

“Scum of the World”

In the name of him who has engraved us on the palms of his hands, dear friends in Christ: I've mentioned before that there are some biblical texts I don't particularly care to preach. Those dealing with Christian stewardship, for example, and in particular those that speak of our responsibility to financially support the ongoing mission of the church are awkward. Why? Because I know the subject has been tarnished by the multitude of false preachers and greed ministries out there who have led people to believe that “all the church wants is your money”. I've heard it. You've heard it. And I don't know, maybe you've even felt that way sometimes. So it makes it hard for me to stand here in the pulpit and talk about it. I have the feeling from the get go that it's going to be an uphill battle, that you'll be wary and defensive, and that you might not be very pleased with what I have to say. But do you know what? Despite this, when such a lesson comes along in the reading series I usually preach it anyway. I do this because it's part of the whole counsel of God. And it's my job to proclaim to you God's whole counsel so that you develop into whole, complete, mature Christians. It doesn't matter if it's awkward for me. It's wrong to cherry-pick the texts that are easiest to preach and to leave the sensitive topics alone. In fact, because I'm aware of my reluctance, I often force myself to choose the harder texts. With this in mind, I chose the Epistle for today's message.

But relax: it's not about stewardship—at least, not the kind that will have you reaching to guard your pocketbook. No, this text has to do with the office of the ministry in the church, and how Christians ought to think about the men who hold that office. What makes this kind of text awkward is that for a minister to speak on the ministry ... well, it can sound rather self serving. The concern is that you will misconstrue the message to be one of self promotion or personal complaint. So let me make this clear from the outset: when treating this topic, I'm speaking in general – not about *my* ministry; but about *the* ministry. Ministers come and go. Those of you who are older have been served by half a dozen or more that you can remember. If you're younger, you'll be served by several over your lifetime – though it occurred to me that those who haven't yet graduated from high school probably don't remember a time when I wasn't pastor here and may tend to think I'm part of the furniture. I'm not. So, see what you have to look forward to? You won't be stuck with me forever. But in the providence of God who has promised to care for his church, you will always have a pastor – a man who holds the office of the ministry. The question before us concerns the relationship of the pastor to the congregation he serves, and how they ought to view him.

So, that having been said, we go into the text itself, which comes to us once again from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, which we've been following for the past several weeks now. And as we've been going along in it, we've discovered that the reason Paul wrote to them was because the church at Corinth was completely messed up and he was trying to set them straight. Foremost among their many problems was that they were divided into several warring factions. Each group claimed to be the most spiritual. They thought of themselves as the best and most mature Christians and of those in the other groups as being something decidedly less.

And as we've also seen, these various groups each identified themselves with one of the pastors who had served the congregation in its brief history. The church was only six or seven years old at this point. Paul had started it when he was in Corinth on his second mission trip. He was there for about 18 months, teaching them the basics of the Christian faith – or as he said it, “laying the foundation”. After Paul left to spread the Gospel elsewhere and start new churches, a man named Apollos served the congregation for a time. He was a wonderful speaker – people just loved to hear him – but he wasn't the deep theologian that Paul was.

Then Peter was in the city for a while, and he too preached there. No doubt he was popular because of his celebrity status as the senior disciple of Jesus. By the time Paul writes, it seems that yet another pastor was serving the church; but he really had his hands full because of all the infighting. And like I said, the opposing groups each identified themselves (wrong-headedly) with one of the ministers who had served there. So there was a Paul party, an Apollos party, a Peter party, and so on. The factions somehow got it into their head that these servants of God were in competition with each other and that their own group was superior to the others because of the man they claimed as their teacher and spiritual guide.

Responding to this sad situation, Paul wrote, no, you don't understand. Apollos, myself, Peter, your present pastor – we're all on the same team. We've all been working toward the same goal: to build up your faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. *He's* what the church is about. *He's* the one who died for you. *He's* your teacher and spiritual guide. Your allegiance belongs to *him*. There is only one God, one Savior, one church. So stop this silly "I belong to Apollos" and "I belong to Paul" nonsense. Stop comparing and contrasting us. You belong to Jesus. You were baptized into his death, burial, and resurrection. We ministers – all of us – have been working to build your faith on him.

