

CLBI Sunday Sample Sermon

Here is a sermon written at my request by Rev. Don Hall of Okotoks, Alberta. Don is a graduate of CLBI, CLC (Augustana), Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, and LTS in Saskatoon, SK. During his parish ministry, Don, Dora, and their family have endured their share of struggle as Don has battled leukemia. I am so glad that in these days while his health is on the upswing, Don agreed to write this sermon.

Don chose to use the Reformation Sunday texts so please adapt it as needed.

You will find that Don uses a number references to his Catholic upbringing and is very candid about the impact it still has on his life and ministry. Please feel free to insert your own illustrations and to adapt this manuscript as you wish. It is only meant to stir your creative juices and be a resource to you. I believe Don has been used to speak many nuggets of Biblical truth into the very divisive issue facing many mainline churches over human sexuality.

You will see by the end of this sermon that Don loves Jesus Christ, that he loves God's Word, the Bible, and that he loves the Church. (He also loves his family deeply!)

Thank you for taking the time to prepare a sermon for your congregation that clearly articulates the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for faith and life as God's people, and for calling your people to share the Gospel with a searching world.

God bless you!
Harold

Reformation Day, October 31, 2009

Lectionary: Psalm 46, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Sermon Title: The Word alone! The Church alone!

**“Momma put a Bible in my glove-box
and a hot home made apple pie- passenger seat.
Said you'll always be my baby
She planted a kiss and a couple of tears- on my cheek.
Daddy slipped me some travelling cash
with a map highlighted route on the dash**

**They weren't just saying goodbye
They weren't just seeing me off
They were just making sure
that I don't forget where I'm from.**

**Momma loved, Daddy worked
They lived their lives just to make sure
I know my way back home.”**

Lyrics from “My Way Back Home” by the High Valley Band, 2009.

I remember the uninviting flat landscape travelling from the west into Camrose. It was the late summer of 1977 and this city boy from Catholic background, in his mid-20's with hippie length hair, was about to enter a Lutheran Bible School, much to the chagrin of my devoted Catholic mother, and the dismay of my Anglican born father turned Catholic for the sake of marriage. Don't they have Catholic Bible schools, Mom asked. Well, I imagine they do Mom but it's just that I feel called to go to Camrose. Before I completed my 2 year program I found myself reaffirming my Christian baptism and being welcomed as a Lutheran. It was April 1, 1979. Yeah, it was kind of funny. That day also saw the reception of a mother and her child. Many thought we were a "package."

In those two years I was introduced to a Lutheran community dedicated not only to the study of the Scriptures but a devotion to our Lord Jesus that began at the break of day until the set of evening sun. It was enhanced by a local Lutheran pastor whose commitment to feeding the flock included a mid-week pancake breakfast and the breaking open of the word of God in the Gospel of John. Truly, if there was a community that lived "sola scriptura" (word alone) it was there. Yes, it was a "conservative" approach to the Scriptures, although it was certainly understood that the text was to be taken sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes both. What I quickly learned was that the Scriptures could never mean what they never meant in the first place. I also learned the importance of the community and how easily an individual believer could get caught up in some private interpretation of Scripture without the correction of wise teachers. That is not to say that differences in interpretation were stifled, simply that they were tested by the "doctrine" accepted by the community. That community also reflected the norms of a larger body that we call Lutheran. It in turn confesses its allegiance to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church (Nicene Creed).

Today Lutherans "celebrate" Reformation Sunday. Mind you we are the only ones who actually mark it on our church calendar. Of course other Christians are aware of it, especially our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. It is a peculiar day as it, unlike other festivals on the calendar, celebrates an event, a movement, a protest, that shook the church of the 16th century. It's immediate side-effects well chronicled, and its late effects are still in play.

Lutherans were born critics. It's in our theological DNA. We protested against mother Rome but we also contested other Christian movements, such as the Anabaptists and the Reformed. We seem to have settled somewhere in what has been dubbed "the radical middle." We never abandoned the Mass nor the Sacraments (we could quibble over the number but we retained the incarnational foundation to "the means of grace," that is, as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, so too the Scriptures and the Sacraments were written, spoken, made visible, as means to reveal grace and truth) which gave us at least the veneer of being Catholic. As the saying goes, you can leave your roots but your roots never leave you. On the other hand, we stood shoulder to shoulder with other "protestors" who rejected the primacy of Rome as the teaching authority and transferred that to the Scriptures alone. We quickly ran into a problem as each interpreted the Scriptures differently, so much so that we fractured to the point we can barely number the denominational and sectarian movements that have arisen since. Alas, "sola scriptura" sounds good but in practice it didn't work. Each did what was right in their own eyes.

