

Trinity Lutheran Seminary Commencement
Bexley Hall
Columbus, Ohio
May 21, 2011

Matthew 6:25

Mark 8:27-29

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Congratulations to each of you receiving a degree today and to those of you who have supported these students with your prayers, your love, and yes, your money. As Paul said to Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you” (2 Timothy 1:3-6 NRSV). So this day and each day forward, I encourage you graduates to give thanks to God and all who have and will nurture the faith in you. You didn’t come to seminary unprepared and you do not leave on your own. You are baptized into and belong to a community of faith. In that community, your faith has been deepened, challenged, watered, and grown here at Trinity by members of your gifted faculty and staff. Will you join me in expressing your gratitude for those who have been your teachers, your servant leaders in the communities of Trinity? [Applause]

Isn’t it great that when Luther wrote the Small Catechism so that parents could pass on the faith to their children—the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the meaning of baptism and Holy Communion—Luther was very clear. Parents and godparents also must teach their children to ask the question, “What does this mean?” We do so in a culture, a world, that seems so attracted to the certainty that fundamentalism seems to offer. Douglas John Hall, good friend of Trinity Seminary, writes, “Fundamentalism, whatever the origins of the term, has come to mean a position of such exactness and certitude that those embracing it, or more accurately, those embraced by it, feel themselves delivered from all the relativities, uncertainties, indefiniteness, and transience of human existence.”¹ In such a culture, you are being sent out with an insatiable curiosity about faith and life. You are going out in confidence. As Hall reminds us, “God does not meet our demands for certainty with a simple rebut or refusal. God offers an alternative to certitude. It is called faith. God reveals God’s self as one who can be trusted. Certitude is denied. Confidence is made possible. Consider that word confidence—literally from the Latin, it means con: living with, fide: faith.”²

You are asking, “What does this mean?” The fact that you are receiving your degree today means that you have mastered the art of answering questions: the questions of faculty (for many of you), the questions asked by candidacy committees, questions that will go on your profiles to call committees. You have discerned you own questions about call. My prayer also is that you have become dedicated questioners, who bring to your calls of Word and Sacrament and Word and Service an insatiable curiosity that calls people and frees them to live with and raise their own questions.

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2005)100.

² Ibid.

When I taught confirmation, I met with confirmands, parents and baptismal sponsors before confirmation day. I asked them to write out answers to several questions. One was, “What two questions are you asking now because of being in confirmation for which you do not yet have answers?” If they had no questions, I felt I had failed them as a teacher of the faith.

Jesus was a relentless questioner. From age twelve, asking his parents, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49, NRSV) To the disciples, “Who do people say that I am? But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27-29, NRSV) Jesus, in his dying breath, remained the questioner, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34, NRSV) In his resurrected life Christ continued as a questioner, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:15-16, NRSV) “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 4:9, NRSV)

Other than the Bible, in the last ten years, I am quite certain that this passage from Joseph Sittler is the one that I have most often quoted. “What I am appealing for is an understanding of grace that has the magnitude of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment.”³

So you are not confirmands, but I am the bishop who stands between you and your degree. So what are two questions you are asking for which you have no answers, but you will bring with you in your next call? Turn to someone and share your two questions. [Sharing]

In an e-mail from graduate Matt Kruse, he responded, “As I embarked on my seminary journey four years ago, I brought with me two simple questions. Are you ready for an adventure? Alright God. Now what? Today, nearly four years later, two different questions shape my eager anticipation of first call. Who do you say that I am? Asking, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ means that I must continually seek to understand my own experience of the gospel while simultaneously listening to the stories of those around me, to find the places where our own narratives intersect God’s ultimate story. In asking this question—we not only define who Jesus is, but who we are as the community of the Spirit.” Matt’s other question is, “What if? What if we had unlimited resources? What if our institutional structures allowed freedom for creative ideas that spark mission and evangelism? What if we could gather as a church built of mutual relationship among the baptized? What if?”

And listen to Ellen Schoepf, who responded, “My initial question, when embarking upon ministry in a specific place would be to ask, ‘What is God doing in this place, in this community of faith and in the greater community?’ I believe God is actively working in the church, bringing about change and reform, and leading us into a deeper understanding of mission—God’s mission in the world. I would want to ask how they see God at work in their lives and how they see themselves as living into God’s mission for the world. Therefore, when entering a first call congregation, I would also want to ask, ‘Where are the signs of hope in this particular place and context?’ What is being born,

³ Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 14.

what is being made new? Where are people bumping up against the in-breaking reign of God? I believe these questions are vitally important because they are questions of identity and vocation.”

