

A Cake for Seminex's 35th Birthday

Colleagues,

Thirty-five years ago today, February 19, 1974, Seminex was born in St. Louis. [That date is also my brother Ted's birthday. He was there too. We celebrate the two birthdays together ever since.] That "time for confessing" in Missouri, so says Bob Bertram in his book by that name, which led to an exile-seminary, was really about the Gospel, the unadulterated Gospel—with no add-ons. "So that," as the ancient collect reads: "Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people." Couple months after its birth—May 23, 1974—Seminex offered its first graduating class to the church, and shortly thereafter Ron Neustadt became the first Seminex grad to be ordained in St. Louis—yes, in a Missouri Synod congregation! No surprise, the TV folks were there. Ron made the evening news.

During those same 35 years now, Ron's been proclaiming that unadulterated Gospel—and also mentoring others to do the same. Case in point is Brian Days, currently in the SAM program [synodically authorized minister] in the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA, the same synod where Ron serves.

A few days ago Brian, earlier a student in a Lutheran Confessions course team-taught by Ron and me, asked me for some pointers on the Transfiguration gospel coming up this next Sunday. I punted him over to his neighbor pastor Ron. Below is the exchange that took place between them. It's a gem. A virtual birthday cake for this anniversary day. Taste and see.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Date: Thursday, February 12, 2009, 3:08 PM

Pastor Ron. Good to be in touch. As Ed has said I was having a little trouble finding a way to go with Transfiguration Sunday. I think I may go with "this is my beloved, listen to Him" and build off that.

I would love any help or instruction you have.

In Christ,
Brian Days

From: Ron Neustadt

Date: Friday, February 13, 2009, 10:12 AM

Dear Brian,

I'm happy to offer what I can. I imagine we will be involved in an e-mail exchange beyond this one as we discuss this text.

The first question is "What does the text say?" What is Mark's message in this text? Why does Mark include it where he does in his Gospel? What's the significance of Moses and Elijah? The voice? The "metamorphosis" itself? (Metamorphosis is Mark's Greek word that gets translated "transfigured.")

Related to that, why would this account be important for Mark's first readers? That may tell us why it is (still) important for us. What was going on in the life of the church when Mark wrote this?

These are questions you have probably already wrestled with in your text study. The sermon, of course, will not be a lecture on

the answers to these questions, but the answers to these questions will help shape the sermon.

Once that preparation is done, we can start cooking. Remember the “Crossings” matrix, our “recipe.” (The purpose of the Crossings model is to help us “cross” the Word of God with real, everyday life, you recall. So, the idea is to identify the real life “bad situation” we find ourselves in that God addresses (in this text and its context) with Good News— and to make sure that we don’t stop too early in identifying that bad situation — because the Good News of Jesus (and that Good News alone) can cross out the very worst of bad situations in which we find ourselves — the critique of God.

So, first, what problem of ours does this passage (and its context) address? One way to answer that is to ask who in the text has a problem? And how is his/her/their problem like a problem that we have? We can start with a problem that is obvious, right on the surface, some kind of behavior perhaps.

Then we ask “What’s going on inside that has caused this problem that we can so easily observe?”

And ultimately we ask, “What does God have to say about this problem of ours? What is God’s critique (judgment)?”

Then we are prepared to hear the Good News God has for us. How does Jesus’ death and resurrection cross out God’s critique? That’s the Gospel!

And what difference does that make for us “inside?”

And, finally, how does that change in us exhibit itself in observable, changed behavior?

Here’s one possible way of doing all that with Mark’s transfiguration account:

Mark begins, "Six days later..." Six days after what? After Jesus began to teach the disciples "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected . . ." and Peter objected. And Jesus rebuked Peter. Even called him Satan!

Six days after that, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. (Mountains were always significant in the Bible. Moses had gone up a mountain to receive the 10 commandments. Elijah, the most prominent prophet in the OT, had held that contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Mountains are where God had revealed himself.)

And, sure enough, Moses and Elijah, those representatives of the Law and the Prophets, show up!

And that's when Peter speaks up and demonstrates his problem. (Remember Peter seems always to be the first one to speak up. He's a kind of spokesman for all the disciples – maybe even us, too!)

And his problem is that he still is objecting to what Jesus had just said (six days earlier) he had come to do. He was objecting to Jesus going to Jerusalem to be handed over . . . He was objecting to Jesus' willingness to suffer and even die at the hands of those who claimed that Jesus's offering of forgiveness of sins to people violated the Law and the Prophets – and God's own righteousness.

Might this be a problem that we share with Peter? ! Willing to enjoy Jesus' company, even being religious and building "dwelling places" for him, but sometimes unwilling to forgive, to be merciful? (You will have to know your hearers to know how this problem gets expressed in their lives.)

Peter seemed to think that Jesus was like another Moses or Elijah – someone who tells us, or even shows us, how we should

live. But Jesus is NOT on a par with Moses & Elijah. He is more than lawgiver or prophet.

Peter's seemingly generous offer (to build dwellings) reveals the sin in him: not trusting Jesus' offer of forgiveness and mercy, an offer he was willing to make at the cost of his life.

