach, and because they are the background from which we derive much of our view of "parish." We need to understand the larger picture so that mistaken notions do not warp our approach to preaching in the local parish. Dramatic statements may be truth . . . they may also just be dramatic statements.

Concomitant with this concern for a broad background understanding is, of course, a very real need to understand that area of real estate which constitutes a parish. Sizes vary. In northern Florida, where I began my ministry, my parish was measured in counties. In suburban Washington I work with a flexible three-mile radius. In high density areas of New York City a parish is measured in terms of a few blocks. However large the

area may be geographically, it must be manageable. Furthermore, a man must truly know the people in it and their needs. This is important for two reasons: One, the toughest part of preaching is application. To be in ignorance about the realities of the life of people is to build in irrelevance. Two, such understanding is fundamental for the development of a community orientation of parish life which will, in turn, allow a future for a congregation.

In the next decade or two congregations that are constituency-oriented will decline in both effectiveness and numbers. They have a very limited future. Community-oriented congregations, which express themselves in parish terms, need never worry about having a tomorrow. A modest exception to this is those congregations that are by their very nature constituency-oriented: ministries to the deaf, some military oriented ministries, some campus ministries, and some social ministries. In addition, congregations established as area mission outposts in certain sections of our country or the world would fit in that category.

Community-oriented parishes are those that are aware of and responsive to the needs of those who live around them. They are parishes that have realistically assessed their primary concerns in terms of their own resources and the practical limitations that sociopolitical realities insist on. Constituency-oriented parishes are those that intend to attract a certain kind of person, wherever he might live. Constituency-oriented parishes emphasize survival goals. They are limited in their effectiveness and frustrated by change. They have to move their buildings a lot. And those factors affect and permeate their preaching.

As a young man I began my ministry in one of the most unreconstructed areas of the country . . . northern Florida. As I left the seminary's hallowed halls I felt secure in the knowledge that I had or thought I had at

least most of the answers to the questions involving the racial tensions that were brewing through the land in those days. Five years later, as I left for Maryland, I did not even know what the questions were anymore. My dilemma had developed from a predilection to shape the questions to the answers that I had preconceived. I was preaching to principles, not people. I thought I knew all the principles of Christian theology and social enlightenment, but I had neglected some elementary homework. I knew questions and answers, but not people. I assumed that after I had helped unenlightened white people to discern the basics of Christian love and had showed them how they had to open the doors of the church to black brethren, that all I had to do was announce the fact and black fellow Christians would swarm in. I taught. Some learned. I announced. No one swarmed. As a matter of fact they wouldn't even come. The truth of the matter was that I was an enormously ignorant man who assumed things that were not true. My ignorance of such elementary matters colored my preaching.

As another example of neglecting to calculate some elementary factors I would cite the case of a brilliant young pastor who was placed in a small town in Delaware. He noticed after a while that attendance at services was erratic. While most of the people attended services some of the time, few attended all of the time. He interpreted this as ineffectiveness on his part, then as lethargy on their part, and finally as indifference to the Gospel on the part of all. When we sat down and talked about the town, we discovered that the main employer was a large chemical company. Most people worked for the company, which, in turn, was on a three-shift, seven-days-a-week work program. In addition, the shifts were rotated so that everyone had every shift sometime. That meant that regardless of the time of day or night something was planned, roughly one fourth

of the people were working and one fourth had just left their jobs. If one picked the right time, he could catch one fourth about to go on their shift, one fourth about to leave work, and one fourth just getting to sleep. The pastor's eloquent sermons on oneness, fellowship, worship, and the communion of saints were not falling on deaf ears as he had assumed. The problem was that he was operating on the basis of a world view that expected everyone to get to work at 8:00 a. m., get off at 4:30 p. m., and have both Saturday and Sunday to himself. His view was wrong.

A pastor needs certain tools if he is to preach relevant sermons: the Bible, some good commentaries, a solid theological training, a census report of the area where he serves, some population pyramids of the congregation, and a pin map. To have the last three without the first three is to set the stage for some splendid sociological and ecological studies of man in his environment. To have the first three without the last three is to set the stage for irrelevant preaching.

