

Bob Coughlin Ordination Homily

Pastor Gib Botten

August 21, 2011

In article 5 of the Augsburg Confession it talks about how the ministry of Word and Sacrament was instituted so that there might be faith in Christ and that the Holy Spirit works faith into people when they hear the gospel. In article 14 there is a sentence that says that no one should publicly teach or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called. Well, in Lutheran circles there's been a lot of debate about what that means and what it means for the church today--especially in churches that are trying to encourage the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. At the very least, what it means is that in the Lutheran tradition we set apart people for the special ministry of pastor. And pastors are called to preach the gospel--the only hope for the church and the only hope for the world. And today we're recognizing and setting Bob apart for this ministry in and through the church.

Bob has been identified as someone who is able to step into the role of ordained pastor. It's not like he's just starting his ministry today. He's been working to bring students to Christ and to deepen their relationship with Christ through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for 33 years. I got to know Bob during my years on staff with InterVarsity. One time back in the 80's Bob invited me up to teach at a fall conference that they had at Sky Ranch. I agreed only on the condition that he take me fly fishing on the Madison--which he did. Ask anyone of us who've worked with Bob over the years in student ministry if he is qualified to serve as a pastor and it would be a unanimous, yes.

The Lutheran confessions put a great deal of importance on the calling of a local community of believers--the church. And Bob has been serving in this church for about 19 years. This church can affirm Bob's calling to ordained ministry and you are doing that today. Bob has also been certified by LCMC (Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ) as having received the necessary theological training along with his years of ministry experience. We've all checked under Bob's hood and affirm that he's ready to go. But we're not just affirming Bob's call to ordained ministry because he's passed all the requirements. We're doing this because we believe that God has chosen him to walk into this role.

Those of us in pastoral ministry often wonder why God chose us. Was it a mistake? Has God found it so difficult to find new recruits these days that he has to lower his standards and that's how we got in? Or in my case, was God in calling me just trying to be funny. But those of us, who know Bob, know that God has chosen well. That is not to say that in calling Bob God is also trying to be a comedian. God chooses the weak of this world to shame the strong. And the Bible calls us fools for Christ. So there is always something of a divine comedy going on in all of our callings.

I wanted to share a word of encouragement from God's word, I Timothy 6:11-13. This was a passage I shared with my church council a few weeks ago and it seemed appropriate for this occasion. Paul is giving advice to a young pastor Timothy and he says: "But you man of God, flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Jesus Christ, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The first thing we hear is that Timothy is to run away. One of Paul's encouragements to Timothy is to flee from the unholy benefits of ministry. There were some folks in his day running around to different churches using their position for financial gain. Hard to believe that kind of thing would happen among Lutherans. Lutheran pastors normally don't get on TV or start theme parks, but I suppose it happens. But the fact is that in ministry there are unholy benefits to being a pastor. Maybe before I talk about that I should list some of the holy benefits, at least from my perspective. As a pastor you are invited into the best and worst that life can throw at someone. You get to be among the first to be with a young couple with their first baby. And then you get to baptize that baby a few months later. You will be there at someone's death--sometimes being with them at that very holy moment of passing. And you will preside at their funeral. You will be there for the joys and sorrows of your people and you will bring God's word to them at that time. As

a pastor you'll have the benefit of working with leaders and inspiring a vision in the church. You will have the honor of rising up new disciples and bringing young people to faith. There are lots of holy benefits that pastors get. But there are also unholy benefits. Because pastors are often at the center of church life, there is always a temptation to promote one self. Pastors can sometimes forget their calling and become power hungry or controlling. It is for good reason that retired pastors have developed a bad reputation in many churches. And I've seen too many retired pastors who simply can't let go of their need to be in control. So Paul says to Timothy, flee from the unholy benefits of pastoral ministry.

