

“Be Ready to Confess Jesus”

2 Timothy 4:1-4

(Based on a sermon by Rev. Dr. Lawrence R. Rast)

October 1, 2017

17th Sunday After Pentecost (LWML Sunday)

2017 is a rather remarkable year. First of all, as many of you know, it is the 500th anniversary of Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. As that date draws near, the world will be paying more and more attention to Luther. This is a big deal! But there’s even more to 2017. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League – the good old LWML – which has done so much to encourage and support the sharing of Christ’s gospel within our Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and among partner churches and friends throughout the world. This is a big deal!

In the half millennium since the Reformation began and in the 75 years since the LWML formally organized itself, confessing the faith has not gotten any easier. In fact, it may be even more difficult for us to speak of Christ and live as Christians in the present day. And who knows what the future might hold for us, our children, and our grandchildren? Yet God is faithful and He has promised that the world, our sinful flesh, and even the gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church. Therefore, it is the perfect time to be distinctly Lutheran, not for the sake of Martin Luther, but for the sake of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love and salvation for all people. As confessing Lutherans in a rapidly changing world and in an increasingly hostile culture, we need to be ready to confess that Gospel to a world that desperately needs to hear it.

Being confessors and proclaimers of the message of salvation is central to our identity as people of God. As St. Paul wrote to young Timothy in our text today, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

when St. Paul wrote these words to Timothy, he was addressing a fellow pastor, a man specifically called to carry out the office of the public ministry and proclaim the Gospel. Yet Paul knew that this was not the only avenue for proclamation of the Gospel. He knew that Timothy, who would proclaim the Gospel, had come to faith by having that same Gospel proclaimed to him through the faithful teaching of a committed mother and grandmother. He had written at the beginning of this letter, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.” (2 Timothy 1:5)

The good news of the Gospel has been given to each one of us to share with those whom God has placed in our lives, whatever our vocations may be. Proclaiming the salvation won by Jesus through His death on the cross and His glorious resurrection from the tomb is not just “the pastor’s job.” Every single one of us is called

to be ready to confess Christ in our various locations as God opens the doors for us to do so. You are called to be ready to confess!

The need for sharing Christ and the new life which He brings is as important today as it ever has been. Surveys say that around 90% of Americans claim that they believe in "God. However, their understanding of the one true God is often less than biblical. In addition, upwards of 60% of .Evangelical Christians (a category that would include the LCMS also) think that there may be other ways to salvation apart from faith in Jesus. The need to be ready to confess the one true God and the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone is great.

The potential difficulty i in confessing is as great as the need for confessing. Many people are just not interested in the message of the Bible and, instead, invent their own plans for salvation. St. Paul wrote in our text, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4) Sounds like 2017, doesn't it?

But this text about people ignoring the truth and becoming involved in myths does not describe just 2017, but 1517 as well. The setting in which God called Martin Luther to confess Christ was as easily confused as the present day. Worship of saints had intruded on worship of Christ; good works were preached as necessary for salvation in addition to faith in Christ; purgatory, relics, and other aberrations had obscured the gospel of salvation in Christ alone.

Yet it was precisely these untruths and myths which led to the Lutheran Reformation. Luther was obsessed with knowing which of these, if any, could make him right with God. As Luther read the New Testament especially Paul's epistle to the Romans, he was confronted by the question of righteousness. In other words, what does it mean to be right in God's eyes? The Scriptures were quite clear: keep God's Law perfectly. He knew that he did not keep God's Law perfectly – not even close. How could he be right with God?

Oh, he tried his hardest to make things right. He went to his priests repeatedly and confessed every last little sin he could think of. He dredged up every thought, every word, every deed from a lifetime of sin, confessed it, was forgiven (provided he did his penance), and then went out to try harder. But as he worked, he remembered other sins. He recalled other times when he had done wrong he remembered situations where he could've done good but failed to do so. He realized that his confession of sin was insufficient. He knew that his good works were not nearly enough. He came to the conclusion that, not only was he not right with God, but that God hated him. Finally, his priest confronted him: "Martin, it is not that God hates you; it is you that hate God."