Okay, we get that; but I need to tell you that in addition to the factions I've already mentioned there was another group in the Corinthian congregation. They were being led by people who were billing themselves as "super apostles". Where they came from is anybody's guess; but it seems that whenever Paul started a church and got it going, it wasn't long before some self-appointed gatecrashers showed up and tried to hijack the operation. And we should expect that: where the Holy Spirit is at work trying to build God's kingdom, Satan is going to turn up there and try to tear it down. Anyway, these so-called super apostles had it in for Paul and his teachings. They hated him and said some terrible things about him; but they couldn't exactly begin there. After all, most of the congregation knew Paul and respected him. So what they did was to plant the idea that "Paul meant well enough when he taught you about Jesus; but his doctrine and views are only entry level stuff. It's for beginners. Ah, but this church is ready for the next step. You Corinthians are really something. You've already gone far beyond your need for Paul and his silly notions. You guys are on the way to true spiritual enlightenment, and we're the ones who are going to get you there."

Now, that is a very tempting thought. Who doesn't want to be enlightened – and flattered at the same time? And you can see how this idea is going to appeal especially to those in the Apollos and Peter factions who are already looking for reasons to put Paul down. It makes their group look better. And once the idea took root, and it did, it wasn't hard to go from "Paul's doctrine is entry level" to "Paul's doctrine is wrong – he led you astray."

So this is what Paul is hearing in reports from the congregation, that a lot of the members had turned on him and believed him to be a false teacher. They were parroting the insults and harsh judgments of the self-appointed "super apostles". And if you put yourself in Paul's shoes, you can see how this would hurt. Here he had risked life and limb to bring them the saving Gospel of Jesus. He patiently worked with them, and suffered persecution on their account from a number of sources. He loved them and genuinely cared for them. He'd shown them that in a hundred different ways. And now many of them hated him. If Paul had been a lesser man, he might have washed his hands and said, "Fine. Nuts to you. Follow your super apostles straight to hell. I don't care." But Paul didn't do that. He couldn't. His heart was still filled with the Savior's love for them. And because he had first preached Jesus to them, he thought of himself as their spiritual father. And I suppose that just about every loving parent hears at some point these angry words from a rebellious child in need of discipline: "I hate you."

It's in this context, then, that speaking of himself and the other ministers who had faithfully proclaimed Christ to them, Paul says, "This is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." So ministers are stewards; and that's an interesting term. A steward is a servant who takes care of something for somebody else. He's not the owner. But he is one the owner places in charge and invests with authority to carry out his duties on his behalf. So, the idea is this: the church belongs to Christ. It's his bride. And to the church belong the mysteries of God: namely the Gospel itself, the proclamation of the Word, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper through which the Gospel is delivered, and what we call the *absolution*, Christ's direct word of forgiveness – all these things belong to the church. These are what create and sustain her. The minister is the steward who is appointed by Christ to employ these gifts publicly in the church on his behalf. So, while the pastor does this work in and for the good of the church, strictly speaking, he doesn't work *for* the church. He's not an employee of the congregation. Rather his allegiance is to Christ. That's for whom he works and to whom he's accountable.

And this is why Paul continues, "I'm not worried about your judgment of me and my ministry. What concerns me is what Jesus thinks about it. He's the one whose evaluation counts. He will judge me. Now, to the best of my knowledge, I've done right by you. I've taught you the truth. I served you as best I knew how. But just because my conscience is clear, that doesn't get me off the hook. I'm waiting to hear what Jesus will say when I stand before him. That's when all will be revealed. That's when what is hidden now will be made known. Then those who built up the church for Christ will be rewarded and those who did damage to it will be condemned."

