

The One We Proclaim

Text: II Corinthians 4:5, Matthew 16:16

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is the 30th of June. On the thirtieth of June, 1960, I was ordained to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments in this congregation, coming here following my graduation from Western Theological Seminary. I was ordained to the ministry within the Reformed Church in America by the Classis of Muskegon. It was not a Sunday in 1960, but a Thursday evening. And it was hot and the sermon preached by the pastor of my home church in Kalamazoo was very long. My inaugural sermon had as its text the text of this morning - II Corinthians 4:5.

It was a text a pastor I much admired had printed on his calling card. I had it printed on my cards, too. And I chose it as the text of my first sermon as an ordained pastor because it summed up concisely my understanding of the pastoral office.

Now, thirty-six years later, the same Classis is about to depose me from ordination in the Reformed Church. Since today is the anniversary of my ordination, I thought I would re-visit my inaugural text. Part of the process of preparation for this message was painful; I took out the file of that first sermon and read it. I did recognize one similarity with my present preaching - the sermon was long. But, thank God, there are some things that have changed.

I received a card a couple months ago from an old friend from a congregation I served the summer before my ordination year - the summer of 1959. She had read the news reports about me and was quite upset. Her question to me was, "Have you changed?" To that question, I would have to answer, "Yes, thank God. Thirty-six years of serious engagement with the word of God, with human experience, with my own maturation, with history's changing landscape has changed me." To be alive is to change, is it not?

Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, the greatest of the 20th century, in an introduction to one of his volumes of *Dogmatics*, addresses the charge that he has changed his theological position. To that he responded, "If it appears I have changed my thinking, it is because I am a pilgrim and I keep moving and as I move, the landscape through which I move changes."

Yes, on this anniversary of my ordination thirty-six years ago, I acknowledge I have changed. And if I had taken along the sermon I preached on the text of the morning thirty-six years ago, you would be very happy indeed that I've changed.

Not that I should be too hard on myself. I had worked at the sermon responsibly. There was an honest exposition of the text and the application was not inappropriate for one beginning ministry in a congregation. But, as I re-read the sermon yesterday, I reflected on what it was that was missing. And I suppose, not surprisingly, I concluded that there was nothing in the message that really came to grips with the human situation of the congregation; there was no vital connection to human experience.

I think I understand that.

I would have been typed as a very conservative Christian minister. I had been richly nurtured in the Christian faith and I had applied myself to the study of Scripture and Reformed theology. But I had little knowledge of the human person and very little human experience. That is not a criticism; I was young. One so young has not a very large store of experience from which to speak.

I will make a criticism however; it is this: one so young with so little human experience ought not to be so certain he had the answer to the multiple human dilemmas simply because he preached Jesus Christ. I've admitted this fault many times - I had the answers; I simply had not yet learned the questions. And the right answer to the wrong question is always wrong.

As I said, I had learned and I preached Reformed theology and I now see that that was why my preaching failed to reach to the heart of the human situation - I was preaching Reformed theology.

The problem with that struck me this week when I read a letter from the Muskegon Classis Minister, Rick Veenstra, to the Christian members of the Jewish Christian Dialogue Committee who had written Classis on my behalf. It was not a very gracious letter and lacked class. In it, Veenstra said, "The Reformation tradition is reformed according to the Word of God." The words jumped out at me; I recognized the misunderstanding he expressed. It was the same problem with my early preaching, indeed, with my first sermon to this congregation. Reformed has become a noun or an adjective, as in "Reformed theology." But in its origin in the 16th century, when it is operating according to the originating vision, it is a verb. The genius of the 16th century Reformation of the Church was that the Church was *re-formed according to the word of God and always being re-formed*. As soon as one claims a Reformed theology, the renewal is over. The burst of spiritual vision and energy has again been mastered and managed and packaged. Now there is a new system rather than a biblical faith that is being redefined, newly translated and bringing illumination to the ongoing human story.

In a word, I came here thirty-six years ago with a packaged theology to preach and teach. I had a system of doctrine to inculcate into this congregation quite apart from the fact that it was 1960 or quite apart from the particular people who made up this congregation.

Have I changed? Yes, indeed; thank God! Changed in my understanding of the place of theological formulation - seeing it now, not as a closed system of truths, a set of propositions to be assented to, but as a living, moving interpretation of human experience from the perspective of faith in the God revealed in Scripture. But, in another sense, I've not changed. I take my text of thirty-six years ago and set it before you this morning - Paul's words which I appropriate still for a statement of my ministry.

For we proclaim not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (II Corinthians 4:5)

Christ Jesus or Messiah Jesus - that is, Jesus the one anointed with Spirit, is the One I proclaim. How much more I believe in him now than then. Then he was Savior; my almost total concentration was on his death for sin, removing our guilt, opening up the possibility of heaven for those who professed his name.

But now I stand in awe of his life. Now I see in him such openness to people, so full of grace. Now I see him as the window into the heart of God. His life challenges me. I sense his claim on my life - how I live here and now. Then I thought he came to die; now I believe he came to live and to call his people to such living. Then I saw him as God/human - other than I; now I see him as my flesh and blood brother who calls me and inspires me to follow in his steps.

I love him more. He moves me more. I believe in him and I believe God brought him out of death into God's Presence.

Christ Jesus is Lord, says Paul. Lord - as opposed to Caesar as Lord. Jesus is Lord - relativizing all my allegiances, political, economic, social. Jesus is Lord.

He is the one I proclaim because I believe, as Paul went on to say, that God, the Creator, the one who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In other words, I believe Jesus was the embodiment of God in human flesh.

Why did Paul make this clear declaration? Because some had come into this Corinthian congregation which he had founded and criticized him and accused him of unfaithful proclamation of the Gospel. The Second Letter to the Corinthians is probably an amalgam of several letters, but it is obvious Paul's apostleship was under fire. Note how chapter 3 begins:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again: Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation ...

And in 2:17, he writes,

For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons sent from God and standing in God's presence.

In 4:2, he asserts,

We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

What was going on?

It is difficult to determine exactly the circumstances, but it may well have been that Paul's breakthrough vision - that God was embracing the Gentiles by grace through faith, not requiring that they follow the Mosaic ritual law - was seen by his opponents as heretical. Therefore, they came into the congregation and stirred up trouble creating tension between Paul and some of the people.

That brings me back to the weakness of my inaugural sermon on this text - I had a theological understanding of Jesus Christ but I had no sense of the question Bonhoeffer asked in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*:

The thing that keeps coming back to me is, what is Christianity, and indeed what is Christ, for us today?

It is that question that drives my ministry after all these years. I proclaim not another - the one I proclaim is Jesus Christ - The word made flesh in whose face we see into the heart of God.

But to put flesh and blood on that proclamation, to say more than the name, to say what it means for our lives here and now - that is the challenge of preaching. To say some meaningful, helpful word to people trying to negotiate this baffling, frightening, fascinating world - that is the task. To connect Jesus Christ to present human experience: that is the calling of the preacher.

Let me extend to you the grace of God as Jesus revealed it by assuring you, whoever you are, whatever your history, whatever your present circumstance, God's grace already embraces you, you are valued, you are loved. And if that reality ever breaks fully over you, your life will change and little by little by the Spirit of God you will take on the likeness of Jesus and in your life image him who is the image of God.