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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life through conversations with the faculty here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

We will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.

I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.

I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection between faith and daily life, when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

Today I'm talking with Dr. Dale Meyer.

He's president emeritus of Concordia Seminary St. Louis and longtime preacher on the Lutheran Hour.

He's no stranger to recording studios and we're thrilled to have him in ours.

Dale: My pleasure.

Thank you, Jessica.

And it's true, a lot of the people who heard my sermon said he's a long time preacher.

Jessica: Also in the studio today we have Dr. David Schmitt, professor of Homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

Dr. Schmitt, thank you for bringing your expertise to the conversation.

David: Oh, thank you very much.

I love being here.

Jessica: Dr. Meyer recently spoke about the new stained glass windows here on campus.

They're modern, beautiful, they're packed with theology.

I love these.

You can see all the artwork online.

There are pictures, a virtual tour, a video.

You can even order a printed booklet.

I have one.

But you don't need to see the windows to appreciate this interview.

But by the end, I think you'll want to.

Dr. Meyer, you recently spoke about this artwork, specifically the figures of faith in the windows.

Dale: Well, figures of faith was a topic assigned to me and maybe by Dr. Schmitt.

David: Yep, it was assigned by me.

You're right.

That's right.

Dale: So I can trace it all back to David.

So we've got all these windows and obviously the windows all have figures in them.

The task given to me was to preach on these figures of faith.

And the question that I came up with as I was preparing is, where's Dale in all these windows?

And that was a good devotional starter for me.

You know, where am I in the timeline of salvation?

And then I followed up by asking, where's Jesus in the timeline of salvation?

I mean, Jesus obviously is in the windows big time.

But exactly where is he right now and how does my place relate to his place?

David: You know, that question, the opening question struck me.

Now, I was watching it online, so I'm able to pause this sermon.

Jessica: And let me tell our listeners that they can listen to that sermon online as well.
There'll be links on our website.

David: Yeah, yeah.

So I was listening to the sermon and you asked, where are you in the windows?

And I kind of paused it because I wanted to meditate on that.

And I kind of, I took the question in a completely different way than you were asking it.

And so it was, I took the question more as looking at the figures figurally rather than literally.

So I looked at them and I still remember the one I decided on was, this tells you what kind of a day I was having.

I felt like Isaac on the altar being slain by my father.

Jessica: Oh no! Oh no!

David: Yeah, you know, God who loves me so very much is causing horrible things to be happening.

And I'm like in a state of wondering, will I ever get through this?

And so the windows, I mean in one sense, the figures in the windows are really patterns of ways in which God has been faithful throughout history.

And you can see yourself in those patterns, right?

Dale: That's a great point because I mean Paul says all things that were written way back when were written for our benefit, Romans 15.

And you can look at all of these and see them, as you said, figurally.

How does that describe my situation?

But I meant it literally.

Where is Art enormous boy Dale in the progress of all these windows?

David: It got me thinking about how I can meditate on those windows and I will find in those windows people who have been in life situations that may be similar to mine or at least whose lives have revealed God at work in a way that I can see him at work in my life.

And it was just a fun thing.

But then we got into the sermon and then the next part of the sermon I realized, oh, Dale meant literally, where am I in the windows?

And I thought, well, we didn't put him in the windows intentionally, right?

So I'm like, maybe Dale wanted a window. I don't know.

Dale: I am in the window.

Years ago, years ago, when I was with the Lutheran, I was in San Diego and I was walking on the beachfront and they had all kinds of stores with souvenirs and I went into one and this had mugs, coffee cups, you know, and they had all the family names.

And I looked for Meyer on a coffee cup and the crest for the Meyer family was a Pelican in its piety.

David: You're kidding.

Dale: No, no.

David: Oh, that's wonderful.

Dale: So up to this point in my life, I mean the Meyer family, my dad was a milkman.

We were normal people and the only crest we used was toothpaste, but that became my crest.

So I look at that and I say, yeah, that's you, Dale.

David: I did not know that.

Jessica: What does this mean?
Tell me what the Pelican of Piety is.
What is this?

Dale: Well, Pelican is plucking her chest.
Blood comes out to feed the little baby pelicans and that symbolizes Christ's sacrifice and the Holy Communion.

