

Ephesians 4:11-13

Thanksgiving Sunday (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Luke 17:11-19

A Gift for His Church

October 10, 2021

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

One pastor writes about common conversations among members of the Lutheran Church:

“What did you think of the pastor's sermon?” “It was ok.”

“What did you think of the pastor's Bible class?” “It was ok.”

“How was the pastor's catechism class?” “It was ok.”

“What did you think of the pastor's visit?” “It was ok.”

This pastor rightly notes that there are times when the work pastors do is considered to be more than just ok. At other times, even the work of the best of pastors may be deemed to be downright deficient. Most of the time, however, it is just blandly “ok.” Considering the power of God's Word to create faith in those who hear it and to save those who believe it, one would hope for a more lively response to the presentation of that Word! After all, what is our usual response to displays of God's power in nature? If you are sitting on your porch, watching lightning flash across the sky, do you simply look at it and think, “that was ok”. If we witness a solar or lunar eclipse, or when we marvel at the stars in the heavens that God put in place, do you look at these things and think, “it was ok”? Again, as this brother in the ministry noted, when pastors bring the Word of God to His people—through sermons and classes and bible studies, we hope that people will feel a greater response to the Word than simply saying, “that was ok.”

The background of the little abbreviation “ok” is tied to a deliberate misspelling of “all correct” (oll korrekt) as a joke in a Boston newspaper. It has come to mean that something is passable, adequate, or acceptable. But what if we used that abbreviation for the wonderful power that Christ has given to His church in the Office of the Keys? If the abbreviation ‘ok’ is short for Office of the Keys, then when people say: “What did you think of the pastor's sermon?” “It was OK!” Now this would not mean that the sermon or the bible class was just routinely adequate, or passable but that it was a demonstration of the Office of the Keys, a powerful declaration of the Word of God, bringing the assurance of forgiveness in Christ, and thereby unlocking the door of heaven itself. The faithful pastor doesn't just talk about forgiveness; he doesn't simply show where the passages on forgiveness are found in the bible. The pastor owes it to his people to be sure that his preaching and teaching and ministry to God's people comforts troubled hearts and loosens the chains of burdened souls, as he unlocks the door of heaven through the ministry of the Gospel.

Over the past few weeks, we have been focussing on the Office of the Keys, that *special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.* (SC, Office of the Keys) After His resurrection, Jesus charged His church with the work it is to do as He tells the disciples: **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”** (Luke 24:46-47, ESV) St. Paul tells us that **“Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”** (2 Corinthians 5:18-19, ESV)

To help His church carry out that office, God has provided it with a precious gift. He has given His church the pastors who shepherd His flock. He has given pastors to equip the saints and build up the body of Christ. That is what our text tells us today. If we go back, just a few verses before our text, Paul tells us: **“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”** (Ephesians 4:8 - ESV) Paul then describes those gifts in our text: *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*

On this Thanksgiving Sunday we stop and think about all the gifts that God has given us by His grace. He has provided us with all that we need to support this body and life. He has given us the blessings of forgiveness and life through the suffering, death and resurrection of God the Son, Jesus Christ. He has blessed us by bringing us into His family through Holy Baptism and surrounding us with brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We have every reason for thanksgiving! While it may seem a bit self-serving, I urge you to also give thanks for a special gift He has given to His church: the pastors and workers who serve in His name, at His command.

The office of the pastor is wholly linked to the Office of the Keys. We read that question from the catechism which asks, *“How does the church publicly exercise the Office of the Keys?”* The answer is based on God’s gift to His church: *“The Christian congregation by the command of Christ calls pastors to carry out the Office of the Keys publicly in His name and on behalf of the congregation. The pastoral office is a divine institution.”*

All Christians serve the Lord under the Office of the Keys as part of the priesthood of all believers. Peter says: ***But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*** (1 Peter 2:9 - ESV) God has called you into His kingdom by faith. He uses you to show His glory to the world. Led by the Holy Spirit, the priesthood of believers now calls qualified men from within their ranks to serve as pastors in the public ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The call of the congregation does not make the pastor an employee of the church. Congregations do not ‘hire’ a pastor. Rather, they support him and care for his needs so that he may be among them as the Lord’s servant. The pastor serves as the Lord’s representative, bringing His Word and the declaration of His forgiveness to His people. He serves them in the name of the Lord. The word pastor is a word that means shepherd. It is a beautiful title, reminding those who serve that they have been entrusted by the Good Shepherd with the task of caring for God’s people. In the Old Testament, God speaks against the false prophets who were leading His people astray. He says: ***I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.*** (Jeremiah 23:4 - ESV) Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus: ***Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*** (Acts 20:28 - ESV) The risen Lord commands Peter to ***“Feed my lambs.”*** (John 21:15 - ESV) Pastors owe it to their people to preach both Law and Gospel to provide them with the care that Christ Himself wants for His flock.

There is a poem by Karl Rahner which says: *The [Pastor] is not an angel sent from heaven. He is a man chosen from among men, a member of the Church, a Christian. Remaining man and Christian, he begins to speak to you the Word of God. This Word is not His own. No, he comes to you because God has told him to proclaim God's Word. Perhaps he has not entirely understood it himself. Perhaps he adulterates it. But he believes, and despite his fears he knows that he must communicate God's Word to you. For must not some one of us say something about God, about eternal life, about the majesty of grace in our sanctified being; must not some one of us speak of sin, the judgement and mercy of God? So my dear friends, pray for him, carry him so that he might be able to sustain others by bringing to them the mystery of God's love revealed in Christ Jesus.*

Those who are called to be shepherds serve the congregation by bringing them the Word of God. Paul tells young Pastor Timothy: ***preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*** (2 Timothy 4:2-5 - ESV)

God gives the gift of pastors to His church ***to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*** God strengthens and guides His flock in their lives as His people through the preaching of the Word and through the assurance of forgiveness. As the pastor serves, he carries out the Office of the Keys among God’s people. He declares to the flock the wonderful love of the Lord who came to die for us. He assures God’s people of the life and victory that is ours through Christ’s resurrection. He also works with the people of God to carry the good news of the Saviour’s cross and empty tomb into all the world. That is an important truth that we must remember—there is a part for both pastor and people to work together. Paul says to the Thessalonians: ***And we also thank God constantly***

for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thessalonians 2:13 - ESV) My responsibility is to bring you God's Word in its truth and purity. It is your responsibility to hear that Word and through the Holy Spirit to respond to it in faith and take it to heart. Strengthened by that Word, you go out to serve God, carrying His mercy in Christ to your friends and family, helping them to know the joyous assurance of forgiveness and life through Him who died and rose for us. Thanks be to God for this mutual ministry and service that flows from His gifts to us—and from His gifts to His Church. Amen.