

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Father loved the world and gave the world His own Son to be lifted up unto death for it, as the all-availing sacrifice for the world's sins. God's Son approved of this solution for sin, and so in the fullness of time, God's only Son became flesh, Jesus born of the virgin Mary, that He might be the Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world unto cross and death. You know that story well.

But there's more to the story than that, as even the well known verse from John chapter 3 bears witness. It goes on, "*that whoever believes in Him — in God's Son — should not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). "*Whoever believes in Him.*" But St. Paul asks, "*how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?*" (Rom. 10:14-15). And then he answers with the prophetic exclamation: "*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!*"

Yes, the story continues with the love of Christ for His church. He sends out "*laborers into his harvest*" for "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*"

Today, we hear how Jesus sends out 72 laborers into the harvest fields, just as earlier (Luke 9:1ff) He had sent out the 12. He "*sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal*" (Luke 9:2). He sent them out without moneybag or knapsack or sandals (and earlier without a staff or even a change of clothing). Indeed, He sent them out with one thing: the Gospel of the kingdom of God. He sent them out preaching the word of Christ. So that even as Jesus began His ministry proclaiming, "*the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*" (Mark 1:15), so Jesus instructs His disciples to preach, "*The kingdom of God has come near to you*" and to proclaim "*Peace,*" again reminiscent of Isaiah's exclamation: "*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him ... who publishes peace*" (Isa. 52:7).

But Christ's love for His church did not stop with those whom He Himself sent out immediately. Surely, you heard it. Jesus sent these out: "*Go your way; behold, I am sending you out*" Ἀποστέλλω is the word He uses here, and so rightly, we call these sent disciples Apostles. But Jesus' love for the church did not end with them. The feeding of Jesus' sheep — baptizing, teaching, giving real food and real drink in the Holy Supper — was to continue to "*the end of the age*" (Matt. 28:20). And so the Apostles appointed men to follow after them to "*shepherd the church,*" that is, to "*watch over [the sheep]*" (Acts 20:28), and to "*publicly teach in the Church, [and] administer the Sacraments*" (Augsburg Confession XIV).

And though the Apostles appointed them, really, we confess, it was the Holy Spirit leading them, as Paul says about those we call pastors: "*the Holy Spirit ... made*

[them] overseers” (Acts 20:28). Moreover, although the Apostles did it at first, we confess that the church retains “the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers” that this “authority is a gift that in reality is given to the Church.” (Treatise 67). That’s because, the things that are given pastors to do — preach the Gospel, forgive and retain sins, administer the Sacraments (AC XXVIII, 5) — are really the authority of the Church. As we confess, “the Church has the authority to grant eternal things” (AC XXVIII, 10). Thus, we hear Isaiah tell us today of Jerusalem, a picture of the Church, that we “*may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that [we] may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.*”

The Church, however, “exercises [her] authority” — she offers up her gifts “by the ministry of the word” (AC XXVIII, 10), that is, through pastors. That’s how it happens for us today. Men are still sent (that is, called), but not immediately by Jesus as He sent out the 72 today. Rather, they are sent mediately by the Holy Spirit, that is, through the mediation of the Church. Thus, having been called by the Church to St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, Riceville, IA, today we bid Matthias and Naomi and family farewell and Godspeed, as he goes forth to preach the Gospel to the saints there and to feed them. And soon, Justin and Stephanie and family will be heading to Our Savior Lutheran Church in Danville, KY, where he has been sent by the Spirit through the Church to serve those saints there.

And all this happens because of Jesus’ love for His church and in answer to our prayer: “Almighty God ... Continue to send Your messengers [that is, Your pastors] to preserve Your people in true peace that, by the preaching of Your Word, Your Church may be kept free from all harm and danger” (Collect for Proper 9C).

