

The Lord's Service to Us

John T. Pless

These five homilies were originally preached at the daily prayer services at Concordia College, Seward, Nebraska on the week of February 1-5, 1993. They were crafted with the intent of providing a thematic exposition of the liturgy, the Divine Service, under "the impact of the Gospel" (Elert). The aim of these homilies is aptly stated by the following paragraph from the Introduction to Lutheran Worship: "In Christian worship our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Saying back to him what he has said to us in His Word, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service: "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Where his name is, there he is. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God. The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition" (Lutheran Worship, p.6).

- John T. Pless
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THE LORD'S SERVICE TO US IN HIS NAME

Exodus 20:22-24 / Saint Matthew 28:16-20

In the Christian Year, Epiphany celebrates the glory of God made manifest in the flesh of His Son. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," writes St. John. The glory of the Lord made manifest in tabernacle and temple now resides in the Word made flesh. Where God puts His name, there is His glory.

By His name, God identifies Himself. God tells us who He is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With that name His blessing as He says to Moses: "In every place where I record my name I will come to you, and I will bless you" (Ex.20:24). We call it Divine Service, Gottesdienst, the Lord's service to us. God carries the action of the verbs. He records His name. He comes to us. He blesses us.

Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know" (St. John 4:22). The liturgy is not directed to an unknown deity. We do not worship as agnostics, that is, as those who are uncertain or unsure as to the identity and will of our God. We call on the name of the Lord who has called us by His own triune name in the waters of Holy Baptism. With water and word, He etched His name - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - upon us for time and eternity. In the Old Testament, the Temple was the place where God caused His name to dwell. In holy Baptism, God made your body the temple of His Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of His presence. In the font, He consecrated you to the hallowing of His name. Remember the First Petition of the Our Father in the Catechism:

God's name is indeed holy in itself; but we pray in this

petition that it may be holy among us also.

How is this done? When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead a holy life according to it.

The Lord's name tells us whose Service it is. It is the Lord's liturgy and everything in the Service flows from the Lord's Name. Indeed as the Psalmist said, "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." There is a great deal of anxiety about worship in our churches today that appears to be fueled by a fear that people are non-worshippers who must be transformed into worshipping creatures. The Scriptures work with another assumption: Man is a worshipping creature by nature. The problem is that he worships the wrong god, an idol. In his commentary on the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther notes that, "There has never been a people so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. Everyone has set up a god of his own, to which he looked for blessing, help, and comfort" (LC I:17). The problem is not that we do not worship, but that we worship the wrong god.

The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the name from which all blessings flow. Faith receives all that He gives. This indeed is the highest worship of God.

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THE LORD'S SERVICE TO US IN HIS WORD AND MINISTRY

Saint John 20:19-23 / II Timothy 4:1-5

We put vestments on our pastors so that we do not see the man but Christ Jesus for it is in His stead and by His command that the pastor speaks. Luther writes, "It matters not that dishes are made of different materials-some silver, others of tin-or whether they are enameled earthen dishes. The same food may be prepared in silver as in dishes of tin. Venison, properly seasoned and prepared, tastes just as good in a wooden dish as in one of silver. We must also make this application to Baptism and absolution. This ought to be a comfort to us. People, however, do not recognize the person of God but only stare at the person of man. This is like a tired and hungry man who refused to eat unless the food is served on a silver platter. Such is the attitude that motivates the choice of many preachers today" (AE 22:529).

In this last decade of the 20th Century, Luther's words are perhaps more urgent than they were at the time of the Reformation. It seems that everyone has a notion of what the church needs in a pastor: An entertainer who keeps the interest of the congregation alive. A promoter of programs. A motivator for sanctified living. A kindly and understanding counselor. You could, no doubt, add other job descriptions to the list. But the Office of the Holy Ministry does not belong to us but to the Lord. We look to the Lord who instituted the Office. It was Easter evening and the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors. The Risen Lord Jesus, their Good Shepherd, their Pastor comes to them and He says what your pastor says to you, "Peace be with you." The Lord showed them the nail holes in His hands and the gash in His side. The disciples were glad, overjoyed to see the Lord. Then, a second time, Jesus speaks the word of peace and with that word of peace He sends them just as the Father had sent Him. The Lord breathes on them His Holy Spirit giving them His on work to do: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

