

Seminary Graduation Sermon, 2007: No Other Name Can Save

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*Acts 4:12—Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other
name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Does a name matter? "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." So goes the old saying. Shakespeare tried to get us to believe that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Maybe he's right when comparing one language to another, or in making the obvious point that different languages have different names for the same thing. But when it comes to our everyday life and the names our mothers gave us, that little word, that little sound means a lot. To us Paul, Ben, Brad, Philip, Jason—these are far more to us than an arbitrary set of syllables and sounds. Our names set us apart from every other human being on earth. They point us out in all our individuality, in all our uniqueness. Our names are the signs that people use when they want to refer to us alone, and no one else.

In a few minutes, I will be calling out your names, one by one, as you come up to receive your diplomas. And the second I do so, I know that the sound of your name is going to signify so much more to you, so much more to your teachers, so much more to your friends, your relatives, your parents, your wives, and your children than the simple words "Jon," "Nathan," "Bounkeo," "David". The second I call out your name, we are going to be thinking about you, and your own personal history. What it took for you to get here. All the long years you studied. All the effort and hard work you put forth.

Maybe your name will never be written in *Who's Who*. Maybe strangers will never walk up to you on the street and say, "Hey, aren't you so and so?" But to all those who know and love you, your name is precious. We'll hear it, and we'll think about all we know about you. We'll think about all you mean to us. Our hearts will swell with joy and love.

That's what makes what Peter says here so extraordinary. He's saying that however precious the sound of a particular name might be to us, there's one name that is infinitely more precious than any other. However important our personal history may be to us and others, there is one man's history that rewrites all our stories. Apart from him, all names lose their significance. Apart from him, even life itself is meaningless. That's true because:

- No Other Name Can Save—
I. This Is Your Bold Confession
II. This Is Your Urgent Mission

I.

I look at Peter and John in this text, and I am filled with awe at how bold they are. I mean, if I were one of the Jewish leaders and listening to them, I would be thinking, "That's outrageous! How dare they!" Do you remember the entire story? Peter and John had gone up to the temple to pray. At the temple gate, they healed a man who was born disabled, incapable of walking. How did they do it? Peter takes a name on his lips, the name of a crucified criminal, and says, "In the name of Jesus, Messiah, the Man from Nazareth, walk!"

Then they go into the temple courts themselves—the Temple, mind you, the place where God said, "I choose it as a dwelling for my name" (Dt 12:11)—and there they preach a sermon to the astonished crowd, "This man was healed in Jesus' name. He's the Messiah, your promised Savior. Moses predicted his coming. All the prophets spoke of him. Turn to God. Trust in Jesus." Isn't that audacious? I mean, didn't God say, "I am the LORD, that is my name, and my glory I will not give to another, nor my praise to idols" (Is 42: 8). And now, right in the LORD'S temple, Peter and John are making great the name of Jesus, and telling people to put their trust in him.

It sounded more than audacious to the temple guard. It sounded like criminal blasphemy! Making a mere man equal with God! And an executed felon at that! No wonder they arrested Peter and John and put them in prison. For the actual setting of Peter's words, we must turn the page to the next day. Peter and John are standing before the high and the mighty, some of the very same people who had judged Jesus and said he was guilty of death. Do Peter and John hold back? Do they make nice? Do they enter the spin zone?

Not at all! Right into the teeth of those high and mighty rulers who oppose them they say: "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed...Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved...we cannot help but speak what we have seen and heard." That's a bold confession.

Where did that boldness come from? From some inner reservoir of strength available only to heroic characters like Peter and John? You know that's not true! In the garden of Gethsemane, these men had both been failures. When Jesus had needed them, they had fallen asleep on him. When he was arrested, they lost their faith and ran away. Only the power of forgiveness could restore them. Only the joy that came from seeing the risen Lord, from hearing him forgive them, name them brothers still (abject failures though they had been)—only this unconditional gospel could have ignited this fire in their hearts and put this faithful confession on their lips.

That's the only power that will make a bold confessor out of you. Remember even Peter and John failed the test in the garden of Gethsemane. And this happened after they had spent three years in the greatest seminary that ever was with the best seminary professor that ever taught. If that's true, who of us can say, "I'm better than they are!" The diploma we hand out today won't make you bullet-proof! I know when I look at myself, I'm only too aware of how easy it is to back down. To shave the truth. To shape it so it fits what itching ears want to hear.

