

Why Do We Have Pastors?

Do you ever do something a certain way just because that's the way you've always done it? I always come to church a half an hour before it starts. The last congregation I served only had one service at 9 am. So every Sunday for nine years, at 8:30 I walked from the parsonage to the church. Well, guess what happened one of the first Sundays that I was here? I got up. I was dressed and ready to go. And at 8:30, my wife walked into the living room and asked, "Why are you here?" As I ran out the door, I heard the phone ringing. It was the deacon calling to find out if I was coming.

Sometimes, we get used to doing things a certain way. Now, that doesn't mean that it's wrong to do them that way. But knowing why we do things the way we do helps us know when to change and when to keep things the same. So for the next several weeks, I'm going to do something different. Instead of choosing one of the assigned readings for the Sunday to preach on, I'm going to focus on something that we Wisconsin Synod Lutherans do and ask why. My goal is not to radically change what we do. Nor is it to blindly defend everything we do. Rather, my goal is for us to understand our practices so that we can work at our mission to the best of our ability. I hope and pray that this sermon series gives us something to talk about as we continue to examine our congregation and the ways we preach the gospel here.

The very first question I want to ask is: **why do we have pastors?** I mean, why do I get to stand up here and ask the question? Why do I get to talk for twenty minutes and you don't? The easy answer is because God tells us to. God instituted the holy ministry and every congregation needs to have a public ministry. Now, it won't always look the way it looks here at Peace, but the pastorate is the most basic form of public ministry. And God calls pastors – and teachers, too.

I.

But why did God command that public ministry? What was he trying to achieve? That is really the key question. **Why do we have pastors? To build the faith of God's people.** That's job one. In fact, that's why we preach and teach and administer the sacraments. It's also why we do all the other things that you think of a pastor doing. That means that in a very real sense, pastors are servants of God's people, the same way that doctors are servants. A doctor's job is to do what's best for you. So it is with pastors. In fact, Lutherans have often thought of a pastor as a kind of spiritual doctor. Our work is to care for the soul.

But like a doctor, taking care of God's people doesn't always mean doing what they want you to do. God called me here to take care of your souls and build up your faith. To accomplish the mission he gave me, first and foremost, I have to be his servant. Your doctor works for you. You pay him through your insurance company. But you don't set the standards for what proper care is. He answers to legal authorities to keep his license to serve you. Pastors answer to a higher authority than their congregation. We answer to God. God knows what you need. A doctor does no good for his patient if he's not willing to face the tears and the sorrow that come from hearing that there's something wrong. He or she has to tell their patient what's really happening. So a pastor has to be willing to say what God says to God's people even when it's hard to hear.

That's not easy to do. One temptation that most pastors face is sinful pride. Like everyone else, pastors want to be liked. We want to be thanked and applauded for the work we do. Sometimes, our pride causes us to be unwilling to listen to criticism. Sometimes, sinful pride leads us to think that we should get the credit for whatever blessings happen here. And sometimes, that pride can lead us to despair when God doesn't bless our work the way we think he should. Either way, we're forgetting that the power to build up faith isn't in us. It's in Christ. St. Paul says that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. The good news about Jesus gives faith and strengthens faith. The most I do is present that good news. But it's really easy to forget that truth and make failure or success all about me and what I've done and how good I am at it. Most pastors need to regularly kneel before the throne of grace and ask God to forgive his sinful arrogance.

Then we need to remember what God has called us to do. We need to ask ourselves the same basic question about every decision we make, about every interaction we have with our members and with outsiders, about every program that we invest time in: does this help to build up the faith of the people of God? Am I building bridges to my members so that they will talk to me about the things that challenge faith, or am I driving them away? Am I putting the time necessary into sermons and classes and worship planning and visits so that God's people hear the good news about Jesus clearly? Do they recognize their own lives in the message I

bring? Or am I talking about Jesus in such an artificial way that they don't connect the message to their own lives? It is the good news about Jesus that changes hearts. But God calls pastors to present that message. He calls us to use the gifts that he gives us to apply that message to God's people.

II.

There is enormous room for creativity and leadership in the ministry. But in the end, God calls us to do one thing: build up his people in their faith. And God has given the church one way to do that: the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Why do we have pastors? To preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.**

The whole church has the gospel. You have it just as much as I do and the Holy Spirit works through that gospel when you speak just as much as when I do. So you and I share one ministry. We are joined in God's plan. But God's church is like a body. If the whole body were an eye, St. Paul asks, where would the sense of hearing be? So in the church, if everyone were a mouth – if everyone were a preacher, an enormous amount of other work would never get done. But God gives the preachers, the pastors, the teachers to build up the members in their faith so they can do all that other work.

