

Sharing God's Grace

Exodus 19:2–8; Romans 5:6–15; Matthew 9:35–10:8

One of the joys of living in Fort Wayne is our proximity to so many interesting places. Since moving here, Jeanette and I have loved exploring nearby Shipshewana. Her great great grandfather is buried in Middlebury and her great grandfather was a Mennonite pastor in the Shipshewana area. Since I love museums, the Meno Hof center of Anabaptist history is a favorite of mine. One room in that museum is dedicated to the story of Dirk Willems.

In sixteenth-century Holland, the Mennonites were outlawed and, when caught, often executed. One of them, Dirk Willens, was being chased across an icefield when his pursuer broke through and fell in. In response to his cries for help, Willens returned and saved him from the waters. The pursuer was grateful and astonished that he would do such a thing but nevertheless arrested him, as he thought it his duty to do. A few days later Willens was executed by being burned at the stake in the town of Asperen. It was precisely his Christlikeness that brought on his execution.

Quite apart from the issue of the rescued man turning Willems in, can you imagine the sense of desperation someone would feel falling through the ice into freezing waters? As the temperature changes rapidly, the shock leads to hyperventilating, tachycardia, the gasp reflex, hypothermia, cardiac failure, and death. In such a desperate situation, only immediate action and the risk of the rescuer's own death by falling in can save you.

Today's texts take us from the heights of God's lofty call to the depths of our despair as the enemies of God, to the exultant joy of the redeemed, given the opportunity to "gossip the Gospel" wherever we go.

CALLED (Ex 19:2-8)

In the chapter prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments, God declares his people to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation: Ex 19:6 "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." The Lutheran Study Bible explains it this way: "As the consecrated priests would stand between God and His people, so the people of Israel would act as priests to the world, set aside by God for service, witness, and prayer. Israel would be a priest to all the nations of the world" (TLSB, 126).

Lest we think that was only for the Old Testament people of God, the language is echoed in 1 Pet 2:9 "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

We have been given some great and mighty designations: we are "chosen," we are a "royal priesthood," we are called to be a "holy nation," God's own "special people." Wow!

CLEANSED (Romans 5:6-15)

There is a problem with our being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation . . . we are not Godly, we are not holy! Do any of us honestly think that we could stand up in front of a crowd at a public meeting or even a school assembly, not to mention before the Judge of all the Universe, and claim to be "Godly" or particularly "holy"? Something must be done *to us, in us, for us* if we are ever to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Our Romans text reminds us that we were "helpless" and incapable of working it out (6a), "ungodly" and about as far from being like God as we could be (6b), "sinners" who stand under the just judgment and verdict of Almighty God (8), and worst of all, "enemies" of God who cannot expect a good end or outcome (10). In other words, we were both helpless and hopeless! And, even worse, we deserve only the active, unrelenting, eternal "wrath" (9) of God against us.

Through Jesus, just as we have been justified by His blood (9) – not because we were worthy, not because it makes us magically righteous; but because God declares us "acquitted" by the sacrifice of Christ. The language points to a past declaration of acquittal pronounced over us. Being declared "justified" before God is our true guarantee that when we stand before the judgment, we will be spared God's holy anger against us.

Therefore, we are saved by His life, just as we were reconciled by His death (10). Since God has already done the hard thing (he reconciled us to himself through the death of His Son), how much more shall we be saved when we face judgment by His life. So, when you know that you are most certainly saved because of God's immense love and amazing grace, you cannot help but rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ! (11).

A pastor once suggested that there are four ways to measure the depth of love someone has for us: First, we know the depth of someone's love for us by what it costs him. Second, we know the depth of someone's love for us by how little we deserve it. Third, we know the depth of someone's love for us by the

greatness of the benefits we receive in being loved. Fourth, we know the depth of someone's love for us by the freedom with which they love us. Our justification cost God the immeasurable price of the death of His own Son. It was paid to cover the debt of those who were his very enemies. His love was so great, that God the Son died that we might have God as our Father. Finally, as the pastor noted, "Love is deep in proportion to its liberty." If your insurance company sends you \$100,000 because you lost your spouse, you will not be amazed at how much they love you. That is their contractual obligation. But, if your church brings you meals for a month, someone calls you to see how you are doing, and your Stephen Minister visits you weekly, you call it love. They don't "have to do this. It is free and willing." We observe the depth of Christ's love for us in his freedom: "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18).

There is a key phrase in Romans 5 that unlocks the meaning of it all. Christ died "for us" (on behalf of). Although the sins were ours, the death was his; he died as a sin offering in our place bearing our penalty. "The suffering of Christ was not only exemplary but accomplished atonement for sinners, in that he took the punishment we deserved" (Thomas Schreiner)

Keith Hartsell of Wheaton, Illinois, was driving around with a friend of his in California, when he noticed that his friend's cell phone was locked with an unusual password -- *pro nobis*. Keith asked him what *pro nobis* meant and why he chose that for a password. Keith's friend told him it was Latin, and it meant "For Us," and then he suddenly started choking up. Keith thought, "Why would those two Latin words cause so much emotion?" When his friend composed himself he explained that after walking through deep personal pain, true healing came when he learned that God is "for us" -- or the Latin phrase *pro nobis*. Keith's friend said that after his parents' divorce, he entered a season when he assumed that God didn't care or that God had given up on him. But he finally found hope through those two simple words -- *pro nobis* (for us). You see, when he decided to believe that God was *pro nobis*, that God had even sent Christ to die for him, he could then decide to lay down his life for others.

This is one reason why I love our catechisms, the Small and the Large. They are not works for dusty shelves and stodgy scholars, they are written to cultivate trust in God and the life that flows from it. As someone noted, "In them Luther passes on what he has also received, again and again specifying those for whom God acts in law and gospel—God acts *pro me*, *pro nobis*, for me, for us, and above all, "for you." Though he occasionally moves back to . . . addressing pastors and teachers, it never takes long for him to get back to the level of direct witness. In both catechisms Luther literally hands over the goods, speaking from faith to faith."

COMMISSIONED (Matt 9:35 – 10:8)

Finally, our Matthew text declares that Jesus went everywhere "in order to teach . . . and preach . . . and heal" (9:35). The Gospel of the Kingdom is about God's rescue operation for an estranged humanity, declaring that it was not God's will that anyone perish, but that all come to new life.

Jesus was motivated by compassion (a word only found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke), almost always with Jesus or God as the subject. It is the Gospels "God word" for how our Lord responds to our being "distressed and downcast" (9:36), like "sheep without a shepherd."

What does our compassionate Lord *do* in response to our need? He enjoins us to "pray earnestly" that God will raise up workers since the "harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." And, what is the message these workers carry? It is the Gospel of God's Rule and Reign, the good news of his forgiveness "for us," to all who are broken and bruised by sin and the "stuff of life." It is empowered by Jesus, shaped by his own ministry, and centered in Him! "Freely you received, freely give" (10:8).

Oftentimes people who have been rescued from the bottom of a bottle will turn around and become volunteers and leaders in organizations such as AA. Those who have been helped through their own divorce frequently go on to become leaders in divorce recovery groups. Those who have known the numbing loss of bereavement often go on to help others facing grief. They don't do it for law, they do it for love. Similarly those who have been "Called to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation," but who realize their own inability; those who have learned the liberating truth that God is "for us" in Christ and has cleansed us by his own sacrificial atoning death; those who have experienced his love, can hardly help going as disciples who share that same good news with those they meet.