Pastors who preach without a sense of parish and community are like men hunting in the dark. There's nothing wrong with ammunition in the gun, or the gun, or the steady hand of the hunter. If he shoots often enough, the laws of probability will become operative. But how much better it is to hunt in the light of day when a person can see his game, select his target, and have as much advantage as possible to do what he wants to do.

A pastor should preach to a parish, preach to parish concerns, and speak to obvious needs. But first he must find out what the parish is. He cannot assume that by regularly reading *Time* he will have a clear perspective on what is happening in the world around him or a complete understanding of the needs in a given community. He needs to develop a style of parish life and preaching that responds to the uniqueness of his area's primary concerns. There is more than one

style of parish life and more than one style of preaching. But the style flows from the parish, not the man. Parish styles and preaching styles are not contradictory, they are only different. As long as varying styles of ministry or preaching are in the broad context of commitment to the Word and the Confessions, the variations are almost infinite.

Indeed, the most difficult part of the sermon to construct is the application. In order to present Law and Gospel seriously and properly, a pastor needs some understanding of the milieu in which a given group of people live. There is no such thing as suburbia, the inner city, rural areas, urban areas, and the like. Those are only general classifications like student, doctor, or teacher. If one wants to know a student, for example, he must ask some questions. What is he studying? How old is he? Where is he studying? How motivated is he? What are his goals? Only after obtaining that information can one zero in on something specific that he wants to say to a given group of students. Only then can he hope to make significant applications to the group.

Parish pastors, too, must study the world in which their individual congregations exist and come to know it like the back of their hand. Where they have no information, they should stay clear. There is no need for hunting in the dark; rather, one should operate in the light—not guessing, not assuming, not extrapolating.

Perhaps an anecdote can underscore the point of all this. While in Florida I served a little preaching station in Fernandina, which had existed since the Spanish-American War. I read the minutes of their voters' assemblies and discovered an interesting moment in Lutheran history. In the early twenties the group of German-speaking Lutherans were approached by their neighbors with a request to open their Sunday school to non-Lutheran children. True to their sense

of mission, they extended a cordial invitation. After the first Sunday that the children came there was a second meeting of the voters about a complaint they had received. The neighborhood children had come only to discover that classes were conducted in German. Their parents asked whether this could not be changed. After some discussion the answer came back, "No, we can't change the language, and we don't feel it too much to demand that if you really want the Gospel you will be willing to learn the language in which the Gospel is best presented." There was really nothing wrong with their message, but their understanding of community and their application of the Gospel lacked something. I see the same kind of thing happening over and over again today. The incidents vary, but the results are the same. Today we do add a certain sophistication even to our mistakes as time goes by, but they are just as real. Parish awareness has to support pastoral preaching. More than that, without parish awareness one really cannot have pastoral preaching, but only a fragmented ministry to a series of individuals.

While a parish is a geographical reality affected by diverse sociological and political forces, it is that unique creature of God called man that is the object of all we say and do. It is likewise very important for our preaching that we understand man. No man is a replica of another. Each stands unique in his creation, his history, and his distinctive qualities. While some may try to blur distinctiveness by pooling men into groupings, any attempt in this direction is doomed to failure if the boundaries are too stringent. There is no such thing as a Southerner or a Chicagoan or a Lutheran or a Finn. There is no such thing as a child, a youth, an adult, an old man. There are no parents, pastors, professors, students. There are only individual people, who in varying degree qualify for those descriptive categories, but they all bring to such classification their vary-

ing, changing life-roles and the distinctiveness of their personhood.

The game of merely acting out a role is often played. Pastors start looking "pastorish" and Germans act German; wives crawl into their wifeliness and St. Louisans take on the flavor they think living in St. Louis implies; farmers will act as ignorant as they think you'll believe. Such role-playing is merely the protective camouflage we use in a society that depersonalizes human beings. It's bad enough when political theorists or social scientists view humanity as if it were a stable mineral easily studied under the microscope, but Christian pastors should certainly know better. Their theological premises should help them understand that while there is a common humanity, each person stands out of the mass as an individual—one for whom his sin is a distinctive reality, one for whom Christ Jesus died, one for whom God's intent is both personal and real. Our theology gets around roles and penetrates to the core of the individual.

