

ADDRESS AND SERMON

Pastor Jaynan Clark

President, WordAlone Network
Lutheran CORE Convocation - Fishers, Indiana
September 2009
(transcribed from recording)

Initial Address

I would like everyone to pretend that this is my white card... and it's my point of personal privilege, as the appointed preacher of the day.

Hi, I'm Jaynan, and I'm a recovering CWA attendee. And we are all, in some sense, in a state of recovery, one that will affect our children, their children, and on, and on, without end.

Over and over, year after year, we have heard: "the world is watching; what will be our witness?" Well, we made it, and the world is not receiving it as the gospel truth; thank God for that. We're all caught up in an ecclesial version of the old Wendy's commercial. Where's the truth? Where's the unity? Where's the love? Where's the word? Nonexistent, like the beef, I guess.

Now we're gathered together in the aftermath, and the potential in this worship setting is for a sinner like me — mere road kill under the fast-moving ELCA train — to make a speech rather than preach the Word of God. And there is a difference. So, have ears to hear because there are hundreds of preachers in this room, and you are absolutely the worst listeners of a sermon there is, right? You've already started rewriting the text on what I should have said, how you would have done it differently, and how much better it would have been, right?

And here's my recovery point of personal privilege I want to make now as a speech and be done with it: Please, don't blame the legislators, the courts, the lobbyists, or anyone else in the civil realm for what has happened to the ELCA, for they would not come in from outside and tell the church to redefine marriage and its standards for ministry and to abandon the Word of God. Our elected leadership did that, and in so doing that, the most sober judgment of all has been rained down on our denomination. He gave you what you wanted. This was an inside job. And as we point the finger and say, "Mark Hanson, I know the voice of a good shepherd, and you're no good shepherd," there are three fingers pointing back: "and neither am I."

We have ALL allowed the sheep to be scattered, the flock to be led astray, and the Word of God to be made a mockery of. According to the Augsburg confession, the concluding paragraph,

St. Peter forbids the bishops to exercise their lordship as if they had power to coerce the churches according to their will. It is not our intention to find ways of reducing the bishops' power, but we desire and pray that they may not coerce our consciences to sin. If they are unwilling to do this and ignore our petition, let them consider how they will answer for it in God's sight, inasmuch as by their obstinacy they offer occasion for division and schism which they, in truth, should help to prevent.

We are not your judges. God is your judge. There will be no sheep-stealing because they belong to one good shepherd who calls them according to His Holy Word, which we rise to hear today.

Gospel Lesson

Please rise... The Holy Gospel is recorded in the ninth chapter of Mark, beginning with the 38th verse.

CONGREGATION: "Glory to you, O Lord."

LEADER: "Let us read it together as the people of God."

CONGREGATION and LEADER: "And John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone using your name cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn't in our group.' 'Don't stop him,' Jesus said. 'No one who performs a miracle in my name will soon be able to speak. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded. If you cause one of these little ones who trust in me to fall into sin it would be better for you to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone hung around your neck.'"

CONGREGATION: "Praise to you, O Christ."

LEADER: "You may be seated."

Sermon

The lectionary was set decades ago. I didn't mess with the text. I don't believe in irony. It's God's sense of humor. And I don't believe in coincidences. They're God's intervention on our behalf.

Let us pray: Lord, Jesus, let us be changed by you and by your Word, and lead us out of the temptation to, again, try to change your Word to our will. Amen.

God and God's Word — God's living Word — and His son, Jesus Christ, don't do well when humans decide to put them up for a vote, for or against. There was a rabbi — his name was Rabbi Feldman — who had been having trouble with his congregation. It seemed like they

couldn't agree on anything anymore, and the controversy was filling the air, and unhappiness was filling the synagogue. The president of the congregation said, "Rabbi, this cannot be allowed to continue. Come, there must be a conference, a meeting, and we must settle all areas of dispute once and for all." "Agreed," said the rabbi. At the appointed time, therefore, the rabbi, the president, and ten elders met in the conference room of the synagogue, sitting around a magnificent mahogany table. One by one the issues were dealt with, and on each issue it became more and more apparent the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president said, "Come rabbi, enough of this, let us vote and allow the majority to rule." He passed out slips of paper, and each man made his mark. The slips were collected, and the president said "You may examine them, rabbi; it is 11 to 1 against you; we are the majority," whereupon the rabbi rose to his feet in offended majesty. "So," he said, "you now think because of the vote that you are right and I am wrong. Well that is not so. I stand here," and he raised his arms impressively, "and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I am right and you are wrong." As he said so, there came this frightful crack of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that split that mahogany table in two, brought fire and smoke through the room. The president and the elders were laid out all over the floor. Through the carnage, the rabbi remained standing untouched. His eyes were flashing. There was a grim smile on his face. Slowly the president lifted himself above the floor, above the wrecked table. His hair was singed; his glasses were hanging on one side. And he said, "All right, 11 to 2, we still have the majority."