David: Yeah, and it's a beautiful window.
So the Pelican appears in the south transept window, the crucifixion window, and at the very bottom of the cross, you'll see a Pelican in a nest.
The nest is made of a crown of thorns and if you look at the crown of thorns, they slowly become olive branches, right?
And so it's filled with the Pelican.
She's got her young there.
She's plucking her breast.
Blood is coming from her breast, feeding her young.
And then there's two of them who are drinking the blood that's coming from the cross.
And so that helps you understand this symbol because you're watching as the blood of Christ is feeding these two and the mother is feeding the other ones and you begin to realize what this symbolizes.
But I did not know that that was the Meyer crest.

Dale: It is now.
Like I say, up till now it's always been toothpaste.

David: Okay, yeah.
So you are in the windows.
Well, good.
But so you asked literally where am I in the windows and why is that a helpful question?

Dale: You know, in retirement I reflect on my ministry, good things and bad things.
I reflect on our church's ministry and I'm convinced that we have not done the fullest job of presenting Jesus to our people.
And I'm not saying that we presented him falsely.
There's going to be millions and millions of people in heaven because they heard the gospel of Jesus from Missouri Synod pastors, teachers, broadcasters, you have it.
But what has struck me in retirement is that for various reasons, and I think we can know what these reasons are, we focus on especially the first century when Jesus did what he did.
And I'm not diminishing that because, you know.

David: That's our salvation.

Dale: Yeah, depends upon that.
His death is resurrection.
And then we fast forward to someday he's going to come back, okay.
And we confess that in the creed.
I'm not sure how much we actually believe it.
What that does is create a void in the present.
You know, he did this in the past.
He's going to do this in the future.
But it's kind of like broadcasting the green room.
You know, the green room where you go and wait until Jessica says it's time to be on stage.
And Jessica calls you in.

Jessica: You eat the snacks, the M&Ms, we have ours.

Dale: Exactly.
So, you know, I think our popular understanding of it is Jesus was in the green room during the Old Testament.
The Father, the director said, okay, time to go and do your thing, be born, suffer, die, rise.
And then he goes back to the, he ascends, he goes back to the green room.
And he's just waiting around until the director says time to shut it all down.
And that creates a vacuum, a void in our lives.
What is Jesus doing for us now?
You know, you're only as good as your last show.
So, Jesus' last show, quote unquote, was wonderful.
As David said, our salvation depends upon it.
But what's he doing now?
And so he kind of gets relegated from the heart and the core of our devotion personally and as a church.

David: So, I really liked that analogy because you ended up saying he's not in the green room, he's in the control room.
He's running things.
Right. Yeah.
And that is, I think that's really perceptive.

Dale: I'm reflective on this.
This is something that I have not urged on my congregations and people in my preaching and teaching.
And I don't think we have in the Missouri Synod generally.
Now, if you look at the liturgy and the lessons, my goodness gracious, the ascension, Christ sitting at the right hand and coming again.
It's all over the place.
It's all over the place.
But for various reasons, and I think they're somewhat sociological and historical, I don't see that we push that in our preaching and teaching.
And again, I'm not saying that we're teaching falsely.
I mean, anybody can get something going every once in a while.
But as a whole, I think our Missouri Synod clergy does a fine job of presenting the Gospel.
But in this day and age, I think we can do more.
St. Paul told the Ephesian elders that he proclaimed the whole council of God.
I think I at least have been a little bit weak on this aspect that he is sitting at the right hand of the Father now.
He is running all things from the control room and he's doing that for us and for the good of his church.
And we take this by faith, obviously, when you look at, hey Jesus, you're running this?
Ain't looking too good.
So we take it by faith, but one day, he's going to reveal himself in glory.
The church looks to the back, backwards.
We look to the first century.
I don't get the sense in congregations that we're looking forward.
We've got to look forward as much as we look backwards.

David: Or even look around, look around us, right?
Because isn't that like, I'm thinking of that passage in Acts where doesn't Luke say, you know, in my first Gospel, I wrote what Jesus began to do and teach, right?

Implying that Jesus is continuing to do and teach things through the working of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the church.

And so there's that ability to look around at what is happening right now and see Jesus at work.

Dale: Yeah, that's great.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a passage that I've used, some people might say ad nauseam, you know, long time preacher and Lutheran Hour.

Okay, we've heard this Dale.

But he says that he discovered faith.

He learned how to discover faith by plunging himself into the problems of contemporary life.

If we cocoon ourselves away from the problems in our communities, in the nation, in the world, and just kind of, you know, on Sunday I'm going to retreat into compartmentalized church and not look around,

then there's no stimulation to faith.