The only way for us to build each other is to preach the gospel. The gospel comes in two forms: the written and therefore spoken form and the visible form. The written and spoken form is the word. It's the Bible, especially its message that Jesus died and rose to take all our sins away. The visible part is the sacraments. That is the gospel, too. Last week, we baptized a baby in church. God in his marvelous grace and mercy combined his word with the water that I poured on little Matthew's head. In that moment when that water was poured, the Holy Spirit worked. He reached into that child's heart through the gospel. This coming week, I'll be making visits to our shut-ins. I'll offer them communion, just like I'll offer it here in church in the weeks to come. When you eat that little wafer, you receive the very body that Jesus offered on the cross to pay for your sins. When you drink that sip of wine, you receive the very blood that Jesus poured out to pay for your sins. And at that moment God says to you, "My child, all your sins are forgiven." God calls us pastors to proclaim those amazing words and to administer those sacraments.

Now, there are lots of ways pastors can preach the gospel. We preach sermons and lead the worship service. We teach Bible class and visit the sick and counsel with troubled members. In all those things, God sends us to show you Jesus. There's lots of room for creativity. I've been to WELS churches that incorporate multi-media presentations into the sermon itself. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Well, we might not all agree. But the standard should be whether or not it helps people to hear and understand the gospel. If it holds people's attention and it clearly points to Jesus, then it can be a good thing. But if the pastor does it so poorly that all people remember is how dumb that video was, that doesn't help. But at the same time, it's also true that if my sermons are so badly written or presented that you can't follow them, that's not preaching the gospel. If I spend so much time telling stories about my kids that I never tell you about Jesus, I'm not doing what God called me to do.

There are other things that pastors do that are less directly linked to the gospel. We go to lots and lots of meetings. We have a leadership role here in the congregation. Last year, when we were calling for our principal, every time we got declined, it was my job to read the letter. Then it was my job to help you trust that God works through the calling process. Isn't that building your faith? When the church council talks about budgets, when board of ed is reviewing financial aid applications, when the board of property and maintenance is planning our next arbor day, I'm usually there. All those support things happen so that this can happen and so that our teachers can teach our children about Jesus. We have to plan so that this time next year, we're still preaching the gospel here, if God allows this world to continue. So whether I actually need to be at all those meetings or not, every aspect of a pastor's work is connected to proclaiming the gospel.

That all sounds pretty good, right? But it's also pretty obvious. Why spend a whole sermon talking about it? Because even when God does something clear and obvious, our sinful natures can still mess it up. We pastors mess up God's plan for the ministry over and over again. There are endless ways that we show that we're sinners and we don't deserve our calls. But God's people struggle with the ministry, too. I think the first way that members show their sinful natures is that they forget to judge their pastors by the only standard that matters. They forget that for your spiritual good, a pastor has to be faithful to God's word even when it's unpopular. They can't just let bad practices slide. They can't just look the other way when members sin. They can't relax the rules for funerals and weddings because the only way to build people up is through the good news about Jesus. Bad practices and sinful choices always interfere with seeing Jesus.

Now, you have every right to ask your pastor why he's insisting on this or that decision and what the Bible actually says about it. But when God says something, especially something that's hard, it doesn't get us closer to Jesus to ignore it. That's sinful pride. That drives us away from Christ. Members sometimes struggle to see that. Sometimes they don't want to be reminded of what God says. Now, pastors and teachers can be equally guilty of that. But finally, it's sin to oppose our pastors when they are standing on God's word. It's sin to tear them down behind their backs because we don't like the choices they make or because we just don't like them personally. It's sin to make it harder for them to be faithful to the Lord because we don't want to be faithful. That sin deserves God's wrath in hell forever.

But God gave us the ministry to confront that sin and when we repent, to point us to Jesus. He died even for those sins. Jesus died and paid for every member who ever didn't want to listen to their pastor. Jesus died and paid for every time a member made their pastor's work harder because they listened to their own sinful nature. Jesus died and paid and he washed all that sin away. In love, he created the holy ministry so that in every congregation, there is someone to announce that forgiveness and build God's people up in faith. God loves you. He has forgiven you. He has sent pastors and teachers to you over and over again so that you know that truth and have peace.

That's finally why we have pastors. That's finally why pastors do all that we call them to do. No sinful human being is worthy of a call like that. No sinful human being can perfectly discharge the duties God gives. Certainly, no human being has the power to create or build faith. There is only one way for us to do that: the gospel, the power of God. May God give us faithfulness and creativity and courage as we preach and apply that gospel. May we all treasure the gift he gives us in the holy ministry. Amen.