

The Ministry of Reconciliation
Rev. Rolf David Preus
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Our topic is atonement. Atonement has to do with peace, reconciliation, being set at one with God and living under his favor. It is crucial that we understand the nature of this peace. False peace can disguise deep conflict that can flare up into open warfare without any warning. On the other hand, genuine peace, established by God and maintained by God, is as certain and sure as are God's promises.

The ministry of the Word and Sacraments is a divine institution. Jesus sent out the first pastors of the church. The Bible calls them bishops, presbyters, ministers, pastors, ambassadors, preachers, teachers, even angels. All of these titles need not confuse us. It's not as if each title signifies a different form of office. The office is what Jesus formed it to be when he sent out the first ministers.

In St. Matthew's Gospel he told them to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything he had commanded them. In St. Mark's Gospel he told them to preach the gospel to everyone in the world and to baptize. In St. Luke's Gospel he told them to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins to the whole world. In St. John's Gospel he told them to forgive and to retain sins. As we consider the words of our Lord Jesus sending out the first pastors of the church we see the harmony between his words and those of his apostles who defined the office as he did.

We cannot understand the ministry of reconciliation until we understand the doctrine of reconciliation. The minister's ministry is to administer what is given to him to administer. This should be obvious. But it is not. In both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism the power of the word of God must be

supplemented with a special power of the priest or minister. Protestants speak of being anointed. They cannot comfort themselves with the inherent efficacy of God's Word, so they pray for, claim, and point to signs that allegedly prove a special anointing of the Holy Spirit upon the preacher that will ensure the success of his preaching. Roman Catholics speak of the indelible spiritual character of the priest¹ without which he cannot function as a priest.

Lutherans take a different view. A critical feature of the office or ministry in Lutheran theology is the direction the ministry takes. The Roman priest offers up the sacrifice of the mass. His ministry is directed up toward God. The ministry within Protestantism does likewise. The direction is from earth to heaven. Not so, in Lutheranism. The ministry is directed from heaven to earth.

Listen to Luther describe the ministry in a sermon preached on the Third Sunday in Advent, 1521, on the words of St. Paul, "Let a man consider us as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." Luther writes:

This office is a service or ministry proceeding from Christ to us and not from us to Christ. Note this carefully; it is important. . . . The meaning of the verse, then, is: "Let every individual take heed not to institute another leader, to set up another Lord, to constitute another Christ. Rather be unanimously loyal to the one and only Christ. For we apostles are not your lords, nor your masters; we are not your leaders. We do not preach our own interests, nor teach our own doctrine. We do not seek to have you obey us, or give us allegiance and accept our doctrine. No, indeed. We are messengers and ministers of him who is your Master, your Lord and Leader. We preach his Word, enlist men to follow his commandments, and lead only into obedience. And in this light should you regard us, expecting of us nothing

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (online version) paragraph 1582.

else than to bring the message. Though we are other persons than Christ, yet you do not receive through us another doctrine than his; another word, another government, nor another authority than his. He who so receives and regards us, holds the right attitude toward us, and receives, not us, but Christ, whom alone we preach. But he who does not so regard us, does us injustice, discards Christ, the one true Leader, set up another in his stead and makes gods of us.²

On the one hand, Luther has a very high view of the ministry, claiming that the ministers speak with the voice of Christ himself. On the other hand, he has a very sober view of ministers. What makes the ministry precious is not the sanctity, strength, devotion, or success of the ministers. It is the gospel itself. Apart from the gospel there is no ministry.

The ministry does not consist in the minister choosing what he will serve. It is not his choice to make. The waiter at the restaurant serves the food that is prepared for him to serve. That's his job. Neither the preachers nor the hearers decide what is to be preached and heard. Faith doesn't activate the gospel. It receives it. The minister doesn't provide the catalyst to get the gospel to do its work. He preaches it and administers the sacraments that belong to it. Thus, to understand the ministry of reconciliation we don't first establish a generic doctrine of the ministry and then proceed onto a ministry specializing in reconciliation. No, to understand the ministry of reconciliation we must first learn the doctrine of reconciliation. Only then can we understand the ministry of reconciliation for until atonement is made there can be no ministry in the evangelical sense of the word.