So, what Paul is saying is that one ought to be very slow to judge a man whom Christ has called to be a minister in his church. You cannot read his mind and cannot truly know his motives. And as has been said, he doesn't work for you in the sense that you are his boss; at least he shouldn't be because as Jesus said, a man can't serve two masters. Either he will be trying to please Christ or the members of the church. A minister who does the latter might make himself very popular and well loved by a congregation; but then he isn't serving Christ. And a minister who is serious about serving Christ will invariably run afoul of members of the church. Why? Because people are sinners, and sinners don't like to hear the Law of God condemning them. And at the same time sinners are self righteous, so they don't like to hear that the cross of Christ alone is what saves them. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an offense. And those who proclaim it will necessarily offend people. Like the Lord Jesus himself, those who stand in his stead proclaiming his Gospel will be hated. They'll be reviled and held in disrepute and called the "scum of the world". This is true of all Christians; but it's especially true of Christ's ministers because they are the ones charged with caring for and feeding the flock of God – which is why you should to be loath to pass judgment on one of them.

All right, lest I be misunderstood, it needs to be said that Paul is not saying that Christ's ministers are beyond all human criticism, and that they are not in some ways accountable to the congregations they serve. First and foremost, in matters of doctrine the sheep must judge the shepherd. In the Lutheran church we are blessed to have very clear standards of Christian doctrine and our pastors must teach accordingly. If a minister is teaching things contrary, he is to be confronted – first to correct him because he may not understand it's wrong; but if he persists after correction, then to remove him from office. And there are other areas in which he must be judged. If he is grossly immoral, for example, and openly living in sin, and if he refuses to repent of it, then he cannot serve the church. If he violates his oath not to speak of sins confessed to him in private, or if he can't perform his duties, say for health reasons or mental illness, well, then he needs to stand down. And if he won't do it voluntarily, he needs to be forced to. In such things it's entirely appropriate to judge your ministers.

Above and beyond that, you should apply more caution. And remember too that while by virtue of his office your minister stands in the stead of Christ, he isn't Christ. He's a sinner just like you. He has selfish thoughts and desires and often acts on them. He struggles with anger and pride and lust and covetousness and all the rest of it. He makes mistakes and commits errors of judgment. He's a sinner – a sinner in need of God's grace and forgiveness just as much (and in my case probably more) than you. And for that reason he needs your Christian love and forbearance as well as your gentle word of rebuke when called for and your forgiveness too.

And there are other things to consider. It often happens that people are quick to criticize the way a pastor handles a situation because they assume he knows everything about it that they do. This is rarely the case. The pastor isn't likely to be on the grapevine of gossip, and almost never knows "what everybody knows". On the other side, people sometimes think *they* know the whole story when they don't. There are times when the minister is privy to facts that he is not free to share. My point is that unless you know for sure what's going on in his mind when he does something that strikes you as odd or inconsistent, it's best to assume that the pastor is acting in good faith on the information he has. And if you think he needs to be clued in, do it. As helpful as it would be, he hasn't got a red phone on his desk that's a direct line to God. On top of all this, this needs to be said: if your pastor is something less than you think he should be, if he's not serving as well as you think he could, then help him to become better. He's a work in progress just like you. Luther once said it would take him at least 100 years to master the art of being a teacher of the church – and Luther was a genius. The rest of us ministers would take a lot longer. So be patient, be helpful and supportive, don't be afraid to correct him if he needs it, and pray for him, that he might become a better at what he does for all the people he serves.

As Jesus says in today's Gospel, your heavenly Father knows what you need and he provides it. What he desires is that you would seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. These things are found only in the church that Christ our Lord purchased with his blood and into which even today he breathes his holy life through his Word and Spirit. He does this work largely through the ministers that he has called and appointed as the stewards of his divine mysteries. To the world at large, and sadly to many even in the church, they are dishonored and reviled, considered the scum of the world. Don't allow Satan to entrap you that way now or ever, because by it he means to lead you away from the very Gospel that saves. Instead, confessing our own sins in this regard and receiving Christ's forgiveness, let's all resolve to be less critical, more supportive, and even more thankful to God for all the stewards he calls to serve his church. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!