Furthermore, pastors need to remember that people do not exist for them to manipulate, coerce, chasten, or move. People are not pawns on a chessboard or interchangeable parts of a larger machine or anonymous digits in a vast numbers game. Each person is born individually, stores all his personal pain in his own realm of understanding, pulses and bleeds by himself, and ultimately dies all by himself. Each one can say, "I'm a me. I'm inside of me. I can't get out. No one else can get in."

The parish I now serve is paralleled by many other parishes today and anticipates tomorrow's norm. The number of Ph.D.s is high. Literally dozens have their master's degrees. The majority are college graduates. Vocationally they span the spectrum: psychiatrists, lawyers, engineers, teachers, accountants, specialists in every branch of human knowledge. We also have skilled and un-

skilled workmen, but not as many as elsewhere in our Synod.

How does one preach in such a circumstance? It's easy. First of all one has to recognize the common humanity before him. Second, he has to remember what he has to offer. The temptation to misread this kind of congregation has to be resisted. I once attended a seminar on "Preaching to the Educated." The lecturer emphasized that preachers ought to interlard their sermons to such a group with intellectual stimulation and with references to contemporary literature, poetry, and plays. The longer he spoke the more uncomfortable I became. While I have an interest in those things and can sometimes use them effectively in person-to-person ministries, most of my parishioners have made it very clear to me that this is not the kind of stimulation they seek on Sunday morning.

If anything, the more educated a parish is the more susceptible to spiritual leadership the members are and the more inquisitive about spiritual concerns. It is easier to preach to people who can understand language and concepts and who have a deep sense of their own limitations. I have a sneaking suspicion that the best congregation a simple pastor could preach to would be a congregation of seminary profs and graduate students in theology, assuming that they had managed to humble themselves beneath an understanding of their limitations.

It is true that our understanding of the priesthood of all believers conditions much of what we do. The apostle's statement that God gave "pastors and teachers for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry" clarifies our purpose and our function.

I have had the experience of working through books like Kent Knutson's *His Only Son Our Lord* or Herbert Mayer's *Interpreting the Holy Scriptures* with a group of 20 housewives whose formal education ended after high school. It started out a little slow

while we learned the language, but it was not long before they could handle terms like "kenotic," "hermeneutic," "cabod," and "homioiosios." Give them the language and they already have the spiritual and life experiences to fill in the chinks!

There are many resources that help a pastor to understand his ministry to the individual. And that's what he preaches to—masses of individuals! He cannot tell them what their problems are and offer God's balm until he has accepted them for what they are and has taken them at the point where they are. Theological principles will be constant, but illustrations and applications will vary. I preach, it appears, a different sermon at the 8:30 service from the 11:00 service. My vicars have told me that with a certain amount of censure. After they have been with me for a while we listen to the two tapes of the same sermon and ask whether this is actually so. What becomes clear is that illustrations and specific applications vary. I'm able to vary them because I know those people "out there." I know who is in pain and what has caused it. I know who is asking questions and what they are. I know who is wrestling with temptations and how they come. Pastoral relationships give one that knowledge. Pastoral preaching flows from pastoral relationships.

In conclusion, we might ask some questions. Is Philbert right in his little monograph on preaching, "Christ's Preaching—

and Ours," when he suggests that the most significant difference between apostolic preaching and that which takes place today is that while theirs was itinerant, we have become reiterant? If that is true, what does it mean for our task? Are those who talk about a need for the underground church and about the passiveness of preaching in our time correct? Is Hans Küng right in his article, "With Windows Open to the World," when he speaks of our necessity to translate our "be" into a legitimate "do"? Does J. E. Rattenbury make a valid point when he states, "In any congregation, normal or otherwise, sixty-five years ago, you could count on a general sense of guilt. Now the only thing you can count on is a general sense of doubt"?