Consider the structure of the Augsburg Confession. In article four we confess what the gospel of justification is. Then, in article five, we confess what the ministry of reconciliation is. This follows the pattern of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5. In

² Sermons of Martin Luther, Translated and Edited by John Nicholas Lenker, Volume VI, reprinted by Baker Book House, 1988, pages 66-67.

verse 18 Paul writes, “Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ.” He has reconciled us to himself. It is done. He goes on in the same verse, “And has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” First there is the reconciliation. Then there is the ministry of reconciliation. In the next verse Paul begins, “That is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them.” He refers back to what God in Christ did. He reconciled the world to himself. It is done.

Notice that intensive perfection and the extensive perfection of the atonement are both confirmed. Among Protestants in general, the intensive perfection of the atonement is affirmed by the Calvinists and the extensive perfection of the atonement is affirmed by the various Arminian or Methodistic bodies. Only the Lutherans affirm both. The intensive perfection of the atonement means that the atonement effects forgiveness. Nothing needs to be added to the atonement for forgiveness to be a reality. Paul joins the words “not imputing their trespasses to them” to the words “reconciling the world to himself.” Not imputing trespasses, which is the same as forgiving or justifying, is coterminous with reconciliation or atonement. Atonement and forgiveness go together. Those for whom Christ died and paid their debt are forgiven by means of that payment. That’s what Paul says. He teaches the intensive perfection of the atonement.

He also teaches the extensive perfection of the atonement. God reconciled the world, the whole world, to himself. Nothing in the text suggests that the world is to be limited to the elect. This is universal grace. Paul goes on to say, “And has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” There can be no word of reconciliation to proclaim until reconciliation between God and this world has been accomplished. All sins of all sinners are fully forgiven. God is at peace. Until this is the case, the minister has nothing to administer. The preacher has nothing to preach. There simply is no ministry of

reconciliation until reconciliation between God and this world has been achieved.

Since it has been achieved, Paul can go on to say:

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The plea to sinners to be reconciled to God is certainly not to do anything that might propitiate God for that has already been done. It is the invitation to faith. In inviting them to faith, to be reconciled to God, he then repeats the gospel of atonement and justification,

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The making of Christ to be sin and our becoming the righteousness of God in Christ are bound to each other, the latter being the logical consequence of the former. The coin has two sides. We call it the double imputation or, to use Luther's expression, the happy exchange. The imputing of sin to Christ and the imputing of Christ's righteousness to the sinner belong together. Atonement requires both. The personal reconciliation of sinners to God in the here and now is bound to what Christ accomplished for us in his vicarious obedience in death.

This is the pattern of thought of the Augsburg Confession. Article IV reads:

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God

imputes for righteousness death of his Son.in his sight (Rom. 3-4).³

When the text says, “Who by his death made satisfaction for our sins,” and we look back to the previous article to understand what this vicarious satisfaction accomplished, we see that he became a sacrifice “not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath.”

We distinguish between the various soteriological terms: atonement, redemption, propitiation, and justification. Clearly, they are not exact synonyms (if there is such a thing), but they all entail each other. Our theology can become calcified into unnecessarily rigid categories if we forget this. If Christ is the propitiation for your sins you are redeemed, you are reconciled to God, and you are justified. The vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus accomplished this.

This is why St. Paul summarizes and identifies Christian preaching with preaching Christ crucified. In speaking of Christ’s cross he is speaking of everything Jesus accomplishes for us by his vicarious suffering and death.

This is the gospel the preacher is to preach and this gospel has inherent power. The power of the gospel is the righteousness that avails before God, the righteousness that faith receives, the righteousness that brings with it the peace of the Prince of Peace.

