

June 2, 2013
Second Sunday after Pentecost – *Deacon Commissioning*

Special Sermons file
(Series C)

Psalm 119:105

Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

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This is a banner day for this congregation.

In a few moments we are going to do something we have never done before. One of our own men is going to be recognized as a licensed deacon. This is a first step for the church and a giant leap of faith for him. I am honored and humbled to be a part of this special service acknowledging *Chuck Godfrey* who will be --

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This text from the hymnal in the Bible is one my favorites. I like the sound of it and the way it moves my heart in the right direction. You can tell it is inspired by God because it doesn't sanctify our reason or strength; it speaks about the miracle of faith. As we read or hear these words the light of the Word goes on, but not for our eyes, but for our feet. God doesn't pull us out of the realm of sin, cover us with the robe of righteousness, teach us the way to live as redeemed sons and daughters, and then leave us to stumble and grumble without hope in the dark. He gives us a light, a spiritual GPS system that guides us every step of the way. We may never completely understand it, but that doesn't prevent us from making the journey and moving forward by faith --

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Today the light is on. The Spirit is moving through this text. But doing theology as we used say at the seminary doesn't just happen because we're in a church building or thinking holy thoughts. It comes with the package we call faith. And sometimes it takes us a long time to tear off the wrapping paper and open the box. I know Chuck didn't get up last Tuesday and say to himself: "On Sunday I am going to be a deacon!"

In 1520 when Luther was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, he said something that must have been quite a shock to his students. His dynamic lecture left no wiggle room when he said that theologians, (*which includes deacons*) are not made by simply "understanding, reading, or speculating, but by living (*he paused*), no rather by dying and being damned" (AW 5/163:28-29). In other words, a man of faith is molded and scolded, shaped and scraped, rooted and booted by the Word of God. It doesn't just happen; it is a process, frequently a struggle and never automatic.

At the seminary we were taught to preach for two reasons: to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. King David didn't become a man after God's own heart by counting sheep. Deacons don't do theology by logging on the internet. The journey is not simply a matter of academic achievement, but more an adventure in the miracle of faith. Most men prefer to avoid the incrimination that the light of Scripture exposes, and go straight into their own reason, close with a prayer, and skip any personal discomfort imposed by a text. But to do theology the Word must be allowed to shine not only in the hearts of the hearers, but in the man of faith preaching in the pulpit. This is most certainly true for deacons also who are --

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As it says in the *Formula of Concord* ...

We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in Psalm 119:105. *FC Ep Sum 1: Book of Concord, page 464*

Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

In his preface to the commentary on the Psalms, Luther assured his students that there was a right way to do theology. He said that in Psalm 119 (in 176 verses) there were three rules. In the language of the medieval church, they were translated in Latin as ...

Oratio ... Meditatio ... Tentatio.

We would call them: *prayer, homework, and drive*. We could also take the letters to form a degree for a life of service in the kingdom of God ... a P-H-D degree --

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PRAYER (Latin: *oratio*) comes first. Talking with God begins with our ears not our mouth; we listen because we are grounded in the Word. We pray because we believe that the Lord not only hears, but responds. Like David in this Psalm, we pray for divine help and guidance ...

*With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O Lord!
I will keep your statutes.
I call to you; save me,
that I may observe your testimonies.
I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I hope in your words.*

verse s 145-147

And for what does a deacon pray? A sermon topic? A quiet day catching lots of big fish from his boat? A peaceful day with no calls on his cell phone? Perhaps. Sometimes, more often than not, doing theology means throwing his hands up into the air with absolutely no idea what God wants him to do. In quiet desperation he learns to pray. He learns that God answers knee-mail. He learns to trust the light for his feet. He learns to listen for the voice of faith in the quiet presence of the Lord.

A young couple went on a guided tour of our nation's capitol. At one point, they noticed a tall, quiet man going up the steps. He was identified as the congressional chaplain. "What does he do?" they asked. "Does he pray for the House or for the Senate?" The tour guide answered, "Oh, well, he just gets up, looks at the Congress, and prays for the country."

HOMEWORK (Latin: *meditatio*) is constant because we love it. If someone would have told me in high school that I would be writing a documented paper every week for the rest of my life, I would have said: no way! But doing theology means consistent, constant, continual study and meditation of the Word. For King David, it was a love affair with the Lord who never ceased to amaze him ...

*Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate
on your wondrous works.*

verse 27

Studying, meditating, digging deeper into the Word for Luther was like a cow chewing a cud. The reformer told his students that ...

one does not permit it to go in one ear and out the other, but holds it firmly in the heart, swallows it, and absorbs it ... *Luther's Works 9:136*

But he also encouraged reading the words of Scripture out loud, over and over, and paying close attention to what they mean. In homiletics class we were taught to look and listen for the one intended meaning of every sermon text. Homework for the man of faith doing theology is never done.

Let him who wants to contemplate in the right way reflect on his Baptism; let him read his Bible, hear sermons, honor father and mother, and come to the aid of a brother in distress. But let him not shut himself up in a nook ... and there entertain himself with his devotions and thus suppose that he is sitting in God's bosom and has fellowship with God without Christ, without the Word, without the sacraments. *Luther's Works 3:275*

DRIVE (Latin: *tentatio*) is tough love in the Word. So far, I think most of us have a pretty good idea about prayer and homework. But we really don't have a word in our English language for what Luther called (German: *Anfechtung*). This is the inner spiritual turmoil brought on by the trials and tribulations of working with human nature that quite literally "drives" the man of faith into the Word. Most of us will do almost anything to avoid this level of intensity. We want our fast food in less than two minutes. Our beds cozy and comfortable. And our beer ice cold. Hold that "no pain, no gain" stuff ... but *tentatio* is by far the best teaching ground for doing theology.

One of the men in a former parish called me late one night after his company party. He said he was driving past the church and noticed the restroom lights were left on. Since I lived next door, he asked me to go over and turn them off; if it wasn't too much trouble. Then he hung up. I couldn't believe it. There was snow on the ground. My wife and kids were asleep. I didn't want to go out, but I through on my clothes and went over to the church and took care of the lights. When I got home, I couldn't go back to sleep. So I waited a couple of hours and dialed the phone. When he answered, I said, "John, the lights are off." *Dr. Oswald Hoffman sermon, 1974*

Drive puts the man of faith equipped by prayer and homework into gear. It makes him a real theologian because it exercises and reinforces the miracle of his faith grounded in the Word and Sacrament ministry among God's people where he is --

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The enemy is no match to the sharper sword of God's Word (Eph. 6:17). Like King David we praise God for it ...

Then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your Word.

verse 42

Oratio ... *Meditatio* ... *Tentatio*.
prayer ... homework ... drive

May God give us hearts after his own.

In Jesus' Name,
A M E N