God's critique of that sin (not trusting) had gotten expressed six days earlier: "Get away from me, Satan." When we put ourselves under that critique, that's a problem bigger than we can solve on our own.

That's why Jesus is so good. In fact, that's why God is so good in sending his Son. Remember what the voice said after Moses and Elijah were no longer there, and it was Jesus Only? : THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED; LISTEN TO HIM. Listen to him. Listen to what? Listen to what he has been telling you about his going to Jerusalem. About his suffering and dying. Because it's FOR YOU! It's because you are that dear to Me.

That's a message that can actually create trust in us (again and again) – hearing God tell us how loved we are.

And when we do trust it, we actually act on it. That is, we find ourselves showing mercy to others, forgiving them – all for the joy of it! We find ourselves "coming down the mountain" (maybe your church has a little "mountain" a few steps high, where communicants come to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus). We find ourselves coming down from that mountain eager to do what Jesus did when he came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. We find ourselves willing to live our lives in service to others – showing mercy, forgiving, telling them the Good News of Him who did not even turn away from the cross because he loves us so much.

That's pretty quick and sketchy, but I hope that helps, Brian.

Peace & Joy,
Pr. Neustadt

From: brian days Date: Saturday, February 14, 2009, 11:08 AM

It was a big help. I am going to focus on the "Listen" part. I didn't see it til you wrote it, the part about Peter still refusing to believe Jesus should go to the cross. It was an eye-opening angle. When I finish the sermon I will forward a copy.

Thanks for the help and God Bless,
Brian

From: Ron Neustadt Date: Saturday, February 14, 2009, 3:31 PM

You're welcome. Blessings on your preaching.

Pr. Neustadt

The Sermon.

"Listen" Sermon for Feb 22

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? A weekend, a day or even minutes that left you feeling like you were in the presence of God? I had one a few years ago. I attended a seminary sampler weekend at the Chicago School of Theology. It was a time to meet new people from a wide variety of diverse cultures and backgrounds who all were thinking of entering seminary or who were already enrolled and in different stages of their journey. It was a blast. I wanted to move up there and stay... but on

Monday, I had to drive back home. I had to walk back down the mountain.

In the Gospel reading today we read that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them apart by themselves up a mountain. The only words spoken on the mountain according to Mark's gospel are by God and Peter.

In the company of Moses who represents the law he has grown up with, Elijah the prophet, and his friend and LORD Jesus, Peter thinks this is a pretty good place to be. Peter is terrified but has not forgotten what Jesus told him about His impending suffering and death. So to keep Jesus here would be a good thing.

Then a cloud overshadows them and God's voice is heard, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" When Peter looks up Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus stands alone. As they come down the mountain Jesus tells them to keep quiet about what they have seen.

It was a short-lived mountaintop experience for Peter. In the presence of God one moment and then walking back into the darkness of this world the next. We often share this feeling. Our good times don't last long enough. Daily struggles with money, people, time, illness, injury and life in general can stop our good mood in a hurry. It is at these low points we sometimes quit listening to Jesus and try to do things on our own.

Millions of people are looking for answers. They seek them in self-help books and TV shows. They seek happiness and security in the latest fad. They look for acceptance in their appearance and possessions. For all their hard work and labor they are left with nothing if they do not know the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus walked off that mountain knowing He was walking toward a certain death. He marched toward the cross ready and willing to pay for the sins of those who came before us, ourselves, and all those who will come after us. He died for the sins of all. His grace is sufficient.

While at the seminary sampler I spoke of earlier, I met a young woman by the name of Laura Forbes. She had been a missionary for the past few years and was about to enter seminary. She didn't know what God had in store for her but she was going in the direction God was asking to go. While the two of us ate breakfast I asked her how she got into mission work. She said she felt a call that way but always made excuses. But then while she was talking with her pastor and making the same old excuses, he asked her what nets are you holding onto? What do you mean? she asked back. He said something then that not only touched her but also me to this day. "Why don't you drop your nets and go?" Soon after she was on her way to Central America to do mission work.

The same Jesus that called Peter and Andrew, the same Jesus that called James and John, the same Jesus we read about in our gospel lesson today, calls to us everyday. His way is better than any new fad. His comfort is bigger than any fear. His love for us is greater than anything this world can set in front of us. He calls to us here in this church and He calls to every last neighbor near and far outside this church. He says follow me. Jesus doesn't guarantee that when we follow we will have an everlasting mountaintop experience. We will have our ups and downs that life deals us. But we will share the joys and pains with the One who calls us.

Now I am going to ask you all to close your eyes and picture yourself by a beach. It's a bright sunny day. You are in a boat not far from the shore. The water is clear and there is a warm

breeze hitting your face. About to cast your fishing net overboard, you hear a call from the shoreline. It is Jesus calling you to follow. Now picture yourself at work or the classroom. At home in front of the TV. At the store. In the car. Jesus calls to us wherever we are. Will you drop your nets and go? Will you listen?

May the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that goes far beyond our human understanding be in our hearts and minds forever. Amen.