OK, now I'm pretty sure they weren't voting on sex in the synagogue. It doesn't matter. God appears in all majesty and honor, and witnesses to His power over everything, even rearranging the laws of nature he set up, and he still is voted down. Even the mark of the beast, rolling over the mark of the Trinity, by three — by three — stopped up ears and hardened hearts, and the crowd voted for Barabbas. And Pilate voted to wash his hands of it. The disciples voted with their feet, stopping off only long enough to bow their heads, warm themselves around the fire and deny him one more time.

So go the disciples of then and now. We're all just a bunch of sinners, not worth our salt. Standing tall when it suits us, when it gains us some position or status, but caught bickering over who is the greatest among us. This was clearly the issue just a week ago. And the week before that. It clearly was said that Satan was the one who wants glory, laud and honor, without denial, betrayal, suffering and death, without the cross. Now, they and we are right back at you, Jesus.

'Wow, these guys! You see these guys over here? They're over here casting out demons in your name, Jesus, but we decided to stop 'em from doing that.' You know, apparently, those other guys were getting better results than the disciples and it ticked them off, right? They were actually casting Satan out, but the disciples decided it was important that they follow them. Get in lock-step behind them, rein it in. Note that the disciples seemed to think it was better to leave those suffering and inflicted ones possessed by Satan himself, abandon them in the presence of

evil to the demons, than to have this healing being done without their direction. Wow! Jesus must have had to clench his teeth, don't you think, before he answered with such grace and wise teaching. Flipping conventional wisdom on its head, he says "If they aren't against us, they are for us." It's just like him, too. He flips the world upside down. But, wow! That's a lot of people FOR us, and not too many against us.

How do we know that? Well, we can hear the world's outrage coming back from having put God's Word and his created order up for a vote. What an arrogant stance by supposed followers. It's like voting on gravity. You can do it, but eventually you'll fall. Perhaps the disciples, then as now, had not only slipped into caring too much about their self-importance, their position, their power, their pedigree, their office, but were also tempted to try to do ministry in their name according to their ways and not Jesus'.

You see, there is nothing new about reductionism. In the face of sin, death, and the power of the devil, do we stand a lot like Maxwell Smart, the secret agent who would inevitably, you know... Remember the guy with his back up against a brick wall and Smart would try to intimidate his foe by scaring him off with something hopelessly transparent, like, "Right now there are 50 armed police officers surrounding this place." Then, when the enemy doubted him, he would say, "Well, would you believe there's 20 police and an angry dog?" and with the crook still not impressed, Smart would finally suggest, "How about a troop of Girls Scouts on a cookie sale drive?"

Yep, such power, appealing to our self and the world in the face of Satan. It puts evil invisibly in the driver's seat working his simple agenda. He's not clever, you know. He's not even creative. He just plays one card over and over again: divide and conquer, divide and conquer. Can you hear him whispering it in your ears? Oh, and he's real and to that you say, "She's crazy. I mean, in this post-modern, enlightened, rational, reasonable intellectual age, who believes that stuff anymore?" To say that publicly puts one in danger of being carted off to a padded cell and put on a Thorazine drip. So be it. I'd rather be thought to be crazy than to be found unfaithful. ("Amen.") I bet many pastors and leaders in the ELCA say to me, "Jaynan, with all your education and study, you don't really still believe in that stuff? That's crazy." Well, yes I do.

However, I think the crazy ones are the ones who get up to preach, teach, and confess every Sunday, leading the flock and don't believe it. I mean, what do you do with the Bible? What do you do with Luther's writings and all the hymns? Why do you sing 'Almighty Fortress?' What do you do with the rest of the Christian church or the Tanzanian church that I served? Oh, yeah. Like Ryan reminded us, they're just behind the times on their way to being enlightened and smartened up.

Well, the time is now to face it. The best way to empower evil is to convince sinners he doesn't exist. We got so smart, we outgrew all this stuff. Ha! Think about that. So, who does he

have us doubting. If there is no evil, no spiritual warfare, no unquenchable fire, no judgment, then what is Jesus talking about over and over again, even today? What are the disciples arguing about? Who gets the credit for casting out if it doesn't exist, and who is Jesus face-to-face with in the wilderness? What, is he having some kind of moment of psychosis? I guess he can join me in the padded cell on the drip. Thank God. I'd rather be declared crazy with Jesus than unfaithful without him. ("Amen.")