In this way, Christ continues to love and care for His church on earth until the time of the harvest comes. For this, too, “Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus unto Thee” (LSB420). For indeed, Jesus’ words to the 72 did not apply to them alone. When Jesus said, “*The one who hears you hears me,*” He was applying it to all His sent ones, all who would follow in the Apostles’ train, all the preachers and pastors who have been given a message to proclaim, who have been handed over the keys to declare to you the true healing: “*[Sons of God], your sins are forgiven*” (Mark 2:5).

Now some people take offense at this distinction here articulated. “You’re making the pastor out to be lord over ordinary church members,” some accuse. I’m not intending that. Some tension can arise between pastor and congregation. I don’t want that either. Jesus was clear in the Scriptures that the disciples were not to “*lord it over*” others (Matt. 20:25), but were to serve in the fashion of “*the Son of Man [who] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matt. 20:28). Thus, C. F. W. Walther both affirmed that the “pastoral office” is

“distinct from the priesthood of all believers,” and that yet this “ministry is not a special or, in opposition to that of ordinary Christians, a more holy state, ... but it is a ministry of service” (Walther, Church and Ministry, Ministry Theses 1 & IV).

So it is for pastors—not lords but servants. No cause for boasting except in *“the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* No cause for rejoicing except, like all Christians, in being made *“a new creation”* in Christ Jesus, except, like all Christians, in having *“your names ... written in heaven.”*

On the other hand, pastors hear Jesus’ words today and sometimes receive this “being sent” with a bit of trepidation; after all, Jesus does say *“I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”* Understandable. I’ve heard Dr. Rast on Issues, Etc. say how hard and challenging the work of ministry is. Even when done *“in a spirit of gentleness,”* rebuking sin is hard; calling to repentance is uncomfortable; restoring one caught in a transgression is unpleasant. Pastors can receive a “tongue-lashing” for their audacity; they can be wounded; they can *“bear ... the marks of Jesus”* on their bodies. How much easier simply to do the thing that makes one popular, rather than that which is faithful. But as the fictional Father MacAnally once told a young priest: “It’s not part of our apostolate to be popular” (TV show *Ballykissangel*). No. Pastors are sent to do the Lord’s bidding for the sake of the Church — to call sinners to repentance, to preach the good news of salvation in Christ, to wash away sins in baptismal waters, to feed the saints the food that endures to everlasting life.

This tension between priesthood and pastors often troubles the Church. As I’ve been preparing for the upcoming convention, I’ve noted two questions in the Convention Workbook that Pastor Harrison asked our Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Now, I don’t for a second think that Pastor Harrison was confused about the answer, but he wanted the CTCR to offer their theological analysis. The first question was: “Are the Word of God and the saving Gospel effective only when spoken by a pastor?” Now the Commission answers this question quickly — “No” — and supplies numerous examples of ordinary people speaking an efficacious word of God to others. “They illustrate the ‘royal priesthood’ in action,” the Commission says. They are right. But clearly someone’s thinking or teaching that way was pitting pastors against people, and that’s wrong.

The second question was about allowing laymen to carry out the public functions of the pastoral office, not in an emergency, but just because the pastor said it’s okay (that’s my characterization). The answer again is “No,” and that answer has to do with God’s establishing of the office of pastor, and His calling, sending, and placing pastors in the office by the Church for the sake of the Church. The report reminds us: no one can “arrogate to himself” that which “belongs to all.”

On this Sunday as we think on how Christ loves His Church and cares for her, let us not fall into the ditch on either side. Let us not disparage the speaking of the Good News by ordinary Christians and say that only pastors can speak an efficacious word. No. Remember: the Gospel “*is the power of God for salvation*” (Rom. 1:16). We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8), and “*faith comes from hearing ... the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:17). On the other hand, let us not treat the office Christ gave to His Church for her good or those who inhabit the office as unnecessary to the Church. No, Christ sent Apostles and Prophets and Evangelists to His Church of old, and He still sends “*shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*” (Eph. 4:11-13). Christ sends still to deliver the salvation He won by His cross to His beloved Church.

Let us rejoice! Christ is still loving His Church!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.