There is a place, call it a mathematical point, where everything that Jesus did for us and everything the Holy Spirit does in us meets. It is a point of contact where the second and third articles of the Creed meet. This mathematical point is faith. It is a mathematical point because it has no dimension. We describe the doings of Jesus every time we preach the gospel. Indeed, if we don’t talk about Jesus, we aren’t preaching the

³ Tappert: page 30. All citations from the Lutheran Confessions are from The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959.

gospel. That has height, depth, width, and breadth. We could talk about Jesus for hours and just scratch the surface of the biblical testimony concerning him. We can also describe the work of the Holy Spirit within us. The greatest work is faith. You cannot see it or measure it, but it receives everything Christ has achieved for us and it flows into everything good we will ever do. Every Christian virtue follows faith and without faith everything we do is moral sin.

How does the Holy Spirit produce faith and its fruits in our lives? He does so by means of the word of God. The Holy Spirit regenerates. The word of God regenerates. The Bible speaks both ways. St. Paul in Romans 10 says that faith comes by hearing the word of God that is preached. St. Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 1. In St. John's Gospel Jesus says his words are spirit and he says he will send the Spirit and then he breathes the Spirit on the apostles. Thus, there is an inseparable bond between Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit and the word. The incarnate Word, the spoken Word, and the Holy Spirit go together.

When the Bible speaks of the word of God as a means of grace it usually is referring to the oral word. This is also so with the Lutheran Confessions. The Augsburg Confession (AC V) says that God established the preaching office for the purpose of our obtaining the faith through which we are justified. The Smalcald Articles (SA III VIII), in treating the topic of confession, identify enthusiasm as the source, strength, and power of all heresy.⁴ Luther writes:

In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before.⁵

This presents us with a practical problem. Since the Bible usually identifies the word through which the Holy Spirit calls

⁴ SA III VIII 9, page 313

⁵ SA III VIII 3, page 312

us to faith and sustains us in the faith as the oral or preached word, and since it is given to the ministers of the church to do the preaching, and since nobody should publicly preach, teach, or administer the sacraments in the church unless he is rightly called (Romans 10:15, AC XIV), and since this call entails ordination, should we conclude from the foregoing that without called and ordained pastors we don't have the Holy Spirit and are thus consigned to faithlessness? Must we conclude that, since the gospel is to be preached and preachers are to be sent that the gospel doesn't belong in the first instance to those who need to hear it but rather to those called to preach it?

Such a conclusion would be a denial of the gospel. Since we are justified by faith alone the means by which justifying faith is engendered must belong to the believers. If it didn't, justification would not be by faith alone. It would be by having a suitably called and ordained minister. A Lutheran understanding of the ministry places the doctrine of the ministry in a position subordinate to the doctrine of the atonement and justification.

Let me illustrate how this works out in practice by recounting a controversy of some one hundred and fifty years ago among the Norwegian Lutherans who had immigrated to America and settled in the American upper Midwest. It was one of several controversies that divided the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was a debate about the absolution. On the one side were Pietists, rather anticlerical to begin with, who argued that the pastor could not pronounce an unconditional absolution because he could not know if the penitent were truly penitent. On the other side were men, such as Herman Amberg Preus, who represented a more confessional perspective that held to a high view of the ministry. But how did the confessional side respond? If someone tells you that you may not do something God gave you to do, namely, forgive and retain sins, you might argue from the authority of the office. But that wasn't their primary argument. The confessional side did not argue for the efficacy

of the absolution by building up pastoral authority and certainly not by pitting pastoral authority against the authority of the laity, but by an appeal to the universal justification of all sinners.⁶ Since God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven all sinners all of their sins – and this is objectively true whether or not any sinner believes it – the pastor most certainly can pronounce an unconditional absolution on the penitent without having to ascertain whether he has faith. The efficacy of the unconditional absolution was grounded, not in pastoral authority, but in the vicarious atonement and objective justification of the world.