Wherever you serve, you will be confronted with two questions constantly before us. “What is the good life? What is the life well-lived?” I am convinced that question is woven into the consumer-driven, marketplace-oriented, Twittered, Facebooked, text-messaging connected culture. We spent a wonderful Holy Week and Easter with our family in Minnesota. It was wonderful, that is, until the morning on the drive back to Chicago and something was stuck under the car and I had to use a stick to get it out. It wasn’t until later that I realized my Blackberry had fallen out of my pocket. I had to go back to retrieve it. It was there by the side of the road. I was thrilled until I turned it over and realized it had been run over. I don’t usually read Ione’s e-mails, but that night I did. It was one to her friend, Sandy. She wrote, “We had a wonderful Easter vacation. It was delightful to see our new granddaughter, Sophia Ione. Everything was perfect until the trauma of the drama of six hours in a car with Mark without his Blackberry.” [Laughter]

What is the good life? What is the life well-lived? It can seem like a question that the affluent, or at least the comfortable, have the luxury to ask. But I think it is deeply embedded throughout the culture. It is a question not always asked so clearly, so honestly, but it is the question for which we need to make a creative, compelling, evangelical response. I’m not sure that we are; in fact, we need each other in ministry because the opportunity and the challenge of providing a credible, accessible, believable and evangelical response to those questions, “What is the good life? What is the life well-lived?” is far more than any one of us can face alone.

Please don’t get me wrong. I’m convinced we Christians have marvelous theological answers to those questions. I’m not asking you to set aside the richness of your biblical theological confessional tradition. In fact, we are doing good work in ministry, and you’ve been well-prepared at Trinity. I hear from bishops all the time that a sign of hope in this synod is the gifted first call pastors and rostered lay leaders. I really believe that. It is not that pastors are not preaching sound biblical, theological and exegetical sermons. It is not that we are not engaged in significant ministries, marvelous worship, serving communities, or offering good education and youth programs. The problem is that many very attractive, competing narratives are being offered and lived that become the answer to, “What is a life well-lived? What is the good life?”

Advertising in recent years is no longer just trying to sell you a product. It is convincing you that buying that product is a way to a life of meaning, joy and community. A couple of weeks ago, I went into a hotel breakfast area before going to a synod assembly. The room was packed with seven and eight-year-old girls and their parents—mostly moms—and some siblings. The girls were excited about the dance competition that day. They had traveled for miles. Now they were made-up, had bows in their hair and dance shoes on their feet. I overheard some parents expressing hope that the competition would be over early enough so they could stop at the casino on the way home, eat cheap and plentiful food and win a little money.

But their dilemma was this: they wanted to get home early enough to get their daughters to bed because Sunday morning several had to get up early to drive to a soccer tournament. There was wondering when homework would get done.

I am not sure it is helpful for us to sit in the comfort of our sanctuaries and critique that way of living as a response to the question, “What is the good life? What is the life well-lived?” Don’t get me wrong. Critiquing culture is important work, but offering a compelling, creative, accessible, evangelical lived response is even more important, and I think, more difficult.

Friends, could Jesus be much more contemporary to our cultural context than in the section we read from the Sermon on the Mount? Who does not know the reality of anxiety? Anxiety that comes with poverty and a disappearing middle class. Anxiety that belongs to undocumented migrants, fearing arrest and deportation. Anxiety of college and seminary graduates facing unemployment. The anxiety of waiting for a call. Anxiety over whether pension funds will be depleted. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that anxiety makes us possessive of what we have, distrustful of others (especially those in leadership) and finally, downright anti-neighborly.

Listen to Jesus, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25, NRSV) Why do we think we have nothing to say about what the good life is, the life well-lived? The pharmaceutical industry has made billions and billions teaching us that the life well-lived is life without anxiety.

The issue is—how do we make the promise of God acceptable to an anxious culture? The promise is that God will clothe you, even you of little faith. Just look at the lilies of the field. God will clothe you with love, mercy, promise and purpose. Let’s not forget the power and promise in the clear command, “Do not be afraid.” That may be where we must always begin as evangelical leaders. You are messengers sent from God, called to announce, “Do not be afraid.” In so doing, you push back the walls of anxiety and fear so that there is space for God’s word of promise to be heard, believed and lived.

Sometimes the testimony of others will provide the answer to the question, “What is the good life, the life well-lived?” This morning, I said to the attendant in the men’s room at O’Hare, “Good morning! How are you?” He said, “I am blessed by the best. Oh, I tried the rest. But then I turned to God who is the best, and I am so blessed. So now I do my best to serve you, my brothers, whatever the color of your skin. Yes, I make this place shine to serve you with my best because I am so blessed.” A room full of travelers heard his lived answer to the question, “What is the good life?”

