

The Oldest Document in the Werner Elert Archives—A Sermon from 100 Years Ago.

Colleagues:

A fortnight ago I received a thick envelope from Germany with this message inside:

“Enclosed is a photocopy of the oldest manuscript found among the Werner Elert papers, most likely his examination sermon as a theology student from around 1910. [Elert was born in 1885.] I have typed the text nearly verbatim from his hand-written copy, correcting only a few irregularities in orthography. Almost 100 years old or so.”

Niels-Peter Moritzen sent it to me. And who is he? Think back over half a century to 1953. Dick Baepler, Bob Schultz and I—a Concordia Seminary troika—met Niels as a fellow theology student at Erlangen University in the summer semester of that year. Both Bob and Niels were doctoral students at Erlangen. Baepler and I were interlopers for just that one semester. Niels later returned to Erlangen as Professor of Missiology (1967-1993). Marie and I reconnected with him and wife Ruth in their retirement home in Erlangen last year.

Back to his letter:

“In the basement of the building of the theology department is an archive of faculty papers. The Elert-Papers are a substantial part of these archives. They came to us from Elert’s son-in-law during the time I was in charge. I hired a gifted student to type an index of this mainly well-ordered

material. Elert's sermons alone are so many that it takes as much space on the shelf as four Bibles. There must be 200 of them. If you want to do some Elert-archeology, there is work here for more than a year. Pax et Gaudium! Niels"

Anybody out there in the Crossings Community interested? Niels, now 82, is looking for help.

Marie and I translated the typescript that Niels sent along with the photocopy of Elert's century-old hand-written original. Here it is for your own Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

(No date indicated)

Sermon on the text of Acts 14:8-22. Paul and Barnabas in Lystra.

Werner Elert, student of theology

Beloved in Christ!

Our text leads us into the first mission trip of the Apostle Paul. It was not his last one. After he had seen Jesus Christ on his way to Damascus, after he had come to know him as the actual savior of his own people, the reconciler of the whole world, trials and trouble entered his daily life. For a few years thereafter he had lived in seclusion in order to prepare himself for his new life, his new calling. But then he moved out into the whole world, proclaimed the great deeds of God, boasted about what happened to him.

Everywhere, everywhere that his path took him, everywhere that his ship would end up, everywhere he proclaimed the Good News: Christ has appeared, the reconciler for our sins. A living fire

had ignited in his heart, which constantly drove him, which had to catch fire elsewhere, and which no ocean of suffering could extinguish. "On frequent journeys," he writes to the Corinthians, "in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people . . . danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers—who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?"

But now comes what is great about Paul: "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness!" Not himself, he claims, not Paul, was the one, who in the face of all this trouble and anguish, wanted to bring his own wisdom to mankind. He was as weak and wretched as we are, he had to cope with sin as we do too. No, it was the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who drove him onward, the Spirit that spoke through him. Still today the Lord speaks to us through the words that Paul wrote in his epistles. Still today is Paul the proclaimer, at whose feet we sit our whole life long to hear from him the Gospel.

But Paul is not the only one to proclaim the Gospel to us. Twelve apostles went out with him to conquer the world for the Lord. Unnumbered disciples followed them. In this text we find Barnabas as Paul's colleague. But for the most of these disciples Paul's words about himself were also true: "in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute." It cost them a great deal to be God's instruments.

And ever since, wherever the Word of God catches fire, where the Gospel touches broken hearts that long for that Good News and therefore receive it with joy, the result is the same. Like the thankful Samaritan leper, it is not enough to be personally healed and comforted by the Gospel message, but they are moved to give thanks to the Lord publicly—praising his marvelous grace and proclaiming it to others.

Over and over again brave ones have come forward to move out into the darkness, where people have no clue of the true salvation of the world, sacrificing life and health, comfort and good fortune, in order to proclaim the Gospel, to bring the Good News.

It can be overwhelming to trace this holy commitment, this holy faithfulness through the centuries. No historian can explain, no natural human understanding can understand why they did that, why they gave their lives for the sake of a conviction that had come to power within their souls. Only those can understand this who themselves know that it is God who here is at work in history and is guiding human souls like streams of water. Such people stand in awe before this action of God's Spirit and listen with thankful ear to the proclamation, thankfully receiving the word of cross and resurrection.

Of course, it cannot stop at this awestruck amazement, at this grateful listening. For how does James say it: "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only!" So now we must ask ourselves, How shall we respond to the Gospel, the mighty testimony of these witnesses to Christ? What should the preaching of the Gospel awaken in us? Our text names three things: First, strong faith in the Gospel's power; second, genuine knowledge of that Gospel so that we may proclaim it ourselves; third, sincere thankfulness expressed in our actions.