When I say "Him," I don't mean just Jesus. I also mean God, our Heavenly Father. Yes, I just said it. God, my Father. And he should be regarded as such because Jesus said so. It's as simple as that. It should be good enough for all of us. Why isn't it? I want enough with this lame argument that somebody had a bad experience with their failed earthly father. All the more reason to hand over to that suffering child their one Holy Father who will never fail them.

In this scientific age, remember that science is no enemy of our faith. In fact, it keeps helping us in our witness. As we human sinners try to rebuild our towers to Babel with our illusions of greatness and smartness and acts of pure idolatry, think about the scientist Steven Gold, who made the following observation: The most important scientific revolutions all include as their only common feature, the dethronement of human arrogance from one pedestal after another of previous conviction about our centrality in the cosmos. ("Amen.") The more they studied, the more they're convinced of their limits.

Unfortunately, that's not true of Jesus' disciples, especially his teaching theologians, pastors and church leaders who, in their studies after they studied long enough and hard enough, have used a fine tool like the historical critical method as a weapon instead of letting the sharp, two-edged sword of God's Word do the work on them. They've sliced it, diced it and finally disregarded it as refuse, possibly with value in the past but we're too smart for it today. In this wake, the lay people are told that the Word is so complicated that without a special pedigree and years of study, you could never really understand the Bible, a 'don't try this at home' attitude. And they listened and many didn't. The written Word was left unopened, unread on a coffee table gathering dust.

Isn't that kind of like what Luther was facing? God's Word is clear. When you start mocking it, when you start voting on it, calling judgment on those who confess it, excluding those who won't include everything, justifying the unjustifiable, elevating sin by blessing and ordaining it, suspending repentance and the forgiveness of sins and replacing it with cheap imitation grace, appealing to unity when you've brought the schism and division yourselves and then appealing to conscience bound to the self and not to the Holy Word of God, you have cut yourselves off from Christ's own body. You have declared yourself to be one of those few who are against him. You have used Jesus' name as a veneer or a gift wrap on a bomb and you've blown up the Holy Christian church, the institution that held that Word from the inside, and you

have chosen to actively work against God himself by denying him his sovereignty over all things and all people.

Voting to remove God's law and replace it with your own and calling it the gospel of Jesus Christ in his grace is blasphemy. Oh wait, Jesus went down to that charge, too, didn't he. Everyone who hasn't done this — most of the Christian world that hasn't done this, most of the unbelieving world that hasn't done this — is not against us. How do we know? Because Jesus says so and he's quite clear. He's not impressed with numbers. So what, there are over 1200 people here. He said if two or three are gathered, we're good to go. Obviously the true gospel is not about getting our act together or pulling ourselves together or getting our life in its wholeness and fullness and fulfillment together, putting all the pieces together in our unity and oneness.

Now, Jesus is a real cut-up. In fact, the entire church parking lot out here — this is a suggestion — should be designated handicapped parking because by the time Jesus is done with us, every one of us is dismembered. What does he say to us? If it takes precedent over me, cut it out. You just cut it out. Cut it out now, any part of you that becomes so important in your life that it's hurting you and your neighbor: you get rid of it now. He loves you enough to hold the line for you and the two-edged sword.

There was a little girl who had two sisters. She was the youngest. It was tough, you know. Those sisters would pick on her, so it seemed like the only thing she could do was scratch them back. It got to be a bother. She was leaving marks, kept scratching away and her mother kept saying, "No, you have to stop this, you're hurting your relationship with your sisters and you can't do this, this is wrong," but the little girl didn't listen. Wow, that's unusual. So, one time, one day the mother had enough. She went quietly over to the kitchen drawer. She pulled it out, the butcher knife, she pulled out the cutting board, and she said, "Put your fingers on the cutting board. Someone has to save you from yourself." There was terror in the little girl's eyes but the mother's eyes told her something else. There are limits, there are boundaries. They're clear and when you cross them, the people that truly love you, cut you off. Sounds harsh, huh?

I'd like to thank my mom for teaching me a lesson when I was eight years old. I learned from my mother the true meaning of a law/gospel distinction, and it's true, you know. The people that love you the most are the ones that will stick with you, that won't put up with your nonsense, and won't turn you over to yourself. You're too precious to them. They love you beyond themselves. They risk what you're going to think of them for what they need to do for you.

