

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

October 2002. Volume Six, Number Four



Unlocking the Skeletons in Your Closet - p.4

The Keys: An Identification Mark of the Church - p.7

“He’s OK, They’re OK” - p.10

In the Field - p.16

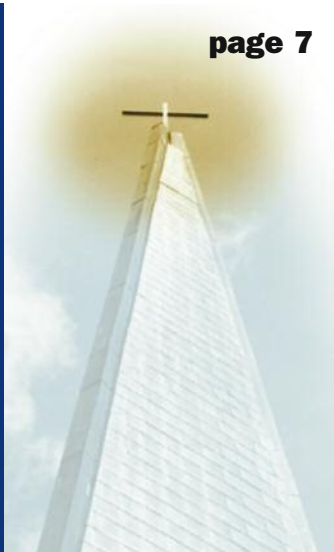


CONTENTS

page 4



page 7



page 10



page 17



page 27



FEATURES

4 Unlocking the Skeletons in Your Closet

By the Rev. Richard Nuffer, Supervisor of Vicarage, Dean of Assessment, Assoc. Prof. Pastoral Ministry & Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary

You are a Christian—baptized soon after birth, raised in church each Sunday, active in your current congregation, perhaps even holding offices in the congregation, LLL, or LWML. You believe in the forgiveness of sins (including your sins) through Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection. You believe that you bodily partake of Him in his holy supper. Yet you are troubled.

7 The Keys: An Identification Mark of the Church

By the Rev. Terry Cripe, Pastor of Christ our Saviour Lutheran Church, Defiance, OH.

Would you think it odd if I stood outside a hospital and asked those entering, "How do you know this is a hospital?" I could walk into ours and find a gift shop inside. Is the hospital's purpose to sell books, magazines and candy? I could go over to the hospital thrift shop and purchase a nice second-hand shirt. Is this the hospital's mission? Like many people in our community, I could go to the hospital's cafeteria for a tasty, inexpensive meal. Is this why the hospital exists? Obviously, none of these services is an identification mark of a hospital! Our Lutheran Confessions teach that the marks of the Church are the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with that pure Gospel teaching (*Apology*, Articles VII and VIII: Of the Church).

10 "He's OK, They're OK"

By the Rev. Larry S. Harvala, North Dakota District President, Fargo, ND.

A common conversation among members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod might be: "What did you think of the pastor's sermon?" Sometimes the work pastors do is considered outstanding by their members. At other times, it is deemed to be downright deficient. Most of the time, however, it is just blandly "ok."

16 In the Field

By Monica Robins

Featuring the Rev. Larry A. Nichols, Pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Smithfield, RI.

For the LIFE of the WORLD

PRESIDENT
Rev. Dr. Dean O. Wenthe

PUBLISHER
Rev. Scott Klemsz

EDITOR
Rev. John T. Pless

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Nancy Embler

ART DIRECTOR
Steve Blakey

For the Life of the World is published quarterly by Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 6600 North Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46825. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the written consent of the publisher of *For the Life of the World*. Copyright 2002. Printed in the United States. Postage paid at Huntington, Indiana. To be added to our mailing list please call 260/452-2150 or e-mail Rev. Scott Klemsz at klemszsc@mail.ctsfw.edu. *For the Life of the World* is mailed to all pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the United States and Canada and to anyone interested in the work of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

He's **O**

They're **K**

By the Rev. Larry S. Harvala

A common conversation among members of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod might be: “What did you think of the pastor’s sermon?”

“It was ok.”

“What did you think of the pastor’s Bible class?”

“It was ok.”

“How was the pastor’s catechism class?”

“It was ok.”

“What did you think of the pastor’s visit?”

“It was ok.”

Sometimes the work pastors do is considered outstanding by their members. At other times, it is deemed to be downright deficient. Most of the time, however, it is just blandly “ok.” The background of the little abbreviation “ok” is uncertain, but it usually means that something is passable, adequate, or acceptable. Considering the power of God’s Word to create faith in those who hear it and to save those who believe it, one would hope for a more lively response to the presentation of that Word! After all, what is our usual response to displays of natural power? Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes usually get a better response than: “That was ok.” Since they are really displays of God’s power, how can the sermons and classes and visits of the pastor make a greater impact on his members? Since they are receiving God’s power, how can members better appreciate the sermons and classes and visits of the pastor?

Perhaps both pastors and members need to be regularly reminded that when the Gospel and the Sacraments are at work, there is a divine power being displayed. This is actually a power that is given to the church in the Office of the Keys. Lutherans understand the word “office” as a right and a duty to perform certain functions.¹ The Office of the Keys is the power to unlock and lock heaven itself through the forgiving and retaining of sins. Where does this take place? It should be taking place wherever the Law and Gospel are at work in the church and that should be in every program and activity. This locking and unlocking should not only be taking place in the church. It should be very obvious and evident. The unlocking and locking of heaven should be particularly evident in the work of the pastor, because the church gives her pastor the public use of her Keys.

The Office of the Keys has not commonly been abbreviated with the initials “OK” but if that were the case, it could give a whole new meaning to this exchange: “What did you think of the pastor’s sermon?” “It was OK!” In this sense, OK would mean “It was Office of the Keys.” It was not just routinely adequate, or “ok,” but it was a powerful display of God’s Word being delivered in such a way as to unlock heaven through the forgiveness of sins, or “OK.” Instead of preaching about forgiveness, it is preaching that actually declares that forgiveness with the full power and authority which God has placed into the Gospel.