The foundation for the authority of the pastoral office is the objective truth of the atonement. The peace established by Christ and the ministry established by Christ are intimately bound. Nowhere is this more clearly taught than in John 20 where Jesus does two things at the same time. He shows them bodily evidence that he has atoned for the sins of the world and he establishes the preaching office. Let us read these familiar words and note the order of events:

Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

⁶ See Vivacious Daughter: Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation Among Norwegians in America, by Herman Amberg Preus, Edited and translated by Todd Nichol, The Norwegian-American Historical Association, Northfield, Minnesota, 1990, pages 157-160. See also Herman Amberg Preus, "The Justification of the World," 1874, from a larger lecture entitled, "Wisconsinism" translated by Rev. Herb Larson.

Jesus speaks words of peace. St. John, who was there and who is writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reports that when Jesus said “peace be with you” he showed them his hands and his side. This is not simply a matter of identification as to his person. It is specifically a reference to his work. He shows them bodily evidence of the vicarious atonement. He who died has risen. But more than that, he who was crucified is risen. It is not just dying and rising. It is being crucified and rising. For in the crucifixion, as Jesus bears in his body the sin of the world that is imputed to him, and as he suffers divine retribution against the human race, he is taking away all sin and pacifying God’s wrath and establishing peace between God and sinners. So he says, “Peace to you.”

He says “Peace to you at the same time that he establishes the preaching office. Pointing to the wounds he sustained in establishing this peace he identifies himself as the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but the sins of the whole world and it is at this moment that he establishes the pastoral office. We mustn’t think of the pastoral office except as Jesus has established it.

The establishment of the pastoral office is not for the purpose of granting to the gospel a power that it doesn’t have. The blood of Jesus shed on the cross cleanses us from all sin. The power of the word the preacher preaches is in the blood of the Lamb that atones for the sin of the world. When we bind the pastoral office to the vicarious atonement we are not limiting the gospel proclamation to what the pastor says. Here is what we confess in the Smalcald Articles about the forms the Gospel takes:

We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy

Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered,” etc.⁷

The pastors are the ones who preach, who administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and who exercise the authority of the keys. In the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, we confess:

Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called.⁸

The mutual conversation and consolation of brothers is not limited to called and ordained pastors, however. That Luther’s intent is to include the laity among the brothers here mentioned is clear from his citation of Jesus saying, “Where two or three are gathered.” Clearly, the gospel spoken by laymen and laywomen is as efficacious as the gospel preached by the preacher.

The office doesn’t empower the gospel. The gospel empowers the office. A powerful pastoral office that features ministers who speak authoritatively in the stead and by the command of Christ does not militate against the rights of the laity to give the same gospel the preachers preach to people in need with the full confidence that the gospel is always the power of God unto salvation regardless of what form it takes.

The authority of the preaching office is a gift of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus to his church. It is not a legal imposition. It is a gracious gift. Anti-clericalism cloaks itself in the clothes of promoting lay participation in the church, lay rights, the priesthood or the believers, and so forth. If anti-clericalism is opposition to all forms of sacerdotalism that would make the work of the minister meritorious then we should all become anti-clerical for the sake of the gospel. If

⁷ SA III IV, page 310

⁸ AC XIV, page 36

anti-clericalism is distrust of clergymen who deny the holy mysteries of our religion and adopt the zeitgeist of an increasingly godless popular culture in the name of meeting people where they are then let us be anti-clerical. If anti-clericalism is opposition to preening, arrogant, self-important preachers who don't know what it means to serve, then let us all be anti-clerical together! But if anti-clericalism arises from the attitude that says a mere man cannot speak words that bestow the forgiveness of sins, we must stand against this attitude as an assault against the gospel itself.