What the Lord Jesus set in motion on Easter Evening still happens today in the liturgy, the Divine Service. The pastor is there for nothing else so much as He is to speak the word that forgives sins and in forgiving sins bestows peace and life in the blood of Christ crucified. Pastor and congregation are reminded what the pastor is there for in the words of absolution, as the pastor speaks not for himself but for Christ: "I, as a

called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The pastor is there as servant of the Word and so he declares, "the Lord be with you" and the Lord is with you-a fact you acknowledge by saying, "and with your spirit." The pastor is there as servant of the Word. In the Divine Service, you hear from a Prophet, Apostle, and Evangelist in the Old Testament Reading, Epistle, and Holy Gospel. Then, your pastor, in continuity with the prophets, apostles, and evangelists proclaims into your ears the Word of Life. It is a word of peace through the forgiveness of sins. The peace that Jesus Christ established by the shedding of His blood on the cross is now delivered into your ears and into your life. The pastor is there for the delivery of that gift. "How beautiful upon the mountains" writes Isaiah, "Are the feet of him who brings good news, Who proclaims peace, Who brings glad tidings of good things, Who proclaims salvation, Who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"(Is. 52:7). The pastor is there for the distribution of those gifts of peace in Jesus' words and with His body and blood. The liturgy serves us well by keeping the pastor at that work. Amen.

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THE LORD'S SERVICE TO US AS HE HEARS OUR PRAYERS

I Timothy 2:1-8

"In peace let us pray to the Lord." Jesus said to His disciples in that dark and doleful night of His betrayal, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you" (St. John 14:27). A few days later, on Easter Sunday evening, this same Jesus fresh out of the grave bestows the gift of peace on His disciples saying: "Peace be with you" (St. John 20:19). Packed into Jesus' word of peace is everything that He did for us by His dying and rising. Peace is the way things are between God and man because of the "one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all." Prayer is not an activity which we engage in so that we might achieve peace with God. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, making peace by the blood of His cross. Peace with God won at Calvary and delivered in the Gospel is the platform upon which our praying stands.

The words of St. Paul to Timothy find their fulfillment when the pastor invites the congregation to pray saying, "Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs." We call it the Prayer of the Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ is a praying Church. She has been tutored by her Lord to call His Father "Our Father." The Church of Jesus Christ is a praying church because she is first of all a listening church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his little book entitled Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible notes "that it is the richness of the Word of God and not the poverty of our own hearts that ought to determine our prayers." Christian prayer does not rise out of silence of the human heart. Prayer is not our vain grasping after a phantom god. Prayer is faith learning how to talk to the Father. Even as "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God"(Romans 10:17) so prayer comes from first hearing what the Lord has to say.

We may have confidence in our praying only as our prayers are glued to the commands and promises of our God. Such confidence the church has when she prays "for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs" for the Lord's Apostle exhorts the church that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior."

We call it the Prayer of the Church for here the Church with a single mind and voice calls upon the name of the Lord. In this Prayer, the Church speaks her mind, for united with Jesus Christ, she has the mind of Christ. And Paul tells us what is on Christ's mind. It is His will, His desire that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. In this Prayer, the Royal Priesthood has as its duty and delight that priestly work of intercession and thanksgiving. Here we do for others that which they will not or cannot do for themselves- we pray for them.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Left to ourselves, we are never more selfish than when we pray. With God as the Great Sympathizer, the Great Giver, the Great Promiser we go to our knees and indulge every impulse for gratification. But the Psalms that teach us to pray never leave us to ourselves; they embed all our prayers in liturgy. Liturgy defends us against the commonest diseases of prayer: The tyranny of our emotions, the isolationism of our pride. Liturgy pulls our prayers out of the tiresome business of looking after ourselves and into that exhilarating enterprise of seeing and participating in what God is doing. We are drawn into a large generosity where everyone is getting and receiving, offering and praising" (Answering God, p.91-92). In the Prayer of the Church we are exercising the Royal Priesthood, bringing the hurts and pains, the joys and thanksgivings of our neighbor before our Great High Priest Jesus Christ. In peace, let us pray to the Lord. Amen.

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THE LORD'S SERVICE TO US AT HIS TABLE

Saint Luke 22:24-27 / I Corinthians 11:23-26

Martin Luther observes that the Christian should "go to the Lord's Supper as though he were going to his death so that he may go to his death as though he were going to the Lord's Supper." Note again the words of the Apostle: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (I Cor. 11:26). What transpires as the Lord feeds us with His body and blood is no MacDonald's happy meal, no congenial spiritual cocktail party, but an eating and drinking of death. The chalice that we lift is indeed, as one writer has put it, "a toast of terrible joy." It is the cup of the new testament in our Savior's blood. Body and blood separate indicate a sacrifice has taken place. The sacrifice happened once and forever at Calvary. With the body and the blood we are made recipients of the sacrifice. It was for us- that sacrifice- and it is given into our mouths. Hence we hear the words, "the body of Christ given for you...the blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of your sins."

