

**Homily at the Installation of
The Reverend William Yancy
into the pastorate of
Bethel Lutheran Church, Saint Louis**

2 Corinthians 4:1-7

[March 27, 1988]

Robert W. Bertram

This is not going to be a sermon, strictly speaking. It is what traditionally is called a homily: a reading of one verse of the text, followed by a brief comment, then the next verse followed by its comment, and so on. verse by verse, until the whole text has had its say. The text was read earlier as our Second Lesson, 2 Corinthians 4:1-7.

P: Will you repeat after me, "The Message makes the messenger?" Please?

All: The Message makes the messenger.

Verse one. "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

"Having this ministry" - which ministry? Good question. For Paul definitely intends "this ministry" in contrast to another ministry. Which other ministry? More on that in a moment. Meanwhile what we can say is that by "this ministry" Paul does not mean merely the ordained ministry, the ministry of the clergy, in contrast to the ministry of the laity. Oh, no. There are both laity and clergy, thank God, who practice "this ministry," and there are both laity and clergy - alas, lots of them - who practice also that other ministry. Blessed is the congregation whose pastor practices "this ministry." Blessed is the pastor whose congregation calls for "this ministry." It isn't always so.

What else I can tell you now already are the names by which Paul refers to these two ministries. "This ministry" he calls "the ministry of righteousness." the other one he calls "the ministry of condemnation." "This ministry" he calls "the ministry of the Spirit," the other he calls "the ministry of death." The ministry of death and condemnation is far more popular both among lay people and clergy.

That is why Paul says in this opening verse, "Having this ministry..., we do not lose heart." The old translation used to read, "We faint not". Whatever else there is about "this ministry" of "righteousness" and the "Holying Spirit," it is the sort of ministry which could easily cause its practitioners (clergy and laity) to "lose heart," to burn out, to give up. That is, it could cause them to lose heart were it not for what Paul calls the "mercy" of God. "Having this ministry" at all, would you believe it, is itself an act of divine mercy? And this is what makes it bearable.

The Message makes the messenger. Repeat, please.

All: The Message makes the messenger.

Verse two. "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

Bill, I have read that article about you-in Bethelnews, written by good Rick Gaugert. What an encouraging picture of Pastor Yancey it presents. What it is about the article that is most encouraging, and what is most like the Bill Yancey I know and love, is that during Rick's interview with you you really preferred not to talk about yourself but rather about the One whose Message you hope to communicate. (You called it the "vision.")

Notice, I am not saying that what was most endearing about the article is merely that you preferred not to talk about yourself. That much by itself is not necessarily encouraging. That could just call attention to how self-effacing Bill Yancey is, how modest, and so call attention to Yancey himself all over again. That is a danger for us, that we become distracted by you and your quiet modesty and in the process lose sight of the One whose Message you mean to bring us.

Modesty, I suspect, was not one of Paul's afflictions. But he did have other distracting features. Whatever those features were, the only way he could keep from calling attention to them was to do as you did in your interview, change the subject. The only way he could keep from commending himself, as he says, is how? Answer: "by the open statement of the truth." Did he mean by that, "the open statement of the truth" about himself? Telling the world (maybe on network TV) all about his own past indiscretions? Letting it all hang out -- his own dirty wash? No, indeed.

By "the open statement of the truth" Paul meant, as he explicitly says, "the Word of God." With that Word he dare not "tamper" or be "cunning," or distract people's attention from it by "disgraceful, underhanded ways." That "Word of God" is the "open statement of the truth." It is the only thing Paul had—and it is the only thing you, Pastor Yancey, have – by which to be commended "to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

P; The Message makes the messenger. Please?

All; The Message makes the messenger.

Verses three and four. "And even if our good news is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the good news of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.

That is what is so "open" about "this ministry": it dares to be open about God. But it dares to be open about God only because this "Word of God," this "open statement of the truth" about God is ... well, what? Is "good news." If it were not good news it would have to be toned down, "tampered" with, "veiled."

That is what “the other ministry” does, the one which exerts such an attraction for us all. That other ministry has to “veil” the truth about God. It has to pull its punches, hedge its bets, guard its language. It dare not let the cat out of the bag that the “old covenant” (as Paul calls it), “the written code,” the glory of “Moses” eventually leads people to “death” and “condemnation.” That has to be kept secret, says the other ministry, because that is bad news. Don't tell me, says my unbelieving heart, that making good, doing good, being good is not what life is all about. Don't tell me that is all an illusion. Don't tell me that that fond prejudice, which is what so gives me hope and so drives me to despair - that that is all a fatal mistake. That could only be bad news.

Not so, says Paul -- or rather, says Paul's Sponsor. Bad news is not all that is. True, it is bad news that we, even with our best efforts, are “perishing” and terminal. By ourselves we are. What is good news is that we don't have to do our own perishing. There is an alternative terminal, Jesus the Christ. To come to our end in him -- as we have in our baptisms, and every day since -- is to come to a whole new beginning, where death flips into resurrection. In him the bad news turns into good news. In Christ we can be open about God.

P: The Message makes the messenger. Please?

All: The Message makes the messenger.

Verse five. “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.”

No wonder, Bill, that you don't have to call attention to yourself. You don't even have to call attention to that, that you don't call attention to yourself. No, as you said in your interview with Rick, you can talk instead about this congregation. Because now, like Paul, you are their “slave for Jesus' sake.” Notice, not just their slave, but their slave for Jesus' sake. You can say to them, I am herewith your slave though you are not thereby my master. My master is Jesus Christ, but that is exactly why -- he is why! -- I can be slave to you, whose Lord he also is.

What Good News that is for Bethel Church, that you are their slave without their having to be your lord. I have a physician like that. She very clearly is at pains to serve me. But what is every bit as clear is that I am by no means in charge of the relationship. If that were the case, just think what poor hands I would be in – if she let herself depend finally on what I the patient might prefer, or if she lay awake nights wondering whether I am going to pay my bills. -- Blessed are you. Bethel, to have as your slave a pastor whose only Lord is your Lord, too.

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All: The Message makes the messenger.

Verse six. “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

"In the face of Jesus Christ." Come to think of it, someone might just say, Had you noticed, Pastor Yancey has 'the face of Jesus Christ'?" As a matter of fact, there probably is in this case some physical resemblance between them (though Yancey is probably a good foot taller.) Still, I take comfort in knowing that that was not why you called him as your pastor. If you had, the first one to vote against such a call would have been William Yancey, who would have been just as pleased had the pastor been beardless, a woman and of a different color.

What is even more comforting is that the reason you did call this man to serve you, and the reason you will continue to be glad that you did, is that the Message he brings -- not just his physiognomy -- will face you over and over with Jesus Christ. And the glory - that is what "glory" means, glow-ry -- of that Face will reflect not only in your eyes but (as Paul says) in your "hearts."

P: The Message make the messenger. Please?

All: The Message makes the messenger.

Verse seven. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."

What do you know, so it is true after all that we can call attention to Bill Yancey himself, or to this congregation itself. We don't just have to look past him or over him, or he over you, in order to see the One whose Message is trying to come through. What's more, you don't even have to concentrate only on Pastor Yancey's strong points in order to read the Good News. Even his weak points, indeed even his sins, can help communicate that Message. That is the kind of Lord we have, a Lord who invented incarnation, becoming flesh, and who specializes in using our own fleshiest features to demonstrate his "transcendent power" by very means of those weaknesses. For all our earthiness, we are the earthen vessels which transmit this glow of God, who is Christ. True, Pastor Yancey is only the Word-processor, not the Word. But his is a Word who would not think of coming any other way. That is why that Word is such Good News.

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