I. First of all, a strong faith in the Gospel's power. Here we see the lame man in Lystra. He cannot walk. He cannot even stand up. His feet have been crippled since birth. He has never been able to take a single step. "That poor, poor man," we say. He was sentenced to stay in one place, could never move out into the green of summer, was forever dependent on the sympathetic care of other people. "Yes," we say, "no one could begrudge him hearing of the power

that can make everything new for him." He was weak, could not help himself, needed someone else's strength. How about us? Do we too need someone else's strength, don't we have enough strength on our own? Have we not with our own strength brought ourselves far down the road? Yes indeed, we have come a long way. Not only the animals are subject to us, but slowly and surely we have taken control of everything: fire and earth, air and steam and water. Human power shatters the rock, fearlessly cuts through the sea; human ingenuity protects you from all sorts of dangers, heals your sicknesses. Why in the world would we still need power from elsewhere? But look again at the lame man in Lystra. Would he not have sought counsel from everyone around him? Doubtless some tried to help him while others, shrugging their shoulders, passed on by. No one could help him. Now think of the many hospitals and nursing homes of our own day. You'll find hundreds and thousands whom no human doctor can help, the crippled and the sick whose afflictions and diseases neither you nor any other person can heal. Go further to the shelters for the homeless, into the streets of the poor, where thousands are starving and freezing who would gladly work, but can find no work to do. Their bitter laughter would greet your claim of how far we have come, if you reminded them to trust human strength, that human strength could help them in their need. They would find it absurd. When the burning sun in hot countries scorches an entire year's harvest, when children in the arms of their mothers die of starvation, is it not outrageous to comfort them with what humans can do? Where is our power of control of the elements when earthquakes come? In the depths of the earth it begins to thunder and roar, and when that has ceased and stillness returns, cities lie in ruins and one single ocean wave has taken the lives of a hundred thousand people. Up until now

you have been immune to all of this, but do you know whether the next hour catastrophe can come upon us all? Yes, even more, we are every day, every hour, exposed to the most serious need, the need that sin brings upon us. In everyone's life, no matter how apparently peaceful and harmonious, the hours come when the heart collapses in regret and guilt, where we would like to scream from anxiety and inner turmoil. If we then seek to comfort ourselves with the successes of human efforts, to seek our rescue from human strength, we too would laugh at ourselves.

So let us along with that lame man in Lystra listen to the Gospel. Let us hear what it proclaims to us: "God has not left himself without a witness in doing good," Paul says in Lystra. If you confront extreme need and affliction, then Jesus calls to you: "Do not worry about your life . . . for your heavenly Father knows what you need!" Under his merciful will no one shall hurt a hair of your head. Isn't that an immeasurable comfort, that we know our entire life is carried by an almighty will that never excludes us from his care? Also in our struggle with sin's misery let us go to God's friendly Son, whose winsome call to the needy is "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, and you will find rest for your souls!" Whoever groans helplessly in the bondage of sin, listen to what the Son of God says: "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Do you hear? He wants to help us. He has rescued us from sin, from its power over us, and from its guilt. That is the very best that could be proclaimed to us: We are rescued, reconciled to God.

How did that lame man respond to the Gospel? "He believed that he could be healed." It all depends on that, on

faith. Whoever has tried on his own to lead a righteous life soon learns that it doesn't work. Trusting one's own ability always leads to dreadful disgrace. Nevertheless you can do that, nevertheless you can come to God, can live with him, when you believe, when you trust, as did the lame man from Lystra, "that you could be healed." Such faith is not simple-minded or lethargic. It is no refusal to invest one's own efforts. It is rather trusting a gracious God, trusting the one who promised to give strength to the weak. He loves us. He is pleased with us, has fashioned satisfaction for all our sins. His son has carried and covered them. And now he hands on to us his own strength. For he is always with us. "Behold, I am with you always," he says in his final hour with his disciples. We were weak, now we are strong. The old has passed away, lies behind us, the Lord has forgiven everything. Behold, all things have become new! In this way God's Spirit creates in us a new and joyful trust. That is faith.

That is the power of which is said it has overcome the world. We never want to cease asking for that power from the Lord. But where do we find such faith today? The Lord once said: "If you have faith and do not doubt and would say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done." We see the strength of such faith in the lame man at Lystra. He believed that he could be healed. Paul sees that faith and calls to him: "Stand upright on your feet!" And the man sprang up and began to walk. The spell was broken, new vitality filled him.

