

John 12:20-36
Tuesday in Holy Week – March 22, 2016
Martin Lohrmann – Trinity Lutheran, Findlay, Ohio
Affirmation of Vows & Chrism Mass

It is a pleasure to be with you today. I bring greetings from Wartburg Seminary and our president Louise Johnson.

In addition to saying thank you for the invitation to preach today, I want to say “thank you” for your ministries, for all you do in your daily baptismal work of loving God, sharing the gospel, and serving neighbors. This morning’s service includes an affirmation of the church vocations represented here today: a re-affirmation that we make about our callings. But it seems equally important to think of today’s liturgy as public affirmation to you for the work you do. This kind of affirmation is important, because the ministry of all the baptized—which includes but is not limited to church professionals—comes with plenty of ups and downs, twists and turns, joys and tears.

It is a good and godly thing worth affirming and giving thanks for that people announce the gospel, share the means of grace, and serve, teach, and lead in the name of Christ in so many rich and diverse ways. As a person whose career in ministry started here, I personally have benefited from the ministry of many of you; my experience is one of many whose lives have been touched by your service. So I want to say “thank you;” a thanks that includes but is not limited to the outgoing bishop, my Uncle Marcus.

As important as the baptismal call to love God and serve others is, sometimes our daily work resonates all-too-well with Christ’s words in John 12 when he said, “Now my soul is troubled.” I am thankful for that sentence, because it lets us know that it is okay for a godly soul to feel troubled. As the Word made flesh and the only begotten Son of the Father, Jesus knew what was in store for him. Especially in John’s gospel we meet a Jesus who had already embraced the way of the cross as the path that leads through death into life. At the same time, Jesus could also call a thing what it is: deeply troubling. Fear, betrayal and violence are troubling and hurtful; it is good to say so. Naming this truth can strengthen rather than discourage us as we make our often challenges journeys through life.

Sometimes our souls will be troubled. This reminds me of something Uncle Marcus once told me about ministry, which went more or less like this: “Not a month goes by when I don’t wonder what I’m doing.” I believe he said this *before* he was elected bishop, maybe 20 years ago. The way I heard it—which I think is how he meant it—was not that Marcus wondered if he had basic skills for ministry or if church work or a particular call was right for him. What I remember learning from that talk was that there will be times when the gospel message itself comes into question and our souls are troubled. Is this Jesus thing true?

Using Paul’s words in First Corinthians to put it in the form of a question: is the message about the cross really the power of God? It sure doesn’t always feel like it. Can weakness really be strength? Can love and goodness really fill and shape our weak and broken lives? Those are questions we rightly ask, maybe even more than once a month.

While these questions are challenging, they also keep us learning our catechism every day. These questions keep us pondering what it means to have no other gods besides the Lord God (commandments), to live as members of a good creation who belong to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (creed), who pray to our Lord as children trust a loving parent (Lord’s Prayer), and as broken creatures who die to sin and rise to newness of life one day at a time (sacraments).

We know there are plenty of gods to follow in the world; plenty of pleasures to pursue. Amid all these options, our mission as church, our lives in baptism, our faith active in love... these things abide, because they have their life in the great I AM.

It may not look fancy. Lives of daily repentance and faith aren't glamorous. Daily acts of service don't win many prizes. Words of grace and love don't make the headlines. But I saw Facebook photos from this past weekend that the Marcus and Heidi Lohrmann family spent with people of St. John's in Hicksville: signs (posts) of the deep life we have together in Christ. Our faith communities really matter as places where this life, power and wisdom of God forms the center of who we are. It's a wisdom that shapes our views about what matters and who matters in life. The foolishness of serving others, loving enemies, finding strength in weakness, and trusting our lives to a crucified savior changes the world. In faith, we get to belong to that love and life, inviting others into this grace, too. That's a message mission worth affirming.

The message of the cross is the power of God. It changes the world for the better. We and our communities need to hear and experience this message a lot, because it doesn't always seem true, out there in the world and in here in our hearts and churches. Congregations are flawed institutions. Christians are not perfect people. Not even synods and bishop's offices are perfect! This can make the cross seem like it's not enough. If we really have been saved, then where is the mystical holy communion of saints? Why isn't Christ's church stronger? If we really believed, wouldn't our communities and individual lives be healthier, holier and more successful? On this question, the prophet's lament in Isaiah 49 might ring true: "I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'" It can feel that way.

And yet, precisely in our own broken, mixed-up hearts and communities, the power of God becomes most apparent. We aren't the ones who bring in the kingdom of God. We don't have to pretend to be saints that we are not. Precisely in the truth of our weakness, the truth of the gospel speaks loudest. "YOU," the Lord says, "Yes, you. I give YOU as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

And can you believe it: in their stumbling return to the Promised Land after exile, the people of Judah became a light to the nations, all the way to us across the centuries. Can you believe it: with that thorn in his flesh that never went away, Paul embraced the cross as the power of God that no one could defeat, no matter how many beatings, imprisonments and struggles he endured. Through the power of the cross, he was free and free to love.

Looking ahead to his victory over everything that keeps people from God, Christ himself still had to say, "Now my soul is troubled." He continued. "And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then came a voice from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

Friends in Christ, the glory of God—the way of the cross, the way of life—is yours. The crucified Christ will be our light, leading us in lives of service and love. It is a mission worth affirming and sharing. Thanks be to God. Amen