We acclaim the Lord who comes to us in His body and blood to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The passover that God instituted in Exodus 12 when He delivered His people from Pharaoh's hellish Egypt had at its center a lamb roasted and consumed by the people. Our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished a new passover. He is the Lamb basted with the juices of our sin roasted with the fire of God's wrath. His blood spells our freedom from the Egypt of sin, death, and hell for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. Where sin is done away with through forgiveness, death is rendered impotent and hell is put out of business. The death of God's Lamb is our life.

In the Holy Supper, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. You proclaim that death by receiving the Lord's body and blood. "It is the Lord's Supper, not the Christian's Supper," says Luther. Here Jesus is host, chef, waiter, and entree and we are guests. The Lamb is among us as the One who serves. Pious Peter thought it out of place for Jesus to be the servant. He protested when the Lord came to wash his feet on that Maundy Thursday evening: "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus said to him, "If I do not wash your feet you have no part with Me." To hold off from receiving the service that Jesus renders is hell. "There is no

way for Jesus to be your Lord unless He is first of all your servant." You proclaim the Lord's death by allowing Him to feed you with His body and blood. Faith is the only way to receive such divine service.

Your reception of the Lord's Supper, His true body and blood, is your confession before the universe of His saving death. This is the great act of evangelism, for here at the altar you give testimony to the fact that the Lamb of God was slaughtered for you and that He now gives you the fruits of His death-His body and blood. It is a confession before the universe for it is made not only in the presence of those who might happen to be in the building but in the presence of angels, archangels, and the whole company of heaven.

We are given the Lord's body to eat and His blood to drink "till He comes," says the Apostle. By the Lord's Supper, He brings us on our way to that glad feast of the Lamb with all His saints in heaven. We are not there yet. The world is very much with us said the poet. And we with the world. Temptations abound for like Peter we are tempted to deny the Lord who bought us and we like Judas are tempted to betray Him. We are tempted, like the other disciples, to flee into the shadows, to run away from the cross. Till He comes again in open glory and with great power, we need this Supper, this ration for our journey, for it is the Lord's Supper. Luther said, "When you are troubled and tormented by your sins do not go to Calvary, for at Calvary sins were answered for, but come to the Lord's Supper for it is here that the forgiveness won at Calvary is bestowed." And so we pray:

"Come Lord Jesus,
we'll be your guests
Let these gifts to us be blessed" Amen.

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THE LORD'S SERVICE TO US IN HIS BLESSING

Numbers 6:22-27 / Romans 12:1-2

"So they shall put My name on the children of Israel and I will bless them" (Nu. 6:27). The name of the Lord is the beginning and the end of the Divine Service. We are now marked with the Lord's name in the Benediction-that word of God's blessing in Numbers 6 in which He favors us with His grace and peace. With the Lord's name given us in Holy Baptism we are drawn together to worship Him in spirit and truth, receiving His gifts in absolution, the Holy Scriptures, His proclaimed Word, and the precious meal of His body and blood. Now with that same name, He sends us back into the world, to the places of our various callings to live by the mercies we have received as living sacrifices to the praise of His glory and the good of the people whom God has placed in our lives. The blessings of our Triune God do not as the final Amen is uttered and the last hymn sung. These blessings of our gracious God have their way with us, moving us from the nave to the neighbor. As temples dedicated by the Lord's name we are made living sacrifices, channels for God's service to the neighbor. This is "the liturgy after the liturgy" to use the words of Carter Lindberg.

The Divine Service ends with the Benediction, but the worship of God does not. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:1-2). We pray in the Post-Communion Collect that the Lord's gifts would have free course in our lives as we give thanks to God for the refreshment of the salutary gift of the Sacrament and implore Him that He would strengthen us through that same gift in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another.

The life that we have received from the High Priest and Liturgist of our salvation, Jesus Christ may be summarized in those two words "faith" and "love." Writing in his essay *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther states "We conclude therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself but in Christ and in his neighbor...He lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbor through love" (AE 31:371). God serves us in His Word and Sacraments. In faith we embrace His gifts with hymns of praise and acclamations of thanksgiving, putting our Amen to His sure and certain promises.

Confident of the Father's promise to bless and keep us, sure of His gracious presence in the face of His Son, and favored by the Holy Spirit's gift of peace, we move back into the situations where God has called us to live in faith and love. St. Paul puts it like this "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him"(Col. 3:16-17). Amen.

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