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Get Out There With Some Godly Passion!

2003 Commencement Address

Karl L. Barth

Each time one steps on this campus, memories are stirred. Concordia Theological Seminary, as you know, was a gift from Wilhelm Löhe, who was so instrumental in the founding of our beloved Synod. Indeed, it was of him that Dr. Walther, our first president, said: "Next to God, it is Pastor Löhe to whom our Synod is indebted for its happy beginning.... It may well honor him as its spiritual father."¹

I am also reminded again today of the close ties that bind both Father Löhe and this seminary to the Barth family. My grandfather was one of Löhe's *Sendlinge*, who came to this country in 1864 to complete his theological studies, and grandmother was a deaconess under Löhe at Neuendettelsau in Bavaria. My father, G. Christian Barth, in turn, served as president of this institution in the years following the end of World War II (1945-1952). Needless to say, I am grateful to be here with you today and to share the joy of you graduates and your loved ones. Congratulations!

The word "commencement" reminds that the focus here is on the future. Yet it would hardly be appropriate this evening to ignore your long years of training and the many people who have touched your lives during those years. They are not only your pastors and your professors, but your fathers and mothers, your wives and sweethearts. They prayed. They worked. Many of them sacrificed so that both you and they might experience the happiness of this day. And their tears of joy tonight are, I am sure, all the reward they seek. We thank God for them.

Now then, in an issue of the *Atlantic* magazine there is an article by Jonathan Rauch, who describes himself as "an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual." Today he prefers to call himself an "apatheist," and he defines apatheism this way: "a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's." He rejoices that apatheism seems to be flowering in this country, and he hopes for "a world generously leavened with ... people who feel at ease with religion even if they are irreligious; people who may themselves

¹Quoted in Erich Heintzen, *Love Leaves Home* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 73.

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be members of religious communities, but who are neither controlled by godly passions nor concerned about the ... religious beliefs of others."

Graduates, behold your world! Yes, the postmodern world is flowering, a world in which, as George Barna reminds us, almost eighty percent no longer believe in anything called absolute truth. And the message to you today is GET OUT THERE WITH SOME GODLY PASSION. The word "passion" is often used to describe sexual appetite. Here I use it, as Rauch does in his article, as an antonym for apathy—intense excitement, absolute commitment even unto death for your labors as "ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor.4:1).

I.

Get out there with godly passion for people and for their salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ! You have many models in Holy Scripture: Ezra, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all weep because of the rebellion of God's people. Paul is so distraught about his fellow Jews who "are ignorant of God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:3), *anathema*, separated from the Savior for them. Observe our Lord, who sheds tears over the city of Jerusalem for its refusal to take refuge under the shadow of his wings (Matt. 23:37).

However, it is not people in general who are to arouse godly passions in us. More than that, it is individual souls who are to be our concern as undershepherds of the Master. Yes, our Lord preached to the multitude in the sermon on the mount. And yes, he fed 4,000 at a time and 5,000 at a time. But see his passion for one grieving widow in Nain, one blind Bartimaeus on the road near Jericho. He tells the story of the one lost sheep, the one lost coin, the one lost son.

Indeed, one of the delightful features of the Gospel of Luke is that we have several episodes found only there in which our Lord turns his attention from the crowds to minister to just one sinner. His lecture in the synagogue is interrupted because there is a woman stooped over for eighteen years who needs healing. He is thronged along the highway; and who receives his attention but the little tax collector fellow who shinnied up the sycamore tree to see him. Salvation must come to his house. At Golgotha there is the criminal who will be with him in Paradise. And on the day of resurrection we do not find him announcing his victory on Israeli television. He walks the dusty road to Emmaus with Cleopas and his friend and "beginning at Moses and all the prophets [expounds] to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

As good Lutherans you ask, "What does this mean?" It means that it is all good and well to think big. To make big plans and to pray big prayers for the lost and dying billions. But it is also important to think small. Think one family at a time, one person at a time. Get out and visit that grandma who is lonely and despairing because her children never call. Take time to help that Christian teenager who wants to be faithful but is having such a hard time understanding what's going on inside of him. Give your computer a rest and exercise your fingers instead by pushing some doorbells in the community.

And when you think small, there is no room for a big ego. President Ronald Reagan used his mother Nelle's Bible for his oath of office. On the inside cover of that Bible are these words: "You can be too big for God to use, but you cannot be too small."² John the Baptist had it right, also for each of us, when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

II.

And doesn't it make sense—if you get out there with godly passion for people, you will have a godly passion to proclaim to them God's message of law and gospel.

How important is that? Why such passion to preach? In Melville's *Moby Dick* Ishmael describes the pulpit in the chapel of the town of Bedford with these words: "Its paneled front was in the likeness of a ship's bluff bows.... What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part, all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world.... Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow."³

Walther is less poetic but no less definite. In his lectures to the seminary students he said: "Among the various functions and official acts of a servant of the Church the most important of all, my friends, is preaching.... A minister who accomplishes little or nothing in preaching will accomplish little or nothing in anything else that he may do."

Walther continues: "Here is where the papists differ from us. They call their ministers priests and assert that the most important of all functions of a priest is to baptize, hear confession and pronounce absolution,

²Quoted in *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989).

³Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 51.

administer communion... We are forced to say that all baptizing, pronouncing absolution and administering communion is useless if these matters have not previously been made the subjects of preaching to the people."⁴

Melanchthon, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, says it all in one sentence: "The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel."⁵

And what is to be preached we know—not the gospel of "liberal Christianity" as described by H. Richard Niebuhr, namely, "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."⁶

Indeed, God is not without wrath, and we are not without sin. He declares, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and "cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). No escape here on our part! Away with the insipid moralism that urges the hearers to try a little harder, love a little deeper, pray and give a little more.

The law must be preached. Dante explained through Beatrice that fallen man "could never make amends; he could not go as low in his humility as once. Rebellious, he had sought to rise in pride."⁷ And God, as Luther reminds, "saves no one but sinners. He instructs none but paupers, and he makes alive only the dead."⁸

Yes, he does, and yes, he did. "You [and I] he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). He "made us alive together with Christ" (v.5). How? "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.... He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:19, 21). "All things have become new" (v.17).

Dr. Walther goes on at length to his seminarians about the glory of this gospel ministry and says, in part: "You are not to prolong this poor,

⁴C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 247.

⁵Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XV, 42.

⁶Quoted by Richard John Neuhaus, "Can Atheists be Good Citizens?" *First Things* (August/September 1991): 18.

⁷Dante, *The Divine Comedy*. The full quote appears in canto 7, lines 85-120.

⁸Martin Luther, "Lectures on Romans," vol. 25 of *Luther's Works*, trans. Jacob A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 418.

temporal life of those entrusted to your care, but you are to bring to them the life that is the sum of all bliss, the life that is eternal, without end. You are not to raise those entrusted to your care from temporal death to live once more this poor temporal life, but you are to pluck them out of their spiritual and eternal death and usher them into heaven."⁹

No room for apatheism when you preach that sweet gospel, for, as the old salvation song shouts robustly, "The old devil's crown has got to come down, and that with a hullabaloo!" For "hullabaloo" read "godly passion."

III.

Let me say it one more time—get out there with a godly passion to be a pious, faithful leader. There are two passages from the letters of St. Paul to his friends in Corinth that seem especially relevant. The first is in 1 Corinthians 4, where the apostle, in the very first verse, reminds them to consider him and other Christian pastors as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." And because Paul knows he is first and foremost a servant of Christ he thinks it a small matter that they should judge him and/or compare him with Apollos, Peter, or anyone else. In verse 4 he asserts: "He who judges me is the Lord."

How appropriate these words are for pastors today in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Because the postmodern man is more concerned with how he believes than what he believes, we are tempted in our evangelistic outreach to tickle people's ears, and there are many who think they therefore should be evaluated on the basis of how good they make people feel. One journalist responds: "Those entrusted with the care of souls ... need not be grim-faced doom-criers. But at least they ought not to be like railway signalmen who, in order not to 'upset' the passengers by giving them bad news, smile and wave as the train goes by, hurtling toward a washed-out bridge."¹⁰ And Margaret Thatcher, in her autobiography, reminds all leaders: "You cannot lead from the crowd."¹¹

If that temptation is there when we seek to build God's church, it is there also when we are called upon to make decisions in the area of church fellowship. Here too our decisions dare not be made on the basis of how the world will judge us and/or our church. If the world is harsh in its judgment, we need remember that "the offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11) has

⁹Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 37.

¹⁰James Hitchcock in *St. Louis Review*, January 31, 1986.

¹¹Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: Harper Collin, 1993), 23.

not ceased. Indeed, our Lord reminds us: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). And he does not call us to "damage control," "only to faithfulness." "Blessed are you when they shall revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:11-12).

Almost 150 years ago Charles Porterfield Krauth spoke these words:

The Lutheran Church can never have real dignity, real self-respect, a real claim on the reverence and loyalty of her children, while she allows the fear of denominations around her, or the desire for their approval, in any respect to shape her principles or control her actions. It is a fatal thing to ask, not, What is right? What is consistent? But, what will be thought of us? Better to die than to prolong a miserable life by such a compromise of all that gives life its value.

Yes, leaders, but mark it well, not tyrants for as strongly as Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 4 about being responsible first and foremost to the Savior, so kindly does he speak in 2 Corinthians 4 where he writes: "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (v.5). Servant leaders, as Paul explains in 1 Thessalonians 2 (v.7,11) where he talks about how gentle he was among them, "just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children" and comforted and exhorted them "as a father does his own children." Indeed! Those whom you will serve are more than clients to be serviced, surely not enemies to be overcome for the control of the church. They are those called to be saints, washed in the blood, beloved of the Lord.

How blessed we are to have our Lord Jesus Christ as the model of such leadership. See how patient he is with the ignorance, doubt, and even unbelief of the twelve. He, their Lord and Master, washes their feet. And even when he warns, there is love in his voice: "Simon, Simon.... I have prayed for you...." (Luke 22:31f.) He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

High expectations? Yes, certainly! And many will be the time when you, like the rest of us, will have to confess that we have fallen short of the mark. How wonderful that we can again turn to Jesus, whose godly passion for us led him to his bloody Passion for our sins and his glorious Easter triumph.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!