The Lord calls us all with the same words: "Stand upright on your feet." You, you who have spent your life in sin and weakness: Come and trust me! With me is life, with me is power, stand upright and walk, walk in a new life that I give you.

II. But having these joyful feelings when the Gospel has been proclaimed to us is not the end. We need to come to true knowledge of the source of this proclamation. The citizens of Lystra were also deeply moved by Paul and Barnabas's proclamation and even more when they say what healing power that Gospel actually had. Great joy spread through the whole city: Finally they had found that for which they thirsted. Finally help for every need. Finally rescue instead of disaster, healing instead of sickness, power instead of weakness. The shouts go up. A murmur goes through the crowd in awe at these strange preachers: The gods have come down to us in human form! Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. It was an event that they had never experienced before. It penetrated into the very depths of the city, into the life of every family, every individual. And so they revert to their ancient native dialect, Lycaonian. We too, when we are moved so deeply, cannot express ourselves in any language so readily, so familiarly, as the language our mother taught us. Paul and Barnabas had spoken in the international language that the Lystrians knew from trade and travel. But in this event that seems so holy to them the intimate whisper goes through the entire city in their mother tongue: "The gods have come down to us in human form."

The poor fools! What benefit to them is their joyful excitement, their happy confidence, when they do not realize to whom they should be directing it? They had not grasped in whose power the apostles were speaking, in whose power they worked this wonder. They heard the good news of the grace of God in Christ and concluded that these two pathetic persons were their saviors from all their needs! The poor fools! we would say. But are they much different from us? We are the same sort of people as

lived at Jesus' time. When the Lord once granted several thousand of them physical food, they wanted to make him their king. They did not grasp what Jesus wanted from them, namely, a change of heart. In worldly fashion they sought to celebrate their benefactor, but the Lord departed from their midst.

And don't we also see in our time that humans are turned into gods? We are in no way better than the poor blind people in Lystra. Our fathers 1000 years ago built churches and chapels to commemorate successful battles, not monuments to humans. They celebrated rescue from great disaster by praying at holy places. We do not wish to minimize praise and honor to fellow human beings, we wish to be thankful for all who nourish our life, but in all the great achievements of mankind we should still learn to give honor to the majesty of God, who has given mankind such power. In everything that we ourselves do and produce we should recognize the leading and protecting hand of the Lord, always acknowledging that it is the Lord who has ordained our place in life and the work we have to do, that every calling is an assignment from God.

Barnabas and Paul are horrified, tearing their clothes when they see the priests of the city preparing to offer sacrifices to them. They cry in their anguish: "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God!" Yes, that was the goal that they wished for their proclamation: that their hearers should learn to distinguish between false self-made idols, the empty shadow-pictures they had followed before, and the true God, the father of the Lord Jesus. He is the one they should acknowledge as the true source of the Gospel.

Are we not hard-wired for such knowledge of God? The citizens of Lystra said, "The gods have come down to us in human form." In their world the ancient sagas spoke of the gods appearing in human form. That reflected the human wish to approach the divine. Do you not know such a thirst in your own soul just once to see the divine with your own eyes?

God has quieted this longing. He has come down and taken residence among us in Christ, the Son, and we know that our own longing will come to an end when we ourselves get to see him.

Thereby faith in God's grace moves into solid hope in the living God. We should recognize him in every sermon and turn toward him, the living and the holy one. Paul and Barnabas sought to say nothing more than that in Lystra. We see heaven and earth around us. It is God "who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them," Paul says here. God is the source of everything. Paul continues, "In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways." You look at world history and see a strange and apparently turbulent world around you. You see great darkness among the nations. Now, says Paul, learn to see God in this history, God who shapes the destiny of the nations and presides over the path of all people.

"Yet he has not left himself without a witness," Paul continues. Doesn't that remind us of the trumpet call in the words of Isaiah, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." God has indeed broken the darkness and brought

light in its place. It has been revealed among the nations. God's son has redeemed them, his Spirit enlightens them. Indeed, he has not left himself without a witness. And even more: "He has done good to us. . . filling us with food and our hearts with joy."

Have you in your life experienced joy? Have you ever received goodness? Then acknowledge that God is the one who gave it to you. Indeed, that we live at all is from the goodness of the Lord, that we haven't reached the end of our rope. So see God throughout the world, in everything that occurs in your own life.

