

“All are naked” Hebrews 4:12-16

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

When you set out to do something new, to travel the road that no one has travelled before, you never know what is going to happen, where it will lead you. Takes a bit of a leap of faith. As Christians we pray, and we entrust our endeavours to our Lord for we know that He desires to bless us.

That is also the story of “The Way of Grace” review. We have set to try something that no one has done before and no one could tell us beforehand how our Lord will bless us through these efforts. We have only completed the first stage and will hold our Forum after the Service, but He already has blessed us.

This is what I want to share with you today, I want to reflect on a few of these blessings and on what this review has revealed and enabled us to discuss. Our today’s reading from Hebrews provides fitting framework for our reflections.

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart... all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” Intimidating words. We all are naked and exposed to the judgment...

The picture of us being naked and exposed is very powerful. Since the beginning we want to hide our thoughts and passions, we want to cover our shameful actions so that no one would know, so that we may look good in the eyes of others.

But we are all naked before the One to whom we must give account. Scary. But you see, similarly now, as we have been reflecting and commenting on what the Word of God and our Lutheran Church teaches on who we are and why we are here, something similar has happened. We have been exposed.

I want to reflect on three blessings that our Lord has brought to us, on our **naked reality**, on a **hard question**, and on our **wonderful confession**. First, on our naked reality. What is that about? It is something important we need to know about us.

We all are different... And that's it? No, listen, we all are different, we are so, so different, we don't realize how different we are. Sure, there are a lot of commonalities, but we are also incredibly diverse when our thoughts are exposed.

I keep forgetting it, because you don't hear those thoughts and opinions of many on daily bases. Let me illustrate how different we are by loosely quoting written and verbal feedback that we have received so far. Thanks to Julie for collating it!

Some found "The Way of Grace" overcomplicated and daunting, for others it was just basics of our faith, a refresher course of things well known. Some felt almost like choking and the others loved it and were filled with joy.

Some would prefer greater diversity in worship, others would prefer more stability and predictability. Some would like more reverent worship style, others more relaxed. Some would like more regular Holy Communion, others less regular.

Some prefer organ music; some prefer our bands. See, whatever your preferences on any aspect of our worship life are, be assured that there are fellow brothers and sisters right next to you, who prefer the very opposite.

The naked reality. We are so different. As one pastor was joking, this is not about shepherding the sheep, this is about trying to herd the cats. Cats are great creatures; it is just that each one wants to go their own way. This is true that the Church, or a congregation is never what we want it to be. It is what it is.

The strangest people from all walks of life, with the most diverse preferences brought together... not by us, not by our choosing, but by our Lord Jesus Christ. He invited each one of you, and also that very different person next to you.

Let's pray that the Holy Spirit helps us not to disappoint Jesus by despising or hurting those, whom He loves and for whom He cares as much as for each one of you. This is His Church. We are His Church.

There is one trend which concerns me greatly. And I may have spoken about it already before. It seems that there is a deliberate trend not to learn anything new when it comes to our Christian faith, and life and God's wisdom for us. I doesn't seem that many think that way, but it comes through again and again.

Think about this analogy. You love someone dearly. What would you like to do? To be together with that person, to converse with them, to learn as much as possible about them. To rejoice in knowing them.

Would that make sense if someone said that they love someone, but that that is enough for them that they know that this person exists, that they know their name and that's all they want. Wouldn't that make us to question their true attitude?

We are to love our God with all our heart and soul and mind. This is how we are to relate to Him. How can we want less of Him? And we are not talking about who can be saved; a childlike faith and trust is all that's needed.

We are talking about seasoned Christians who are supposed to gladly "eat meat", but who keep asking for "milk" and in small portions. If anyone can help me to understand this, please, speak with me. For I just can't fathom it.

So, yes, we are different. This is the first blessings that our Lord has granted us, to recognize the naked reality of who we are. The same goes for pastors. We all are products of our upbringing and experiences, our learning and failures, our sins and passions and of God's undeserved grace given to us.

The same way as the Church is never what we want her to be, the same way pastors are never what we want them to be. They are who they are. There are no ideal pastors, except maybe those whom we don't have... We are an incredible, colourful company that Jesus brings together, and He does it by His grace alone.

What was the second theme? A hard question. Now we reflected on how different we are, and from that we naturally get to the next question. How can we operate as congregations being so diverse, with so different preferences?

Imagine if we came together for the first time, and would try to figure out how to walk together, how on earth could we agree on anything? That sounds like a mission impossible. Now, I need your help with this. I need your advice.

In the midst of this wide diversity of different views, who should pastors listen to? What do you think? Should we listen to the loudest? Should we listen to the oldest or to the youngest? Should we listen to those who are the friendliest?