Imagine, for instance, that a person had been standing by the cross on the first Good Friday joining in with the crowd demanding Christ’s crucifixion. All of a sudden he heard the words of Jesus: “Father, forgive them . . .” “Wouldn’t it make a powerful impression on that person for the Lord to refer to him in such a direct and personal way concerning his forgiveness? Shouldn’t our sermons today have that same sort of direct and powerful and personal effect? They certainly can because God has given power to the Gospel to be a means of grace. God put enough power into those words of Jesus spoken from the cross and to all of the other words of the Gospel to reach across the miles and through the years to convince us that we are forgiven.

An Office of the Keys pastor, therefore, does much more than



The Office of the Keys is the power to unlock and lock heaven itself through the forgiving and retaining of sins. Where does this take place? It should be taking place wherever the Law and Gospel are at work in the church and that should be in every program and activity. This locking and unlocking should not only be taking place in the church. It should be very obvious and evident. The unlocking and locking of heaven should be particularly evident in the work of the pastor, because the church gives her pastor the public use of her Keys.

prepare a lecture about sin. He gets to know his people in such a way that his preaching of the Law really shows them their personal sinful nature as well as their sins of thought, word, and deed. The Law is aimed directly at their hearts, but with the tact and sensitivity which comes from a caring, pastoral heart. Then, the pastor preaches the Gospel so clearly and directly that his members hear that their sins are truly forgiven and removed and that they are fully at peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. That is OK preaching. It doesn't just inform someone about sin and then remind him of the Gospel. It convicts people of their sin and then absolves them of the same sin. OK preaching isn't just a matter of talking about how we are forgiven. It's really extending forgiveness, really absolving someone. OK preaching doesn't seek just to send folks home with a better understanding of Lutheran doctrine. It means sending them out the door with the certainty of forgiveness. Instead of leaving with the thought that they heard an acceptable Law and Gospel sermon, members leave with the assurance that they are free from sin and guilt and shame. Separated from God a few moments earlier, they are now convinced that they are once again at peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. C. F. W. Walther made a passing reference to a custom where a pastor would "preach on the doctrine of Absolution, (forgiveness), and . . . read the Absolution from the pulpit . . ." ⁴²

We no longer have the custom of reading the absolution at the end of the sermon, declaring forgiveness in the name of Christ. Office of the Keys preaching, however, would really do just that. Whether or not the text was on the forgiveness of sins, somehow forgiveness would be pronounced in the sermon.

Opportunities to open the door of heaven through the forgiveness of sins should be pursued in Bible class and Catechism class as well. In these settings, the OK pastor looks for ways to again personalize and relativize the passages under study. The members of the Bible class or the Catechism class don't just leave a little smarter for having studied God's Word. They leave with the confidence that they are forgiven and yes, smarter as well. There may be occasions where an unrepentant person has their sins retained and the door of heaven locked until they repent. It would be hard to imagine that taking place in the sermon or Bible class. Those types of discipline situations, which are also a very important part of the exercise of the Office of the Keys, are best carried out in private. Just as the goal of excommunication is not the removal but the restoration of a sinner, so also the goal of OK preaching and teaching is the assurance of forgiveness.

The Office of the Keys is a church power. Although the

An Office of the Keys pastor, therefore, does much more than prepare a lecture about sin. He gets to know his people in such a way that his preaching of the Law really shows them their personal sinful nature as well as their sins of thought, word, and deed. The Law is aimed directly at their hearts, but with the tact and sensitivity which comes from a caring, pastoral heart. Then, the pastor preaches the Gospel so clearly and directly that his members hear that their sins are truly forgiven and removed and that they are fully at peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. That is OK preaching.



pastor exercises this authority on behalf of the local congregation, the congregation is not removed from the right and the duty to forgive sins. If the sermons and the classes and the visits of a pastor can be described as "ok" by a member, another question could also be asked of the pastor: "How active is your congregation?" "They're ok" may be a common, but unenthusiastic response. A congregation, however, must never lose sight of the place of forgiveness in their overall program and life. There's more to being a Lutheran congregation than having good dinners, right laws, and helpful people. The Senior Citizen's Club, the legislature, and most civic clubs have those things too! The one thing that a Lutheran congregation can do that none of those other groups can do is to give God's forgiveness to repentant sinners. A congregation whose focus is on forgiveness is an Office of the Keys congregation, an "OK" congregation.

There is a desire to restore Private Confession and Absolution as a regular practice in our churches. This is certainly a laudable goal and fully in accord with the Office of the Keys. Luther included the question in his form of Private Confession and Absolution: "Do you also believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" ⁴³ This doesn't exalt the pastor to some special position, but conveys to the hearers that their forgiveness is just as certain as if they were at the foot of the cross and hearing it from the Lord Himself. The "Office of the Keys" or

"OK" pastor doesn't use the power of his office to merely move fonts and flag stands, but works in everything he does to move his members to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins. The "Office of the Keys" or "OK" congregation doesn't think that giving their Keys to the pastor merely means that he should lock up when everyone leaves. It means they should take every opportunity to recognize the power of God at work in the means of grace and walk in newness of life.

1 Francis Pieper. *Christian Dogmatics*. Volume II. (St. Louis, 1951: CPH, 1951). p. 331. This definition is included in a footnote where Pieper quotes Kromayer.

2 "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod" in *Essays for the Church*. Vol. II. (St. Louis: CPH, 1992). p. 42.

3 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors. *The Book of Concord*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000). p. 361.

The Rev. Larry S. Harvala is President of the North Dakota District in Fargo, ND.