We are told to run away from some things and run toward others. Paul tells Timothy to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Pastors do a lot of things--more than the 2 hours on Sunday that some folks think we work. But of all the things we do, doing is not the most important thing. The most important thing is our Christian character. We all minister out of our character; not out of our busy ministry activities. And so we need to follow a program of discipleship that focuses on building our character in Christ. We need to develop a personal life of prayer and devotion and personal meditation on Scripture. Too many pastors figure that they've already done that when they prepare sermons or various teachings, or when they do their ministry throughout the week. But that's just spiritually lazy and a bad excuse for avoiding personal contact with the Lord. Bob, I know you already know this stuff, because I've heard you teach it at InterVarsity discipleship and training camps. You know that we minister out of who we are, not just what we do. But you may notice that as you enter life as an ordained pastor, when you are attacked as a pastor you may notice as I have that the attack often seem to focus on our character. If the devil can attack our character as pastors and defeat us at the point of our character, then he's won. Because while we may be able to speak the truth of the gospel to people, its our character in Christ that shows people that the gospel has power. So pastors need to pursue a life of Christian character that's genuine, because most folks in church can spot a fake.

Finally, Paul gives Timothy an example to follow from the life of Christ. He reminds him that Jesus once made a confession before Pontius Pilate. Jesus could have soft peddled the truth about who he was and what he was all about. He could have tried to appease Pilot--told him what he wanted to hear to what he needed to hear to set him free. Jesus knew what the consequences would be for making his good confession--and that was the cross. And so Paul wanted to remind Timothy of the consequences of his ministry. There will always be a cross.

When we were serving as missionaries with InterVarsity in Puerto Rico, we visited a Science Park in San Juan with the kids. As you go into the park you see two large objects. On the right you see a large rocket. On the left you see a large cross. Only in Latin America would a large cross be found in a science park. But the two standing opposite one another makes one think. What does the rocket want to do? The rocket wants to blast off in a blaze of glory and go up into the sky where everyone can see it. And in doing so it removes itself from the reality of everything down here. But what does the cross want to do? The cross wants to come down. The cross wants to come down into the hurt of peoples lives; into the mess caused by sin and suffering. The church is often a hurting place and it needs pastors willing to walk along side them. The cross wants to come down and serve as Christ came down to serve and give his life away. The cross wants to come down and become nothing so that Christ might become everything. The cross wants to come down to bring a word that causes people to face facts--that sin is our deadly reality; that God's word tells us we are sinners and only the cross of Christ can save us.

Bob, you are being called to preach the cross. And when you do that, there will be consequences. One the positive side, people will be changed and transformed. People living under the burden of sin and shame will be set free. And you will have the honor of being the person God used to do that--one of the holy benefits of ministry. But don't be surprised if preaching the cross doesn't make some people angry. And when they become angry they might try to put you up on your own cross. A few months ago I finished reading the biography of Henri Haamer, the Lutheran pastor from Estonia, who was arrested in 1948 under Stalin and spent 8 years in a Soviet prison camp in Siberia--and lived to tell about it--the consequence of preaching the cross in his native land. When I do my new members classes I spend a little time talking about the experience of Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, the Romanian Lutheran pastor who spent 14 years being tortured for his faith. I could talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer--the Lutheran pastor and theologian hung by the Nazis. Are you sure you want to become a Lutheran pastor, Bob? You probably won't face that kind of cross here in America, but at the same time in America 1500 pastors leave the ministry each month. They are not leaving because being a pastor is easy. There are consequences for preaching the cross. But we do it because the Lord has given us a hope that overcomes all the crosses that we might have to face as pastors.

Paul says to Timothy that the Lord himself will appear. He will appear at the end of time. But he will also appear in the word that we preach and in the sacraments that we preside at. Jesus will appear in the fellowship of the church and in our relationships with fellow ministers. Jesus will appear to us in our times of prayer and as we meditate on his word, the Lord will come to us. Bob, Jesus is right here in this step that you are now taking. And God will bless you in it.

And a final charge to the congregation. Bob will be serving at Peace Lutheran with Bill the senior pastor. They have been called you bring you God's word, so you need to listen to them. You need to honor them as men called of God to serve this church. You need to follow them as leaders of the ministry of this church. And you need to pray for them, and keep praying for them.

Thank you for this honor, Bob, to speak at your ordination.
May God bless you. Amen.