The pastoral ministry offers a significant way for a man to spend his days and live out his worship of that One who reconciled all men with Himself. Parish preaching is hard on the ego, but satisfying to one's sense of servanthood. It gives life meaning and makes one glad to get up in the morning. Inadequacies may frighten us and drive us again and again to our knees in contrition and remorse over our broken humanity, but the Spirit comes and lifts us up. It's sometimes hard to stay alive "out there," but I know of nothing that will sustain life better than pastoral preaching to the people of a parish.

Washington, D. C.

An Introductory Sermon

ARDEN W. MEAD

The Thomasius Epistle for the Sixth Sunday After Trinity, Acts 14:8-18

It was the close of a midweek Lenten service, and we were all gathered at the back of the gymnasium we were using for worship at the time. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a small boy who was standing away from the hand-shaking line, staring at me with a look that was a combination of disappointment and wonder. Eventually his parents joined him, and as they came through the line, he looked up at me and asked, "But where are the holes in your hands?"

Not too many weeks later, as I drove up to the home of one of our members, the small daughter of the family ran into the house, shouting, "Mommy! Mommy! God's car is in our driveway!"

It seems to be an occupational hazard in this profession that occasionally people confuse the minister with the Master, the creature with the Creator. This goes back in the history of the holy ministry at least as far as Paul and Barnabas (and there was at least one other time in Paul's career—when he was bitten by a snake with no ill effects—that people wanted to make a god out of him). I don't know how often this week I've heard people make reference to wanting to hear my first sermon, as though this will constitute the be-all and end-all of ecclesiastical success at the Lutheran Village Church in Ladue . . . although I have heard no one yet make mention of the second sermon, which will be next Sunday. And I can just imagine that the conversation between services takes the form of the question, "How *was* he?"

There will probably be some members of our congregation who will be disappointed to learn that the new pastor is not Jesus Christ Himself, nor even Pastor Hoffmann or Dr. Deffner or Pastor Boecler; that I have

come to Ladue from Greater Cleveland, and did not descend bodily from the heavens; nor was I born in a manger; and I don't have holes in my hands. With St. Paul I shall have to begin my ministry among you by confessing, "We also are men, of like nature with you!" I am a sinner; I make mistakes; I do wrong; I am by no means perfect; I offend my God, and no doubt there will be times when consciously or unconsciously I will offend His people. I am not God!

But of course you knew that. To imagine that you would haul out bullocks and garlands and attempt to worship me would be an insult to your intelligence. You knew all the time that there is only one true and living God, and that He only is worthy of our worship and adoration.

But even though we know better, do we always give Him that worship and adoration which He so richly deserves? There are people who are not here this morning—nor in any church—because they have their own Sunday morning worship routine: They take little round, white offerings and, using liturgically graded implements, deposit them in small banner-marked holes in the ground, with all the routine and reverence of one observing the Stations of the Cross. Others are preparing burnt sacrifices on outdoor barbecue grills this Lord's Day morning, in their form of worship.

Our god, you see, becomes simply that to which we give our lives above everything else—that which is so most-important to us that it becomes more important than God. What's yours? What is it that lurks just below the surface to take God's place in your life? A fine home? A social circle? A prominent job? A promising profession? A portfolio of securities? The family? The beauty parlor? A reputation of one kind or another that must be upheld at all costs? Oh, it can run the gamut from politics and

economics all the way to rock 'n' roll groups, and (yes) also right into the bottle. We may laugh at the naive nature of the ancient residents of Lystra — ready to offer bullocks and garlands to two traveling missionaries — but if we look closely, we may find ourselves every bit as naive as they, bringing our oxen and garlands (and much more!) — bringing even our very lives at the last — to sacrifice upon the altar of whatever it is that claims our prime allegiance and attention for the moment.