That doesn't make the Scriptures wrong, but our approach to them is wrong. The Protestant Revolution, as maintained in Alistar McGrath's, "Christianity's Dangerous Idea" is that individuals can not only read the Bible devotionally but interpret the Bible for themselves. Everybody's doing it! The danger of course is theologically transmitted disease. What happens when the Spirit is divorced from the word, and then that is passed from one to another. As Martin Luther said, we have those who have "swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all!" It is that same kind of thing when we hear today that the Spirit is doing a "new thing" in the realm of human sexuality. The Lutheran caution, historically, has always been to measure that new thing on the basis of the word of God. That is, the Spirit may indeed do a new thing but that new thing would be in keeping with the old thing. It is the primary reason why the New Testament goes to such lengths to present the "new thing"- Jesus Christ himself- in fulfillment of the Scriptures. And also one reason why the Church selected Matthew as the first Gospel, a strategic bridging of the old with the new. Count the times Matthew says "in fulfillment of" and that Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Mt.5:17). The idea that the Holy Spirit, whose primary mission is to bring to remembrance all that Christ taught us (Jn.14:26), is out there doing something manifestly new, that is, different than what the word of God teaches is simply false. In fact we may be eating the same feathers Luther warned about.

So, what are we to do? The Church came first, not the Bible. Well, at least the Bible we now have, inclusive of the writings in the New Testament. Of course the "Old" Testament was scripture for Jesus and the early church. Jesus however called forth his disciples to form his church and gave them authority, in his name, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching (Matt 16 and 28) before the New Testament was formed. This "church" had the authority to interpret and apply the scriptures for the sake of God's mission.

When I say "church" it is meant in our context as well, inclusive of all Christian believers in Jesus Christ, baptized into his body, which is, by definition, one universal Church, though we rightly acknowledge its different parts. Together we are entrusted with God's mission to bring the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed "that the world may know" that there is a God in heaven who so loved the world that he gave his One and Only.

Christians who now find themselves sitting under some denominational shingle that puts the Bible "first" have discovered that others, with equal conviction and obvious faith in Jesus, nonetheless emphasize some doctrine, experience, or lifestyle that is "essential" to their understanding of the Gospel. We all put the Bible "first" but somehow we arrive with different, even conflicting, positions. How can that be?

When I first met my wife-to-be she was of the belief that Lutherans, and worse, Lutherans from Catholic background, were not Christians. She was Mennonite. Mennonite Brethren. Charismatic Mennonite Brethren! Having met me she faced a dilemma. I sounded like a Christian. Walked like a Christian. Looked like a Christian. Perhaps I was! I now like to say, "I'm a Catholic serving Lutherans married to a Mennonite!" When I first came to CLBI I was dubbed the "Pope." When I went to Seminary and assisted in my first chapel one of the professors came up to me after service and said, "You must be from Catholic

background.” What had I done?! All he noticed was that, unlike my counterpart (and senior), at the time of the prayers I turned my body to the cross. On internship I actually gained a convert. After the Reformation Sunday message he said that he never understood the word “catholic” in that way before but as a Lutheran he could now speak the word. Those were the days when some congregations were striking out the word “catholic” from the Creed in the “new” Lutheran Book of Worship.

In all these examples one thing is for sure, it was never the Bible and me alone. Whether it was my wife and I, or a bible school, or theological seminary, it was always about the Bible and others, the community that loved and searched the scriptures, examining them daily “to see if these things were so”(Acts 17:11). What things? “This Jesus,” the one who suffered, died, and rose again, “whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:3). Jesus said that a search of the scriptures would reveal to us eternal life in him (Jn.5:39) and in the post-resurrection appearances, as he removed the veil from their vision, “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” and how it was written in the law, the prophets, and the psalms, that the Christ should suffer and rise from the dead, “and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to the nations” (Luke 24:44-47).

Have we, as Christian people, as a Church, lost our first love? When John spoke to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev.1:4) he gave each a commendation before he named three specific problems that needed their attention. First, they had abandoned their “first love”(2:4). Second, they tolerated false teaching (2:14,24). Third, they were “lukewarm”(3:16), a condition that resulted from the pursuit of prosperity and the rampant individualism it promoted. Is there any better description as to what plagues much of the Church today? Is there any better answer than what the Emmaus disciples learned “Did our hearts not burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”(Lk.24:32)