I mean, problems are a great stimulant to faith.

They can also be a stimulant to walking away from faith.

But when a Christian says, wait a minute, Jesus is reigning.

Somehow he's mysteriously in control of all of this that's going on.

You start to say, where's the relevance of faith to homicides in St. Louis or Chicago, you name it.

And I mean, that means that we really have to process gospel.

One of the things that I see in students, and correct me, David, it's hard to do theology, to do gospel in the light of current problems.

Now, you do it great in your sermons.

You do a fine job of that.

But, you know, anybody can say we're sinners and Jesus died for your sins.

And I'm not, okay.

And one day he's going to come again.

But how does this apply to me as I'm struggling with relationships, with crime, finances, the whole thing, including aging?

David: Don't look at me when you say that.

Dale: I'm probably the oldest one here.

Jessica: As long as you don't look at me, that's fine.

Dale: I'm the oldest one here.

So, you know, that too.

So, you know, what's the future?

I just don't see that we, and I'm indicting myself, I don't see that we generally have instilled in our parishioners, man, the future is going to be great.

I want to live as long as I can, but I can't wait for what's coming on the other side.

David: You know, I think for me, one of the most beautiful things about the windows is that when you look at the human figures and the angelic figures throughout all the windows, none of them are looking at you.

The human figures are looking up to God, they're looking at the world, the angelic figures are usually looking at what's going on.

Isn't that, is that in Peter 2 that angels long to look into these things?

Dale: Yeah, chapter 1, verse 12.

David: Yeah, so you've got these angels who are looking in on all this stuff, and the only human, God-human figure that's looking at you is Jesus in the front window.

In the front window, his eyes are directed at you, and it gives you that sense that this risen Jesus, who will come, who died in the past, who will come again, is reigning right now and sees you, sees your problems in this at work, is at work in this word,

Dale: Oh, that's great, that's good.

Jessica, what a wonderful producer you are.

Our brains are going here, our brains are going.

1 Peter 1, verse 12, even the angels desire to parakipto, to peer into the gospel that has been preached to you people, that's what he says. Fascinating.

Jessica: Now you're writing a commentary in 1 Peter, right?

Dale: Yeah.

Jessica: And when it's available, we'll have a link on our website.

Dale: And I'm going to have to live a long time, thank you.

So I'm in no hurry to go.

But the same word parakipto is used of John at the tomb.

He got there and he didn't rush in because John was a bit more timid.

And it says in the Gospel of John, chapter 21, he peered into the tomb, parakipto, he stooped over and peered.

Same word that Peter uses.

The other thing, if I may pick up on this, one of the things I said in the sermon is that I'm at the communion table.

That's where I see myself, at the communion table on the north side window.

And there are rows and rows around this communion table which is beautifully a Eucharistic tree of life.

David: Right, yeah.

Dale: Which was your committee, man, you guys did a great job on this.

David: And it mirrors the stump of Jesse which is in the window with David.

And so from that line of the stump of Jesse you've now got this tree of life here at this communion table.

Dale: So that's where I'm at.

And what dawned on me, again, thinking through this devotionally, there's rows around the communion table.

But only two, three, four are actually looking at the table.

They are all, as you said of the angels and the other figures, they're looking away from the table.

And I thought, yeah.

And I made the point in the sermon, where are they looking?

They're looking to Christ who is, as the hymn says, soon, very soon we are going to see the King.

He is coming back.

And I made the point that communion is not the end goal.

It's the means of grace.

Ozzie Hoffman said, I'm sure he said it publicly, I heard him say it privately, he said, we often stress the means.

He says the real stress is on the grace.

This is not to put down holy communion or baptism or the word of God.

But all of these, as dear as they are to us, they are the means to the grace and the grace only comes in Jesus who is going to come again.

David: And you're right.

I mean the figures in the windows, they're looking away from the table.

But if you look at them, their faces are directed toward the returning Christ.

And actually the artist began to use more orange and gold tones in those figures.

Because when you get to that return window, you're going to see that the figures there are much fuller in terms of the gold and the reddish and orange tones.

Kind of like the flames in the resurrection window.

And so there's this anticipation.

Dale: These windows are wonderful.

And because you served on the committee so faithfully, I just appointed the committee and then kind of phased out and I retired.

But these windows are wonderful. Wonderful.