So I ask you, who loves the gay and lesbian community more? Those who draw the line defined by God's Word and enforce that line as tough love that doesn't feel very good, or those who give a word of blessing with no basis and suspend judgment without promise? To do so is to lead astray, and Jesus tells us what happens there, doesn't he? Perhaps right now the ELCA

stands for 'Endeavoring to Lead Christians Astray,' and you'd be better off wearing an extremely large millstone. That's what Jesus says. So, what in your life is so important, so much a priority that you are bound to it, because it's your God? If it's not to be embraced, it's to be cut off. Jesus says, "Your hand, you think you need it to function? But if it takes priority over me, how badly do you need it?" You don't need your arm; you don't need your leg; you don't even need your eye. . . . You do need Jesus. Dear Lord, save us from ourselves, from our selfish identity, from all our sinful orientations that are bound to sin and totally unable to be free from it.

I'm not worth my salt. I don't know what you think of yourself. We're all infected with the H1N1 virus. Oh, it's not the Holy Spirit, it's the holy self. You need to be saved from yourself and not turned over to it. Talk about the opposites when the church now starts turning people outside-in. It's called a new religion. It has nothing to do with sex. It's the religion of the millstone that takes people down deep, deep inside themselves, celebrating self-expression and no self-restraint.

You know, Christianity isn't an "ism." Have you ever thought of that? It's not an "ism," but this is. It's a combo plate of hedonism, humanism, narcissism and legalism with an antinomian style. You suspend God's law and you come in with your own legalistic laundry list of works righteousness, appealing to a nonexistent divine spark within. Let's call it "selfism." It's the new religion with a holy book of self-help under a human institution and it's not worth its salt. I'm pretty convinced now that the ELCA would, at this point, take a salt substitute and, perhaps for good measure and liturgical form, throw it over their left shoulder while appealing to the elemental spirits of good fortune and fulfillment.

And where's the Cross? Where's the Cross? It's nowhere to be found. It has no function when mere mortals and creatures can justify their own sins. They have no need of a savior. Leaving sinners unjustified is leading them astray, and Luther says, "The anti-Christ has raised himself above Christ, despises and changes the commandments of Christ, he declares the conscience free from the law and forces moral obedience to himself rather than to Christ." Again he says, "Whoever wants to be under the gospel and to carry the cross of Christ must be prepared to be rebuked as a rebel."

You know, salt does many things. It flavors, it preserves, it heals, it buoy's up, it provides traction, it even melts things. But salt substitutes, what are they good for? Not worth a lick. Unsalty salt, what's it good for? Salt that's lost its saltiness... Now, someone will probably go off on a sermon, and you probably have. 'I don't think salt can really lose its saltiness,' the chemists say. I don't care what the scientists say. Jesus says salt can lose its saltiness, and I was at the church-wide assembly of the ELCA. Case closed. Jesus wants to make of you, all of you and everyone who is not against you, NACL (salt), a Network of All confessing Christian Lutherans. That's what he wants. He wants to be able to make, give flavor, to that which is bland, to preserve that which is Holy, to heal that which is broken, and to buoy up that which is

sinking, and to help get what is stuck, traction to get unstuck and melt away the cold, the cold hardened hearts and the stopped up ears.

Our Lord Jesus is not doing anything among us in order to realign affiliations or redraw institutional lines or rebuild denominations. Nope. He's shaking his salt. He's making a few 'salt of his earth' for the sake of not just other believers and other Lutherans but for the unbelievers who have not yet been salted. You know, all our votes aren't worth a pinch of salt and neither are our flavors of Lutheranism. The walls must come down because Jesus is always about life and death. He salts and he changes.

In closing, in the Second World War, a platoon of American soldiers wanted to bury one of their comrades who had died in the war. They went to the local church and they asked the priest as they knocked on the door, if they could bury their friend in the cemetery and the priest said, "Is he a Roman Catholic?" They said, "no." He said, "I'm sorry, we can only bury Roman Catholics here." They weren't sure what to do, so they took their friend and they buried him outside the wall of the cemetery. They went home for the night and in the morning they came back to pay their respects to their friend. They couldn't find his grave; it wasn't there. They went to the door of the Catholic Church and they knocked and the same priest came to the door and they said, "We're sorry to bother you again today but we can't find our friend's grave. What happened?" He said, "After you left having buried your friend, I was ashamed of myself and how I treated you, and I spent the rest of the day and night moving the wall of the cemetery to let your friend in."

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not withhold his own son.

Not one of us is worth our salt and we're certainly not worth his body and his blood, and yet he gave his right leg for you. In fact, he gave his arm for you. In fact, he gave his outstretched hands for you and look at the scars. No salt can heal that. He gave up His life to give you back yours, healed, buoyed up, preserved, to live for Him alone, bursting with flavor. We've got a tasty, salty Savior being served up today. Amen.