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Faithfully Serving

Rev. Paul Gregory Alms

It begins and ends with the Gospel, this Office of the Ministry. But it is not an abstract vocation. No, it is always up close and personal. Think of Ash Wednesday when the parishioners line up to hear you say to each of them individually, "You will die!" You smudge their foreheads with dirt. There are nervous looks as you push aside hair and take your thumb and physically mark them. There is a closeness in that moment between pastor and people. The smudge you make is in the form of a cross and the ritual points to Christ, to the Good News that sinners are redeemed by Christ and cleansed by the waters of Baptism.

What is it like being a pastor week after week, year after year? I have been a pastor for over 26 years. Twenty-two of those years I have spent in one wonderful congregation, Redeemer Lutheran in Catawba, North Carolina. My ministry has been marked by lots of events and challenges, joys and difficulties. But from where I sit the ministry begins and ends with the Gospel. Being a faithful pastor revolves around delivering the eternal Good News of Jesus Christ. That is why I am a pastor: the fact that Jesus died for sin and rose for eternal life. That is the vocation of a pastor in its simplest terms. There is a lot of time spent doing many different things and those things may not all seem related to the Gospel, but in the end all that pastors do revolves around that Good News.

Preaching that Gospel is central to being a Lutheran pastor. But pastors don't preach in a vacuum. We don't preach to the wall or to a microphone somewhere in a studio. We don't craft perfect specimens of homiletical glory to be admired in the classroom or on the internet. No, we preach to people who stumble into church every week full of weakness and sins and burdens. One has just been diagnosed with cancer. Another is wracked with guilt. Another is estranged from her family. The list goes on. Into this the pastor speaks the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins, the victory of Christ over death and disorder and evil.

Yes, the Gospel, of course, you might say, but that is a pat answer isn't it? A theoretical answer, a theological approach to being a pastor. But how do pastors really live and go about doing their work? Yet the Gospel is the answer there also. It is a practical, down-to-earth truth. It gets at the real, even physical and tangible ways pastors go about their work. Aiming at the Gospel as a pastor keeps one faithful to one's calling, but also keeps a pastor anchored to real life, to the lives we and our congregation members actually live.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. How about distributing the Lord Supper? That is certainly a Gospel activity. We can easily think of the Lord's Supper only as a doctrine, a thing to be taught and thought about. But there you are with an incredible treasure in your hand—the very body and blood of Jesus—according to His own words. Being a faithful pastor means not only upholding that biblical doctrine but actually saying those words at the altar: "this is My body." It means actually giving that body and blood to God's people, feeding them, sticking your fingers in their mouths and tipping the cup that they may swallow. It is a strange and wonderful moment when,

as a pastor, you are there feeding grown men and women (CEOs, poor widows, headstrong teenagers) who kneel and open their mouths as if they were babies as you give them God's gifts.

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has just been diagnosed with cancer. Another is wracked with guilt. Another is estranged from her family. The list goes on. Into this the pastor speaks the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins, the victory of Christ over death and disorder and evil. Little words from a little pastor, a small voice, but the power of God for salvation.

It really is all about the Gospel. Even when not engaged in worship or Bible class or catechesis or one-on-one pastoral encouragement, the Gospel is central in the obvious, ordinary things pastors do. It's why I visit the sick. It's why I hang around with the youth. It's why I wander over to the diner across the street and shoot the breeze with customers. It's why I serve on boards, get involved in the community, join with others to feed the hungry—that Good News of Christ. Even when I find myself doing things like cleaning up around church or running an endless meeting, the focus is on the Gospel. We do these little things to do the one thing: share the Good News of forgiveness and mercy and grace.

Let's be honest for a moment. The daily life of a pastor is not always easy. As a matter of fact, it almost never is. A faithful pastor will encounter disappointment and heartache and

suffering. But such experiences are shot through with the Gospel. The same Christ whom pastors proclaim also showers that pastor with mercy and strength and, yes, forgiveness. There is a funny thing that happens when you are a pastor for even a short amount of time. The people you serve turn out to be instruments of God to bless you as pastor. You are here to serve them but they pray for you, work in the church, assist and sing and serve in their vocations. Every pastor can tell of going to visit a shut-in or sick person and leaving with the feeling that he received more blessings than he gave. The people of God, weak and sinful as they are, are instruments of God's mercy. God uses them to make your calling as pastor one of joy and fulfillment.

So, yes, being a faithful pastor begins and ends with the Gospel. Pastors get up close and personal to deliver that amazing Good News that Christ has died for us and forgiven us, the Gospel. That is what being a faithful pastor is all about. 🙏

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The Rev. Alms serving in his daily life as a pastor "It really is all about the Gospel. Even when not engaged in worship or Bible class or catechesis or one-on-one pastoral encouragement, the Gospel is central in the obvious, ordinary things pastors do."

