

“COMPELLED TO PREACH”

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

For nearly thirty years, the apostle Paul proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ to kings and commoners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, free and slave, and even to Greece’s finest philosophers—some of whom called him a SPERMALOGOS, that is, a ‘seed picker;’ or to paraphrase, a hay seed, country bumpkin, backwoods, unsophisticated.

During that time, Paul made three extensive missionary journeys, and by some estimates traveled more than 25,000 miles. Along the way he faced fierce opposition and endured many hardships: hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, sleeplessness, beatings, betrayals, stonings, persecutions; and all this while struggling with that mysterious “thorn in the flesh”—which may have been recurring malaria or a degenerative eye disease.

Surely, at our busiest, we have all still marveled at Paul’s tireless commitment to preach the Gospel. “I am compelled to preach,” he said. Compelled. The Greek word is ANAGKE and means “necessity.” Literally, ‘a necessity is laid on me.’ But what was that necessity? What compelled Paul to travel so far and to endure so much to preach the Gospel—and to such an extent as to exclaim, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”? The answer, I believe, is fourfold.

First, Paul was compelled to preach the Gospel by his divine call; by the fact that God had called him, chosen him, and privileged him to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Remember, ministry was not Paul’s chosen profession. Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was a persecutor. Paul was a prosecutor. Paul was not a preacher.

That Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle; that one of Christianity’s chief opponents became one of its greatest preachers and leaders, was due solely to God’s design and God’s call. And Paul attested to this fact in nine of his thirteen epistles; saying for example in Romans 1:1, “**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God;**” and 1 Corinthians 1:1, “**Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God;**” and 2 Corinthians 1:1, “**Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.**” And so on. Always presented as God’s call and God’s choice, not Paul’s.

You, dear friend, may not be an apostle like Paul. You may not be called to serve in the public ministry like me. Nevertheless, as a Christian you are called by the same God to share the same Gospel of Christ whenever and wherever God presents the opportunity—at home and at work, in word and in deed.

Peter was speaking to ordinary Christians, not seminary graduates,, when he said: **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light,”** 1 Peter 2:9. Jesus also said to His disciples: **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and place it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven,”** Matthew 5:14-16.

You may say, “I’m not a good speaker.” Moses said the same. You may say, “I have no desire to share God’s Word.” Jonah said the same. You may say, “I have no experience.” Jeremiah said the same. You may say, “The work is too big and I’m too small.” Elijah said the same. But do you truly think that any of your personal doubts or inadequacies matter, if God is the one calling you to bear witness to His Gospel? Of course not.

Paul himself had to learn an important lesson about personal weakness; and he learned it—not from a seminary professor but from a painful “thorn in the flesh.” He said: **“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong,”**(2 Corinthians 12:10. In Paul’s weakness, God revealed His omnipotent strength.

Luther wrote: “When we were made Christians, we were also given the right and power to preach and profess the Word we received from Him before everybody, everyone according to his station and calling. For, though we are not all in the public office and calling, still every Christian should and may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, reprove his neighbor with God’s Word whenever and wherever he finds someone in need of it.”

This God has called each of us to do. And if we recognize this call as a privilege instead of a chore, we too will say with the apostle Paul: **“I am compelled to preach.”**

Second, Paul was compelled to preach the Gospel—not from some outer coercion, but from an inner conviction worked by the Spirit of God; a burning, unquenchable desire to preach Jesus Christ, even should there be no one to preach to.

This inner conviction is certainly felt by all those truly called into the public ministry; the inner conviction that leads one to the seminary and compels him to go on preaching and to go on ministering despite personal or congregational circumstances: successes or failures, good times or bad, packed pews or meager attendance.

I’ve mentioned before how I inexplicably felt this inner conviction or compelling need to minister even in kindergarten; when I told Pastor Richard Kuehne

that I intended to take his place. And in the years that followed, while I did not always return to Immanuel Lutheran College for theological reasons—sometimes the reasons were basketball, tour choir, classmates, and girlfriends—I did keep returning. Or more properly said, God kept returning me.

And subsequently, when I resigned from the ministry in 1987, God returned me to it again in 2010. I will never forget the first Sunday after our return to Florida—how Pastor John Schierenbeck was waiting for me at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Winter Haven, with his hand extended and a grin on his face and an introductory remark something like “I have a proposition for you.” That proposition involved pastoring a small congregation in North Port, FL. Through that opportunity, handshake, and grin I felt the pull of the Holy Spirit returning me to the ministry. I felt compelled to preach.

“Why did you become a minister?” Those truly called into the public ministry will answer this question in much the same way. They will answer, “I had no other choice”—meaning that for them there was only one choice because of the deep conviction worked within them by the Holy Spirit.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote: “A man who truly has within him the inspiration of the Holy Spirit calling him to preach cannot help it. He must preach. Like fire within his bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may restrain him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, yet the man is resolute. He must preach if he has the call from heaven.”

Yet, in a more general sense, outside of the public ministry, all Christians speak about Jesus Christ from a deep inner conviction worked by the Holy Spirit. And that deep inner conviction is faith. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:13-15, **“It is written: ‘I believed; therefore have I spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in His presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”**

“I believe.” This is what compels us to preach the Gospel.