St. Paul sweeps all of these away with one short phrase: "You should turn aside from these vain things." "Vain things" he calls them, and the expression he used indicated that Paul was horrified by the futility of such "worship" — because it doesn't get you anywhere! To give one's life to such pursuits, no matter how noble or satisfying or important they are, to the point where it becomes worship (and it often doesn't take much to do that) is rather like staying up all night tonight with a clock and a calendar to make sure that tomorrow will be Monday. So what, finally? It doesn't really get you anywhere! St. Peter once wrote to his congregation that, after all, "you know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers — and not with perishable things, such as gold and silver" (and he could have made the list much longer), "but with the precious blood of Jesus, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

"Men, why are you doing this?" St. Paul asked. "We also are men, of like nature with you, and bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who *made* the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." God is greater than anything else to which we might be tempted to give our lives because, after all, He is the One who made all the rest of it. Even in something as important as the giving of the Ten Commandments, God interrupted Himself, as it were, to remind the

people that He is the Creator of everything else. And at the other end of the time-line, it seems significant that in the Book of Revelation the very first song that the angels are recorded as singing in eternity is: "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for *Thou didst create all things*, and by Thy will they existed and were created." These things are not for us to worship — to give ourselves to — but to direct our attention to their Giver, lest we make the mistake of the little birthday-boy whose mother must keep insisting, "Say thank you to Uncle George for the bow and arrow. Say thank you to *Uncle George* for the bow and arrow. *Say thank you to UNCLE GEORGE for the bow and arrow!*" Through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah, God once complained, "This people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season — the spring rain and the autumn rain — and keeps for us the weeks appointed for harvest!'"

The citizens of Lystra got all excited because of one lame man who was healed. I wonder what they would think of Salk vaccine, open-heart surgery, television, computers, men in space, synthetic fabrics, automobiles, air conditioning, indoor plumbing, and electric toasters. Miracles! And if you have come to the Village Church this morning to hear the new pastor, looking for miracles . . . well, there will be a few! Little children, born in sin, will be brought to the font and there, by the miracle of God's grace, they will be given the gift of faith and adopted into the family of God. This morning you are invited to come to the Lord's altar for a miracle: in the body and blood of your Savior Jesus Christ to receive the forgiveness of all your sins, the assurance of His love, and the power to live your life for Him. And in the Word of God preached from this pulpit you will be offered a power which can

change your life now, and give hope to an otherwise hopeless future, a future that stretches beyond the grave that normally makes everything else vain and futile. Why do you suppose God has given us all our bounty—not just “rains and fruitful seasons,” but the whole business? Why are we so blessed that in our vocabulary “poverty” is something we watch on television, “hunger” something we read about in the daily newspaper? Why has God granted us so much? The psalmist answers, “Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God, who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains. He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry. He delighteth not in the strength of the horse; He taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him, in those that hope in His mercy.” God does it all so that we will respond—not to the gift, but to the Giver. When Peter healed a lame man under very similar circumstances, we read, “And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.”

For God still has a few miracles up His sleeve which He would like to share with us. He finds us as St. Paul found the lame man at Lystra: “sitting,” unable to use our feet, cripples from birth, never being able to walk. He finds us stymied on the road to life everlasting, weighted down by a load of sin from which we are unable to free ourselves. And through men like St. Paul (and even like me) He says, “I bring you good news!”—and that Good News is Jesus Christ: the healing of full forgiveness purchased in His blood at the cross of Calvary;

and the ability (as we heard in the epistle today) to rise up and walk, to live a new way, “walking in newness of life.” St. Paul declared it better than I could: “And so you should know, my fellow men,—we are announcing to you this Jesus forgives your sins and makes everyone who believes righteous and free from everything from which Moses’ law could not free you!”

That is the message I come to bring; that is the only reason I am here: to invite you to “turn from vain things to a living God,” who gives us His life in the death and resurrection of His Son, our Savior.

The verse after our text says that Paul and Barnabas didn’t get to finish the sermon they had started. The people got angry to learn that they were not “the gods come down in the likeness of men,” and they threw stones at them, leaving them finally for dead. And that is the kind of thing that can happen when a man seeks to puncture the comfortable deities which a society has canonized for itself. But that is my job, my calling: to remind all of us, “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things, such as gold and silver; but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” And then it is for me to pray that your response will be that of the Christians in Galatia, who did not seek to make a god out of Paul on the one hand, nor to throw stones at him on the other, but to whom he wrote, “You received me as a messenger of God.”

It is thus that I come to you—not with holes in my hands, but “as a messenger of God.” No more than that! And no less!

The Lutheran Village Church in Ladue
St. Louis County, Mo.