The division between Lutherans on the doctrine of the ministry may to a certain extent reflect different concerns. We react against error and henceforth define our position in opposition to a particular error, not realizing that there are other errors that can creep in when your attention is directed elsewhere. My dad would tell a story to illustrate this. He was making a pastoral call out in the country and when he got out of the car he was met by a loud, barking little dog that was jumping up and down and acting very fierce. As Dad kept his eyes focused on that little dog in front of him, a great big dog sneaked up behind him and bit him on the leg. He didn't see him coming! Well, we seldom do.

The 19th century confessional Lutherans in America who formed the Missouri Synod were familiar with and in reaction against the episcopal abuses of Martin Stefan, who led the German immigrants who founded the Missouri Synod from Saxony to Missouri and was then deposed for misconduct. C. F. W. Walther, long term president of the Missouri Synod and its most influential theologian, subsequently became engaged in a debate about the ministry with J. A. A. Grabau, the founder of the Buffalo Synod in Buffalo, New York. Grabau advocated an episcopal polity. An anti-episcopal sentiment drove the Missouri Synod from the outset. To oppose the rule of bishops is quite democratic and very American.

I am not among those who pine after episcopacy. Frankly, I believe we are better off without it. That is neither here nor

there. The point is that men such as Wilhelm Loehe and F. A. A. Grabau who advocated an episcopal form of church polity appealed to such texts as Matthew 28, Mark 16, and John 20 that featured the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples as the divine institution of the pastoral office. This would not be remarkable, inasmuch as the Lutheran Confessions do the same thing.⁹ The Missourians, for polemical reasons, gradually moved away from seeing the divine institution of the pastoral office in these words of Jesus to the apostles, preferring to interpret these words as giving the office to the whole church, that is, to the believers.¹⁰

It is perfectly true that the office of reconciliation belongs to the believers. The ministry belongs immediately to the church and through the church, mediately, to the ministers. This does not mean that Jesus did not establish the office when he sent out the apostles to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. He did. We must distinguish between the divine institution of the office and the divine transmission of the office. Jesus instituted the office when he sent the apostles to do what the office requires.¹¹

That the apostles were the church's first ministers does not mean that everything pertaining to the apostolic office applies in the same way to the pastoral office. The apostles had immediate calls. Pastors today have mediate calls. The apostles were not confined geographically. Today's pastors usually are. The apostles had the promise of the Lord Jesus that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth (John 16:13) and today's pastors are dependent upon the apostolic writings and not the direct guiding of the Holy Spirit. These differences, however, do not touch on the essence of the office,

⁹ The Augsburg Confession appeals to John 20 and Mark 16 (AC XXVIII paragraphs 6 and 7); The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope also mentions Matthew 28.

¹⁰ See Rolf Preus, "The Old Ministry Debate in the Synods of the Synodical Conference and in the ELS Today," The Pieper Lectures: Call and Ordination in the Lutheran Church, Concordia Historical Institute and The Luther Academy, St. Louis, 2006, pages 47-51.

¹¹ For an argument in support of the dominical institution of the pastoral office in the words Jesus spoke after he rose from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, see Rolf Preus, "Did Jesus Institute the Pastoral Office?" <http://www.christforum.org/Papers/Content/PastoralOffice.html>

which is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Why? Why must this be done? This is what we confess in the Augsburg Confession:

In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake. Gal. 3:14, "That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.¹²

The divine institution of the ministry of the word is inconceivable and incomprehensible apart from the prior reconciliation achieved by Jesus. The Jesus whose obedience and suffering was offered vicariously to God for the whole human race is the Jesus who established an office the sole duty of which is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments so that those who hear it may be led to faith, where and when it pleases God.

The minister may not veer from this course. That is, he must preach the gospel, no matter what. St. Paul was speaking for all pastors when he wrote, "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!" 1 Corinthians 9:16. Why? Because God instituted the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments in order that we may obtain this faith. What faith? The faith that believes that we are received into God's favor and our sins are forgiven on account of Christ who has made satisfaction for our sins. Thus, as we have

¹² AC V, page 31.

seen, it is impossible to conceive of the ministry of reconciliation before we know the doctrine of reconciliation.