Third, Paul was compelled to preach the Gospel, because without the Gospel there is no way for lost and condemned sinners to be saved. And this desire to reach others with the saving Gospel is what led the apostle to write in today’s text: **“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible;”** and again, **“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings,”** 1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23.

Saving others is what compelled Paul to preach. And saving others is what should compel us. Not statistics. Not increasing Sunday attendance. Not building

cathedrals. Rather, the simple knowledge that all people are by nature lost and condemned, unless they come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is the reality. And this is why the Bible states so simply and clearly: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”** (John 3:16-18)

Sometimes, the smallness of a ministry can be humorous. Years ago, I conducted a midweek Lenten service at a member’s home in northern California. Only three people were in attendance. The first, our accompanist, sat with her back to me because of the location of the piano. The second sat attentively listening, except when checking the pies in the oven. The third sat contentedly snoring in a Lazy Boy recliner. On the drive home I had to smile.

At other times, however, the smallness of a ministry can be discouraging. When I was still serving Grace Lutheran Church in Cape Coral, FL—a small group of no more than twelve members—we canvassed 1,500 homes and distributed 1,500 doorhangers. Of the people contacted, some expressed mild interest. A few said they would definitely be in church the following Sunday. One woman even asked about membership.

Because Easter was approaching, we placed a color ad in the local newspaper. In part, the ad read: “Grace Lutheran Church is a small congregation with a big commitment to proclaiming the Bible in all of its fullness and truth. We are new to the Cape Coral area and would be delighted if you and your family joined us as we celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

I was excited and hopeful; not only because of the response to the canvassing, but because visitors often attended church on Easter Sunday. I had visions of packed pews; of placing folding chairs in the aisles to accommodate the overflow. And when Easter Sunday arrived, the pews were as empty as always. Not one visitor attended, not even the woman who inquired about membership. I was discouraged.

Amid such discouragement—empty pews, small budgets, declining memberships, lack of visible results—the temptation always exists (though we know better) to question the efficacy of simply preaching the Word of God. **“Preach the Word,”** Paul told Timothy. “Yes, Paul, but I have preached the Word Sunday after Sunday, month after month, with no increase in membership. Perhaps preaching the Word is not enough. Perhaps I need something more appealing to the general public. Bingo games. Bake sales. Live hands.”

Did the apostle Paul ever feel disappointment? Did he grow weary and frustrated at the obstacles to his ministry? Undoubtedly. But this is what God told Paul while the apostle was still in Corinth: **“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city,”** Acts 18:9-10.

Does the same God not say the words to us amid our ministry in Lemmon, SD? “Do not be afraid. Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. I am with you.” This is why, Sunday after Sunday, we don’t focus on entertainment. We don’t preach watered-down messages. We don’t compromise the truth of Scripture in order to fill the pews and gain a large following. Instead, we are compelled to preach the Gospel; for, as Paul told the Romans, the Gospel alone **“is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,”** Romans 1:16.

Whatever our future as a congregation may be, the means of our ministry at St. Luke’s Lutheran Church must always be preaching Scripture; because Scripture is the only means through which the Spirit of God has chosen to work.

Finally, Paul was compelled to preach the Gospel because of the blessings that same Gospel brought to him. “I do all this for the sake of the Gospel,” he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:23, **“that I may share in its blessings.”** And finally, it is a deep and personal appreciation of what Jesus Christ has done for each of us that, above all else, compels us to preach Jesus Christ to others.

And so Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, **“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.”**

Over my years of ministry, I’ve heard many Christians voice fears over witnessing opportunities: What to say; how to say it; what materials to use. Granted, being prepared to bear witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ is something every believer is urged to do. The apostle Peter wrote: **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have,”** 1 Peter 3:15. But why does this worry us so? The answer is not complicated, is it? The answer is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the reason for the hope we have amid suffering, loss, pain, hardship, sin, and death.

A true Gospel ministry does not begin with a church building. It does not begin with a voters meeting or an Excel spreadsheet of revenues and expenditures. It begins in our hearts. It begins with the personal confession of Romans 3:22-24, **“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”**

It begins when we see ourselves in the words of Ephesians 2:1-5. **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature the objects of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”**

These words are describing each of us: once dead, now alive; once blind, now seeing; once deaf, now hearing; one lost, now found. And if we understand these words and take them to heart, how can we fail to leap to our feet, saying, “Oh, thank you, God. Here I am. Send me! Send me!”?

So, I end where I began; with the apostle Paul; a man who traveled thousands of miles to share the Gospel; founded numerous Christian congregations; endured enormous hardships for the sake of Christ. What filled him with such enthusiasm and determination to proclaim Christ? His extensive vocabulary? His personal strength? His eloquence of speech? No. Rather, his humble gratitude to God for his salvation and calling.

Paul’s appreciation for God’s love and grace in Christ is certainly evident in his words to Timothy: **“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst,”** 1 Timothy 1:12-15.

Compelled to preach? Yes, we are. By God’s call. By God’s conviction. By God’s urgency. By God’s grace. Woe to us, if we do not preach the Gospel!