I mean, and this booklet that you said is available, what a devotional source it is.

You just sit and look at the picture and just take it in.

Jessica: And you have to see these windows, I think, to know what they're talking about.

They're modern looking. They have all these details.

You can look at one window and there's like five Bible stories in it.

All the symbolism. I didn't know the pelican symbolism that you talked about.

I know where it is in the window.

It's amazing. And there are so many faces.

There are parts in the windows where it just looks like it's a design.

But then I look closer and I'm like, oh, that's not a cloud.

That's the outline of a face.

David: Right. And some of the faces are not fully represented, indicating people who have yet to be born.

Jessica: Oh, that's amazing.

David: Yet to come who are gathering around this Eucharistic feast with us.

Yeah. And that table that I like that window.

You know, it's actually picking up on the Te Deum.

The whole church on earth doth acknowledge that. Right.

And so how do you show the whole church on earth acknowledging?

And there's this now not yet acknowledgement.

The now he's with us in the communion.

The not yet he's coming and we're waiting and longing for him to come.

You've got people of all ethnicities.

You've got people of different socioeconomic status all gathered around the table.

And so your sermon basically had two main ideas that I thought of as I was listening to it.

One is where is Jesus?

Jesus is reigning right now.

And then the other was where am I?

And actually where we are literally in the windows is at that communion table.

Is that right, Dale?

Dale: Yes, that's the way I see myself and I think that's where we are.

An interesting thing is that if we look at the resurrection window, the main chancel window.

Oh yeah, that's Jesus rising.

Okay. On the south transept window he's dying.

We see him rising and then on the north transept he's coming back again.
But that chancel window is not just I'm out of the tomb.
There are plenty of signs of his beginning of the state of exaltation.
The word and the sacrament are coming.
He's got the wounds but the wounds already are the source of our life.
So it's a mistake.
And he's looking at you.

Yeah, it's a mistake just to think oh yeah that's 2000 years ago when he popped out of the tomb.
That is the beginning of the state of exaltation and it just is going to culminate in the north transept window.

Jesus has started the end times and the end time is going to come to its full consummation like the hymn says.

Oh grant the consummation of this our song above.

It's going to come when he returns in the parousia at the end time in glory and we see him.

And all this faith, faith like yeah I have faith that he's ruling the world but it doesn't look like that now.

It's all going to turn into sight.

David: Now in this sermon you have this term deists and you say that most Americans are deists.
Could you unpack that a little bit?

Dale: Yeah my filters in age are going away.

Well I remember in grade school when we had to study history.

David: Thomas Paine.

Yeah a lot of the founding fathers were deists.

They believed that God had created the world and then he went into the green room or wherever he went.

And it's up to us to manage this world that God has created.

We manage it with reason not so much with faith.

So they're deists.

They believe in some deity but you know he's gone, he's gone.

Well if we don't push on our people and I don't mean that in a harsh way but just continue to raise up throughout the church here and our preaching and teaching that no he's ascended.

He's reigning now.

He's interested in your life.

He hears your prayers.

He gives you these means so that you come closer to his grace.

If we don't do that then we have a we're Lutheran deists.

Yeah he did these wonderful things back in the first century.

He's going to do some great thing at the end but for right now you know.

David: And the danger of that is that there's a vacuum and someone needs to fill it with something right?

Dale: Oh you listened to the sermon.

David: I did listen to the sermon.

Dale: If we create this vacuum and we do it unwittingly.

Okay our intentions are good.

And again we do get the gospel right.

I believe that.

But we create a vacuum if we don't emphasize what Christ is doing now.
That the crucified one is risen ascended and in the control room and some day soon he's going to shut it all down and take us home.
You create a vacuum and a number of things happen in the vacuum.
One is, Os Guinness has said this, we become virtual atheists.
We go through the religious ceremonies on Sunday and whenever else.
But when it comes right down to it we've got to manage this life on our own.
There's another writer Parker Palmer and he said this is also true of church leaders.
That we think it's up to us to get things done.
And we don't have the reliance that yeah there's things we have to do.
I mean we are co-workers with Christ.
But it's very easy to see as I look around from my old man rocking chair.
That a lot of us church leaders, I include myself, and a lot of our parishioners are functioning as atheists.
I'm not saying we don't have saving faith.
Because the cultural things that are going on around us are insidious.
And the old wily foe can really.

David: And the world wants us to think that there's a private religion and a public life and the two should not mix.