Or perhaps we should listen to those who are the harshest critics, or to those who travel around gossiping and complaining? There are so many options, and this is not a theoretical question – who to listen? – this is daily on pastors' agenda.

As you can imagine, whichever group of people we may choose to listen, all the other members will be dissatisfied with us. Or should we look at what other pastors do? "See, that pastor does this and doesn't do that, and that one, he does everything differently." Should we be guided by the example of other fellow pastors?

This is true that in Seminary everyone is taught the same, and when we are ordained, we all promise to uphold the teaching of the LCA. Why this or that pastor ignores our Church's teaching, why this or that pastor on many issues teaches and preaches contrary to what our Church believes? I really don't know. It seems that we live in times where many do "what is wise in their own eyes".

Back to the hard question – who do pastors need to listen to? And this is where we are reminded about another wonderful blessing of our faithful God. The Church’s teaching. Who do pastors need to listen amidst the many different voices? The answer is – they need to listen to the Church’s teaching. And we are so incredibly blessed in our LCA. Incredibly blessed.

Our Church is the Church of the Word and we have received this incredibly rich heritage, we have hundreds and probably thousands of pages of good, solid Biblical, Lutheran teaching on almost every aspect of our Christian faith and life.

“The Way of Grace” is just a brief summary of what our LCA teaches. Who do pastors need to listen? They need to follow through on their solemn vows, to listen and to serve according to the teaching of their Church. That simple.

Then we can say together with Paul the apostle: “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself... It is the Lord who judges me.” (1 Cor 4:3-4)

It is so liberating for pastors to stand on that foundation, and such practice is also good for every congregation. For then we know that those are not our strange and competing ideas, but our Church’s teaching that guides our decisions and practices.

On the other hand, as you may well know it, this position, as straightforward as it may be, seems to be disappearing amidst of this misunderstood freedom to do whatever we want to do. Those trying to be faithful to their vows are called names and shamed for not keeping up with times. That’s okay.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, think about this – where in the Bible we can read that majority were faithful to God? Was it in Moses’ time, with Samuel, under the king David, when prophets were sent – Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel?

Or was it so in Jesus’ time? Or during the time of apostles? Or perhaps during the 16th century? Our own Lutheran Church was born when courageous Christians held to the Word of God, while they were slandered, mocked and even persecuted by majority. And how did Lutherans find themselves in South Australia?

Christians shouldn’t strive to keep up with changing culture or to have majority preferences as guidelines. By God’s grace we are invited to always strive to be the faithful remnant, that little flock that stubbornly holds to the confession of Christ.

This is where we get to our last point. That wonderful confession. We come back to our reading from Hebrews. “Since we have a great high priest ... Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Yes, Jesus the Son of God has come so close to us.

He is the One who will judge us on the Last Day, and it is before Him where we all are naked and exposed. The challenges on which we briefly reflected on, He knows all of that and so much more. He knows our hearts; He know every shameful and embarrassing thought and word and deed we have ever done and will do in future. We are naked and exposed before Him.

That may be a terrifying thought if we didn't have this wonderful confession to hold fast to. What is this wonderful confession? That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Eternal Judge of the living and the dead has become one of us, He has become our Brother. He has come not with judgment, but with grace and mercy, to seek and to save the lost, people like me and people like you.

There is nothing in me, or nothing in you that compels Him to be patient with us. But He has called us into His family. He sees me naked; all my thoughts and intentions and He speaks to all pastors: "My servant, don't worry, you don't have to build my Church, that is my job, as for you – just remain faithful to me!"

"Dear Pastor, I know you feel guilty for not having done all you could and were expected – I forgive you, come to me and rest!" "My beloved, if you feel let down by criticism and gossip, then remember – you are good to me, very good!"

He speaks to each one of us, He knows of our disagreements, of our self-righteousness, of how we treat those whom He loves dearly. We are exposed, and He comes and says to us: "Christian, if you despise those who disagree with you, if you look down at others whom I love – I forgive you!"

"Christian, if you resent your pastors whom I have sent to feed you – I forgive you!" "Christian, if you reject my teaching and want to please people more than me – I forgive you, come back to be! I am always here for you!"

More, Jesus invites us: "Come to me, drive that nail in my hand, take that spear and pierce my side, whatever your sins make you do, through it at me, I take it from you, and in exchange I give you this – I give you my life and all that I am.

I give you my forgiveness, until your every last sin is washed away, until all the evil is drowned in my grace. Then I fill you with my love and joy and peace. For you are mine. I have redeemed you, and I am bringing you home to be with me."

He knows what we are like and He welcomes us anyway, and then He comes and indwells in us and begins to change our hearts, to create true unity among us, unity of the Spirit and of one mind and of one soul. True Christian unity in Jesus.

Just don't harder your hearts. Don't push Him away. Come to Jesus and live and He will bless you.

Amen.