I'm sure you know what I mean. And I'm sure each one of you has your own doubts and fears that grip you as you consider yourselves and as you think about the challenges of modern day ministry. Then again there's the fact that you will begin your ministry at such a troubled time in our synod. It all seems so intimidating. Who is sufficient for these things?

Remember then that you don't follow a dead Jesus, but a living Christ! He's the one with the saving name, not you. Are you weighed down by your own sense of sin and unworthiness? Look to Christ! On Calvary's cross, he suffered the penalty you deserved. Now there is no more condemnation for you. Do you feel too weak? Look to Christ! He looked death in the eye, and death blinked. He makes the blind see and the lame leap like a gazelle. He is with you always! That's his promise. And the world will fall down before his promise will ever fail. Okay, maybe you wonder whether you'll be able come up with the right words to say. Again, look to Christ! His words give life to the dead and call things that are not as though they were. And he has put his words into your mouth! Speak them, brother! If he can make a bold confessor out of Peter, if he can make a faithful confessor out of John, he can certainly make a bold and a faithful confessor out of you!

II.

These days we surely do need bold confessors of Christ's saving name. Proclaiming the passion of the Christ becomes our mission to the world precisely because there is no other name that can save.

"No other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." "Salvation is found in no one else." Peter says it as emphatically as he can. Apart from Christ there is only madness, sadness, sin, and woe. However happy people may feel without Christ, however blissful their ignorance may be, they are under God's wrath because of their sin.

Only Jesus saves. Christ and none other! It was this conviction, this Spirit-worked conviction, that drove Peter and John to act the way they did. To speak the way they did. To those who had gathered at Pentecost. To a disabled beggar looking for a handout. To the crowd of astonished onlookers that gathered after his healing. To the very same people who had condemned their master. They spoke in the streets of Jerusalem, in the temple courts, and in people's homes—always prepared to declare the name in season and out of season. Why? Paul sums it up so well, "The love of Christ 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" (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Now as we look out on our synodical scene today, we might well ask questions such as, "Have we lost our first love? Has our zeal for the Lord become a smoldering wick? Has the sense of urgency displayed by Peter and John here, that zeal for the saving name, has it become for us in these grey and latter days a kind of ho-hum thing?" "Ah well, the doors are open. If people want to seek us, they can find us. They know where we are. Besides, all this going out into the highways and byways stuff can get kind of messy. Maybe even a little dangerous."

I don't know about you, but these days I'm asking myself these questions. And speaking for myself, I have to hang my head in shame. "Awake O Spirit who didst fire the watchmen of the church's youth." I bravely sing those words. But I wonder, "Where is that zeal in me? Where is the urgency? Where is my first love?" I shouldn't wonder if thoughts like this trouble you, too. If you're with me, you also know that we can't manufacture these things in ourselves. We can only humbly and penitently pray, "Dear God change me! If you don't, I must remain as I am."

Then we must look to Christ! Look at how great, how wide, and how strong his love was for us all. He wanted us to be his own when we had no thought of him. He came to find us when we were running away. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost," he says. There is nothing in his heart but this most eager and fiery love to find us and hold us and keep us as his own forever.

In fact, his love is a great wide ocean that swallows up all our sins—including our half-hearted efforts, our feeble and lackluster response. And this love, this love has the power to make all things new. It will make us new again, and strong, and eager to speak his name, the only name that saves.

If that message was urgently needed so long ago, it is no less needed now. The world is in as much darkness as ever it was. They tell us we live in postmodern times, times in which people seem incapable of believing in any universal truth. People are so cynical, so tired of being sold and schmoozed and stroked, that their guard is up. They don't want to be taken in by someone else's big idea.

In fact the great universal truth of our graceless age is that there is no single right way anymore. Instead there are many names, many ways, many gods, many spiritualities. Choose one that works for you! And so people do. The tragedy is: all those paths lead nowhere. Yet folks still go looking. They still go looking for something, anything that can bring them peace. Desperately seeking spirituality. Ever seeking, never finding. Each building their own designer religion, their own mystery, their own god who cannot see, cannot speak, cannot save.

Ah, the lies, the lies that kill, keeping people chained in darkness. You know them. You've heard them. Now you hear the Lord's summons, "Who will go for me?" Who will go? Who will speak God's truth into that desperate darkness? Who will free the world from lies that kill? Men, that's why you're here. That's why you've studied. That's why you've trained to be the Savior's troops on the day of battle. You are true men of Issachar. You know the times. You know their urgency.

Gold and silver you may not have. But you do have the Name, the only name that saves. The name is Jesus. Go out there and preach it, brothers! Make his name great!

Amen.