Everything came to a head when Luther finally understood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, that the righteousness of God is not about us being good enough. The righteousness of God is about Christ, who is perfect, acting in our place. It is Christ who obeyed the Law of God perfectly – and He did it in our place and for our benefit. It is Christ who paid the price for sin by offering His life as the perfect and complete sacrifice – and He did it in our place and for our benefit.

There is a great exchange that occurs here. The filthy rags of our sinfulness and rebellion toward God, Jesus took upon Himself, carried it to the cross, and crucified it once and for all. The perfect righteousness of Christ, he now clothes us in through the waters of Holy Baptism. We now have the forgiveness of the sin which condemns us and we have the righteousness which God requires of us. Where before there was a sinner, God now sees his perfectly redeemed child through Christ; where before the person was far from God, there is now a child of God. God's work is for us and is applied to us freely and completely because of Christ.

It is this message which we all must be ready to confess – not religious opinion, biblical facts, ethical encouragement, and the like – but the harsh condemnation of the Law which reveals our need through its threat of present and eternal punishment and the sweet comfort of the Gospel which meets our need through its promise of peace with God and everlasting life.

Luther didn't see all of this clearly in 1517. As I said in our Wednesday evening Bible class, Luther wasn't yet a Lutheran. It took them a few years to work out all of the scriptural implications. But once he did, he was ready, willing, and able to confess. He did so before the highest authorities of Church and State. Nothing – not threat of excommunication or death – would keep them from confessing the truth of the gospel for the rest of his life until his death in 1546.

This poses a question for us. How do we, like Luther, prepare ourselves to be ready to confess the truth of the gospel? The Lutheran Women's Missionary League, whose diamond anniversary we celebrate this year, provides us with instruction, inspiration, and example of how to do just that.

The LWML has had a profound impact on the mission efforts of the congregations, districts, seminaries, and other groups within our Synod. It is done so by confessing the Gospel and by training and encouraging its members to confess the Gospel. Its stated mission is "to assist each woman of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in affirming her relationship with the Triune God so that she is and able to use her gifts in ministry to the people of the world."

Lest we think this is an easy mission (and the women of the LWML certainly make it look easy at times), we remember back 75 years to 1942. Could there have ever been a time more challenging than 1942 to begin this mission? The world had been at war for three years and the United States joined in the war in 1941. Rations were short, many young men were preparing to go to war, and women were entering the workforce to hold the fort down while the men fought and died. The circumstances were challenging, to say the least!

Yet, on July 7-8, 1942, over 100 women – among them 28 official delegates – met in Chicago and established the LWML. Its stated purpose was to encourage a greater consciousness among women for "missionary education, missionary inspiration, and missionary service." In addition to confessing the gospel in their vocations, the women of the LWML decided to gather funds for mission projects above and beyond the Synod's budget. From this humble beginning and through the use of the now familiar "Mite Boxes – the League has blessed the mission efforts of

congregations, districts, and the synod here, as well as countless mission efforts throughout the world.

But there's even more, as LWML historian Marlys Moburg wrote in her *History of the LWML*: "the blessing of the LWML, now also known as Lutheran Women in Mission, goes far beyond the millions raised for missions. Its benefits can be seen in faith deepened through Bible studies, in confidence built through leadership training, in the befriending of career missionaries, in blankets and clothing gathered for the impoverished, in food shared with the hungry and, above all, in the friendships nurtured in the lives changed by sharing the love of Jesus Christ."

"Time, like an ever rolling stream, Soon bears us all away;" says the hymn which we sang before the sermon. And it seems that, as we age, it just goes faster. So do the challenges which face our world speed up. Confessing Jesus rightly, completely, and purely becomes even more difficult. The Lutheran confession has always struggled against the intrusion of false teaching of which our text warns us. But the Lord has been faithful and He has raised up faithful pastors like Timothy who preach the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. In the Lord is gathered faithful men, women, and children who have carried out the work of the Lord with zeal and devotion, meeting the challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities to reach out to those who need to hear the Gospel. Simply put, our faithful God keeps his promises and we pray this Sunday and always that He will always enable us to be ready to confess those promises. Amen