Who then is equipped to be the interpretive guide? Rome has a “teaching magisterium” that speaks to the “faith and morals” of the Church, but Protestants have relied on on a dangerous idea, that individual believers can interpret the Bible. Frankly, that has led to chaos but it also gave the impetus to global missions. This dangerous idea has been a mixed blessing. Mind you, Catholic adherence to the “magisterium” is not exactly at an all-time high. I remember my mother commenting on her lack of following the Church's teaching on contraception. Mom was going to have two children and no more, regardless of the Church's teaching. If it meant being a “poor Catholic” she said, then so be it. Have you ever noticed that about Catholics and Protestants. Catholics will identify themselves as a “lapsed Catholic,” a “recovering Catholic,” a “non-practising Catholic,” a “cradle Catholic,” even a “poor Catholic” but they are still “Catholic.” Protestants will say, “I was Pentecostal, now I'm Anglican” or “I was Lutheran, now I'm Alliance” or “I was something and now I'm nothing.” Mom also understood that the Church had every right to state its teaching and ask its people to embrace and live out the faith, and here it is, not according to their conscience but according to the teaching of the Church. Here “we” stand, not here “I” stand. And there is the rub is it not?

For all the fanfare of “sola scriptura” it still takes a community, an “authority” to say yea or nay to its teaching. It was the Church that gave us the Bible. The Church determined which books were in and which were out. The four Gospels were not selected from a list of equals but because those four circulated in the early church with “apostolic authority.” Other gospels were not “lost” but “false.” The “canon” was closed- nothing more gets in, then again, nothing gets out- not even James, that “straw epistle” which Luther had no time of day for, not to mention the exotic and

mysterious book of Revelation.

When the Ethiopian official was on his way home from Jerusalem he was met by Philip, a divine rendezvous that would see the Gospel into Africa. He was reading out loud the prophet Isaiah not knowing what he was saying. "Do you understand what you are reading?" asked Philip, to which the official replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:30-31). Indeed, unless someone guides. On our own, we don't get it. We need Christian community. We need the Scriptures. We need above all else our first love, Jesus Christ, and one another.

If we want to speak to the culture then let's follow Simone Weil, a French Christian philosopher and mystic, whose writings led me to begin a search of the Scriptures, who says, "to be relevant one must speak eternal truths." The older term for that is what playwright Eugene O'Neil called "eternal verities." In other words, first things that last. Church leaders have gone after the self-esteem movement, prosperity doctrine, faith teaching, positive thinking, even holy laughter. Christian media guru, Dan Wooding, says that while we were trying to be relevant Dan Brown went out and wrote a novel called "The Da Vinci Code" -a fictional account about the origins of Christianity that sold millions. Whatever you may think of the book it at least tells us that people are asking serious questions about the beginnings of the faith, how it came to be that Jesus was considered divine, and the validity of genuine faith in God. Are these not the bread and butter of what we proclaim and teach? The Scriptures are not only the Church's book for us, but for the world, written that we may believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn20:31)

We do not need to be more relevant. We need to be more bold, to say so. To rekindle that among Christians means a return to the Scriptures and to our first love. St. Jerome said "that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." We owe it to the world, that God so loves, to tell his story, over and over again. Let us lay aside our political ideologies and cultural agendas. They cause us nothing but division and heartache, and worst of all, a loss of confidence.

We want our church to be of one mind, one voice, on matters of first importance. Every congregation, every church gathering, every church convention, every bible school, every theological institution, are to proclaim in word and sacrament, eternal truths, the good news of Jesus Christ, yesterday, today, and forever. And it's okay folks to be people of the Book. A momma who puts a Bible in her son's glove-box, as the songwriter says, so that he may always know his way back home. Whether it's in our bulletins or a hard copy in the pews, projected on a screen, read from a lectionary or via the internet, let us not underestimate its power to touch the lives of others. The Dead Sea Scrolls are on display at the Royal Ontario Museum. Included in that display is the oldest written version on parchment of the 10 Commandments, likely inscribed a generation before the birth of Christ. Dan Rahini, President for gallery development at the Museum, had this to say: "I'm very jaded and a total pagan but I stopped dead in my tracks the first time I saw it." The Church is entrusted with a sacred treasure, a holy deposit, which speaks to eternal truths, chief of which is the revealing of God's Son, Jesus Christ, for the world. We are not to be ignorant of the scriptures, but informed by them so that our knowledge of Christ increases our faith and makes us bold to witness to others.

Martin Luther, also a hymn writer, wrote:

**“Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word;
Curb those who by deceit or sword
Would wrest the kingdom from your Son
And bring to nought all he has done.**

**Lord Jesus Christ, your power make known,
For you are Lord of lords alone;
Defend your holy Church, that we
May sing your praise triumphantly.
(Lutheran Book of Worship. No.230. Verses 1,2)**

The hymn speaks of both Word and Church, neither of which can stand alone. They need each other. The Word needs the Church to bring guidance, the Church needs the Word to guide it. Sola scriptura and sola ecclesia. The word alone, the church alone. Together, we stand, divided, we fall. Amen.