Dale: Yes that's compartmentalized.
That's our Western culture.

David: Right so you can believe whatever you want to believe.
Just don't let it have any effect on how you live in the world.

Dale: Politicians will say that.

David: Right.

Dale: You hear that all the time.

So that's one of the things is that in our personal life without the conviction every day when I wake up.

That Jesus is in control of this thing and I have to think, image Jesus sitting on the throne.

However you want to picture that.

Then I think it's all up to me.

And I easily become, well I'm saved, a virtual atheist.

I'll be saved but I'm not building as 1 Corinthians 3 says with the best materials.

The second thing that happens, this is fascinating and I owe this to N.T. Wright in his book Surprised by Hope.

When you have a vacuum because you minimize the ascension the church will fill it.

The church will fill that vacuum.

David: What does that mean?

Dale: The church says and I'm paraphrasing Wright here but I think it's true.

The church will identify itself as the presence of Jesus in the world.

Now Jesus is with us.

Okay.

He is, lo I'm with you always, da, da, da.

He is with us.

But if we equate the existence of the church with Jesus' presence in the church.

Then Jesus has taken a second seat to the church.

Jesus in fact is exalted.

He is the Lord of lords, King of kings.

And he is over the church.

Wright says that if you put all your eggs in Jesus equals the church and the church equals Jesus.

Two things are going to happen.

One might be triumphalism.

We have the correct teaching.

We're the best.

You know, you other people, yeah, okay you're not as good as we are.

That's triumphalism.

I'm just saying, quoting N.T. Wright.

And the other one is despair.

Because some people will say, you know, I ain't drinking this Kool-Aid anymore.

Because the church is not helping me in my real serious life.

David: The church is made up of sinners.

Dale: Yeah.

Right.

David: Who are confessing their sins and yet sometimes people don't hear the confession.

They just see the sinners and they're like, well if that's what the church is about.

If that's what the kingdom of God is supposed to be.

I don't want any of it.

Dale: So it's that vacuum.

And again, N.T. Wright put me onto this but I think it's true in my observations.

The church is not Jesus.

David: The church is the bride of Christ.

The church is not Christ.

Dale: So it's an intimate relationship but He is still Lord over us.

And sometimes He will say, if we will hear it, He'll say, you didn't do that.

My dad always used to say, you didn't do that.

I knew he was really ticked at me.

You didn't do that.

But Jesus will say and He says it to us through His word.

We don't always hear the word.

But when He says you didn't do that to the church or to us as individuals, it's coming out of love.

Love for the bride.

You know, it's like my dad, when he reprimanded me, it wasn't because he was, well he may have been angry with me.

But it came out of a deeper love and concern for his child.

David: The scriptures are the living voice of Jesus.

Guiding us, calling us, speaking to us.

Dale: Exactly.

It's not just a historic document that we have to process through our own traditions.

It trumps everything.

Now that doesn't mean we don't do theology.

It doesn't mean we don't have exegetes and systematicians.

Yeah, we do.

What does this really mean for us in our time?

We can't go back and put ourselves in the first or the 16th century as if that's where we're at.

Because we're not there.

We look, as you said earlier in the podcast, we look around.

Okay, what do these precious eternal truths from the first and the 16th century, how do we translate them into where we're at now?

And that's one of the things that theologically, we try to do this at the seminary, but it's hard.

David: It is very hard.

Dale: It's a tough bridge to cross.

David:

There's one part of your sermon that I thought was beautiful, and that is the part that is honest about recognizing how hard it is to believe that Jesus is ruling when you see what's going on.

And you see things happening and you wonder, how can this be part of his rule?

And yet the faith holds onto that.

And it drives us not in anger, but in hope.

I'm going to trust that this is God at work and it is good and I'm going to long for that day, long for that day when Jesus comes.

So come, Lord Jesus.

That's what I loved about the way you kind of closed the sermon.

Dale: We're almost there.

We're almost there.

So yeah, yeah.

Jessica: Thank you for coming to our studio and being here with us today.

It was such an honor.

Dale: You're welcome.

It was fun.

I really liked this.

Jessica: Thanks, guys.

You can find more episodes of Tangible on Spotify, Google Podcast, Apple.

If you'd like to see the show continue, please subscribe, share, leave a review.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join us next week when I talk with Dr. Joel Elowsky about the vocal cord dysfunction spasmonic dysphonia.

It interrupted his life and challenged his faith.

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