By the way, as I left the men’s room, the pilot greeted me, “Good morning, Father! My, this is going to be a busy day for you, isn’t it, with the world coming to an end and all?” Not the greeting one looks for from a pilot, but I think he was probably equally surprised when I said, “Well, I’m glad I’m gonna spend it with my wife.” [Laughter]

The question, “What is the good life? What is the life well-lived?” is inseparable for us from our answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

I asked that question of Laura Bostrom. She responded in part, “This question is still relevant to us today; ... We can even take the question one step farther; how does this Jesus impact our lives as people of God? I believe an important part of ministry is encouraging ourselves and others to begin to put words, not just actions, to our faith in Jesus Christ. ... This one question has the ability to shape and inform our mission as the church, the living body of Christ, and becomes even more relevant in today’s pluralistic society.”

When Peter responded to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God" (Luke 9:20, NRSV). Then Jesus took Peter again to the narrative, the defining narrative, the meta-narrative, the lived narrative of our faith. It is the narrative that is rehearsed in the liturgy, lived out in each congregation's ministry. It is the narrative that is like the base notes of the chords in the blues that B.B. King plays while the pianist riffs with improvisational splendor.

Jesus spelled out that defining narrative, "The Son of Man is going to Jerusalem. There he will undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day, be raised" (Luke 9:22, NRSV).

It is the narrative of the paschal mystery, as Edwin Searcy said, "In this genre of preaching the preacher proclaims the truth of an alternative way of figuring things out. The cruciform pattern of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday provides the coherent narrative that is rehearsed in sermon, in liturgy and in all aspects of the congregation's life together. This movement from aching loss (Friday) through forsaken absence (Saturday) to astonishing newness (Sunday) stands in stark contrast to the dominant figural narratives provided by a culture of satiation and self-reliant success. In other words, the church's testimony is pre-figured. The figural preacher is like a figure skater whose sermons are practised movements through the patterned figure (or type) of the cross."⁴

On a recent flight to Hartford, Connecticut, I began talking with the man next to me. I asked what he does for a living. With confidence in his voice, he described the online company he and three partners began fifteen years ago. It has grown exponentially into a multinational company and is highly profitable. Then I asked where he was going. His confident voice grew quiet. One tear formed in his eye and rolled down his cheek. "To the funeral of my twenty-six year old nephew, who committed suicide," he answered. "We had so hoped that he was doing better with his bipolar disease. Now I don't know what to say to my sister, who keeps crying, saying, 'If only I had... If only we had... We had so hoped.'"

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we have a marvelous opportunity to invite people into a lived narrative in the midst of our *we-so-hoped-if-only-I-had* responses to the illusory answers to the question, "What is life well-lived? What is the good life?"

It is the narrative of God's mercy given for Jesus' sake in the midst of aching loss and forsaken absence. It is the narrative of astonishing newness, forgiveness, reconciliation and a new creation in Christ. It is life defined by Christ's resurrection, given new every morning.

So Pastor Joseph Livenson Lauvanus, the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, said to me as we walked and stumbled through the rubble in Haiti, over a year after the devastating earthquake, "We will not be defined by rubble but by restoration because we are people of the resurrection."

Oh, let those families gathered in that hotel for their daughter's dance competition hear from you the invitation to become part of a community that embodies together, in liturgy and song, in word and silence, in meal and bath, the resurrection dance for which this world so yearns and so deserves to join.

⁴ Edwin Searcy, "Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church," *The Gospel and Our Culture*, vol. 15, nos. 1 and 2 [March and June, 2003] 3.

It is the dance in which the crucified and risen Christ gathers us up in the arms of God's mercy. It is the dance that gathers us all, the people on both sides of the lines in the sand (or the concrete as someone has said). We seem so hell bent on drawing these days. Just look at the intense outrage that a book entitled *Love Wins* has generated.

Invite people into the dance of the community of the risen Christ, danced in and for the sake of the world, danced as we are set free in Christ to serve our neighbor, care for God's creation, work for peace, strive for justice, to join God's work of restoration and reconciliation, danced as we experience aching loss and forsaken absence.

Oh yes, when we in our bones and sinews, muscles and skin, find ourselves caught up in the resurrection dance, we will be living witnesses to the life well-lived by God's grace for Jesus' sake. So what are we waiting for? Not judgment day, but for the dancing to begin.