This is why we need to define the office of preaching according to its whole, and not presume to chop it into little pieces to be parceled out according to ecclesiastical whim. Jesus formed the office to be an office of preaching, forgiving and retaining sins, and administering the sacraments. Not every minister will always be engaged in all of these tasks. But the office is what the office is, and the reconciliation of sinners to God is why the office was established.

Baptism gives us our identity as Christians and made us members of Christ's body. The Lord's Supper is Christ's body and blood and we, partaking of it, are one loaf and one body. The preaching of the gospel committed to Christ's ministers is for the sake of the church. The minister is not a lone ranger out on his own. He is always attached to the church and always serves the interests of the church.

A bureaucratic definition of the ministry that determines the minister's duties as we determine the duties of government functionaries is foreign to the church and must be rejected. While there are legal features to the office, it is not formed by the law, but by the gospel. Put simply, it is a matter of law that nobody may preach unless he has a call from God through the church to do so. But what he preaches and teaches, and how he administers the sacraments is always for the purpose of making peace between God and sinners by means of the vicarious atonement of Jesus.

This is especially vital for us to keep in mind when we consider how rapidly western civilization is falling into ruin. Recently the Supreme Court of the United States presumed to redefine marriage so as to accommodate the sexual relationships of same sex couples who want to pretend that they, too, are married. Should the church address this? By all means! We must speak God's word where God's word applies, and when the state attacks divine institutions and cheapens the lives of

children the church must speak God's word to the situation. It is perfectly clear that the political culture in western Europe, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere has descended far below where it has been in many years – since before the Christianization of Europe. During the first century, the Christian Church confronted a polytheistic culture that rejected God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. Their religion had no room for a Father God who made us, loves us, and gives us our identity as men and women.

The twenty first century is much like the first. Perhaps we might think that, in our day, the article on which the church stands or falls is no longer justification, but is now the existence of a Creator God who made us in his image. This would be a big mistake. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is always the center of theology for the simple reason that it is the only way any of us can be brought into fellowship with the God who made us in his image. We fight the good fight of the faith always for the sake of this gospel.

The corruption of the culture, the godlessness of the civil authorities, the cheapening of human life and other features of the collapse of Christendom in the West are not a call for us Christians to set aside the preaching of an otherworldly message of eternal life so that we may engage the culture to save civilization. The peace of God that surpasses all human understanding does not come from legal, social, moral, or political reform. It comes from the preaching of the gospel. If we love the city in which we live – truly love it and all who belong to it – we will acknowledge that we have no eternal city here, but seek the one to come. For this is what Jesus testified to Pilate. He told him that his kingdom was not of this world. Pilate sneered. Then what did Jesus do? He established his kingdom.

The peace that God established on this earth in the sacrifice of his Son on Calvary is not an imaginary or pretend kind of thing. It is not an “as if” sort of peace, as if we are pretending that something unreal is real. The most fundamental reality of

the Christian's life is that he is at peace with God, justified by the blood of Jesus, possessing the forgiveness of sins, and living at peace with God. Listen to the familiar words of St. Paul:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

The day to day benefits of living at peace with God, a peace established by Christ's obedience and suffering and secured to us by the Holy Spirit Jesus sends, are clear. That being at one with God is the greatest good makes the ministry of the word by which God grants this to us a good thing, a precious thing, something worth devoting one's life to.

When we pastors fall short we rely on the same grace we preach to our parishioners. We don't define ourselves by the law. We define ourselves by the gospel, reckoning ourselves to be righteous before God because God himself has said so. God cannot lie, err, or deceive us. Therefore, we can trust his word that tells us that for the sake of Christ's obedience, suffering, and death, our sins are forgiven, we are at peace with God, and we are heirs of eternal life. This is our great joy and privilege to preach in full confidence that by means of this preaching sinners will be reconciled to God.