III. When you hear the Gospel, trust it! That was the first point. And then acknowledge the one who speaks that Gospel to you! That was the second item. And now comes the third: Show sincere thankfulness in your actions! In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he wrote a great deal about faith and about knowing God; but then he continues, "I will show you a still more excellent way!" Yes, there is a still more excellent way. He continues, "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." If we have heard the Gospel, have come to know God in his love, then it cannot be otherwise than that this love of God will echo in our lives. Or should it be possible that we could simply take our ease in our knowledge of God's love? The inhabitants of Lystra can serve as a model for us. They heard the same Gospel that we too hear. But they didn't just go back home remembering what they heard for a few days and then forgetting it all. No, they wanted to offer sacrifices right on the spot to this pair of preachers. Granted, this was certainly the wrong way to be thankful. But the reason for that, as we have seen, is that they had

not yet come to know the source of that Gospel. Nevertheless their thankfulness was there and they sought to express it in action.

How different it was with the Jews at Antioch and at Iconium! The apostles had been with them, too, and had proclaimed the good news, but no one listened. Instead, they drove the apostles out of town. And as if that were not enough, they followed after the apostles in order to undermine their work wherever they went. The preaching of the Lord Christ had indeed worked among them, but he had become the stone of stumbling. They had heard the same message as the Lystrians, had seen similar miracles, but had no faith, no knowledge of the Lord, no thankfulness. Did they need salvation any less? No, certainly not. For indeed they had God's most basic preparation beginning all the way back to the time of the patriarchs. Yes, these Jewish hearers are also an example for us, but a frightful one. No nation on earth has been so frightfully visited by the Lord than this people who had been more blessed than any other.

But we also see that among the Lystrians the word of God did not achieve lasting effects. "Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds." They sought to murder Paul, the very one who had offered them the greatest treasure that they could ever receive. Does this not bring to mind the grisly scene in Jerusalem where the Jews, who a few days before had celebrated the Lord as the king of all kings, then cry about their savior, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And today it is still the same. Human nature has no antenna for the Spirit of God. We are fickle and unthankful.

Nevertheless, we still have in our text an unparalleled example, marvelous enough that we can all follow it. And

that is Paul himself. "They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city." Hounded like a beast, he lies supposedly dead in the field. The most bitter ingratitude is his reward.

Nevertheless he knew what he had received. God had found him, Paul, the enemy of Christ and his disciples, had gifted him with undeserved love, had generated faith within him, had made his merciful Gospel powerful within him. And Paul had come to know God, the father of the Lord Jesus, and had anchored his hope in him.

From then on his life was like Peter's, who had said: "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." From then on the pressure persisted to pass on the love of God that had come to him. Wherever he could, he simply had to proclaim the Gospel. That was his mode of thankfulness, for he perceived it to be God's Spirit compelling him to fulfill this calling.

Not all of us are able like Paul to simply move out into the world to proclaim the Gospel. Nevertheless, people should notice in everything we do, in our way of life with one another, that the Gospel has taken root within us. The Lord had once summarized everything we should do in a few words: You shall love God and you shall love your neighbor." Love—what is that? It means: to think of the other, not of yourself. God has given you great gifts. He has given you everything. Nothing that you have comes from yourself, nor can you do anything by yourself, nor can you survive on your own. Think of him in everything that you do! Think of him in everything that you must endure.

Paul knew what love meant. "Love bears all things," he once said, and then added an even more profound word: "It

does not seek its own!" Love does not mean: care for yourself. Rather, it means giving up on myself to find myself in the other.

Give up on yourself completely. Give yourself to God, become small and weak before him as a child and let God take hold of you. Then you will find yourself.

From God's hand then great things come our way, abilities within us that we never dreamed existed. And from those gifts let us go forth, strengthened in our love for God, energized with his power to strengthen the brothers and help them. Just as it is said of the apostles in our text: "They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.'"

Conclusion: This is the last page of the Gospel story that is shown to us: that through many persecutions we must enter the kingdom of God. The Gospel produces three sorts of fruits within us: faith in its power, true knowledge of God, and thankful deeds of love. As often as we hear it, it produces new buds in our soul, buds that are to burst forth into blossoms and fruit. Look outside today at the little buds on the bushes and branches. They are already swelling and in a few months will burst forth and bloom. But if in the days ahead a severe frost comes, that can destroy all of them, can freeze the living sap, and they wilt before they have ever come to blossom.

We need to protect ourselves from such frosts that can also destroy the budding fruit of the Gospel in our souls. Those buds are always in danger from daily needs, daily suffering, daily turmoil. Such things will always come. The very first of Jesus' disciples had to experience that too, and that's why for our

comfort they wrote "it is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." In all these afflictions, let us not forget that God holds us in love and that despite all our own suffering, we too want to love God! And in the face of all suffering we also want to hold the brothers in love and help them. We cannot do otherwise, for "love never ceases."

Amen.