

# Sermon For Friends of the Seminary Day

Text: Acts 1:1-5

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Lord God, Heavenly Father, sanctify us through your truth; your word is truth. Amen.

Hear the opening words of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

Are you sure you want to do it this way? Is there a more economical way of doing it? These are fair questions to ask, aren't they? Your car breaks down. You take it to the garage, and the mechanic tells you what it is going to cost to fix it. Doesn't the question run through your mind, "I wonder if somebody else would do it for less?" You decide to remodel your bathroom. A contractor comes in and gives you a quote. Certainly, it would be wise to check and see if somebody else would submit a lower bid. Of course, price isn't the only concern. There is the matter of quality as well. If the cheaper repair is going to be less reliable, or the lower bid involves inferior materials, the cheaper way may be more expensive in the long run.

We can ask the same questions about training pastors. We certainly don't do it the cheapest way here, do we? You are surrounded today by a beautiful 80-acre campus that is wonderfully kept up. Look at the number of well-maintained buildings that are here filled with the latest technology, and consider the staff necessary to take care of them. Then there are the seventeen faculty members, living in homes on campus, called to supervise the education of the students who attend here. We may be proud of the school we have, but is it necessary? If someone has described a university in its essence as a single table with a professor on one end and a student on the other, couldn't a seminary be a small table with a seasoned pastor on one end and his assistant-in-training on the other? It has been done that way.

Then there is the question of quality. How much education really is necessary? Does the training have to be so thorough? Isn't it enough that our new pastors love the Lord Jesus deeply, read their Bibles regularly and are willing to witness to their faith? That is all the qualifications that some pastors have in our country. What a lot of questions! Are there any answers? To find some guidance, let's look at the way Jesus trained his disciples.

St. Luke tells us where we are at the beginning of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. We are between the two chief parts of Jesus' ministry. The first part Luke covered in his gospel. It began with Jesus' baptism and continued for three years ending with his suffering and death. Of that time Luke says, "I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." Among other things those three years were a time of intense education and training for the disciples.

And what a time it was! Just think what sights the disciples saw! They beheld the power of the very Son of God when Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee. It made such an impression on them that they cried

out, "Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?" They witnessed Jesus' love as he fed the multitudes, healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised people from the dead.

The disciples not only saw wonderful things. They heard great things as well. They heard Jesus sound the theme of his ministry when he proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Then, when they listened to the Sermon on the Mount, they found out that the news wasn't so good. There Jesus told them that unless their righteousness, their right standing before God, exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisees, the most pious people they knew, they could not enter the kingdom that was coming near. But Jesus' ministry did not consist of making demands that he knew his disciples could not fulfill. In the same sermon Jesus told them that he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. He would meet the demands that God's holy law laid upon sinners. He would fulfill the expectations of the prophets when they foretold the Lord's great salvation. Indeed, he was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. He would be the necessary sacrifice for their sins.

The disciples received a complete training in the three years they spent with Jesus during his earthly ministry. He even gave them a brief time to practice being proclaimers of the kingdom of God. He sent them out to the villages of Galilee so they could experience firsthand the power of Jesus' word at work.

Now this time was over. It ended with Jesus' suffering and death. From now on the ascended Lord would continue his ministry through the disciples themselves. He told them as much in the Upper Room on the night before his crucifixion when he said, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning." Now Jesus' work was to be their work. Were they ready?

Well, they were men who loved Jesus, and they were deeply loyal to him. "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," they told him when many of his other disciples were leaving him. And they were clear on who he was. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Peter proclaimed when Jesus asked what they thought of him. But then Jesus told this same Peter that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, to be betrayed into the hands of the Jewish leaders, and then to be handed over to be crucified. When Peter heard these words, he cried out, "This be far from you, Lord." In Peter's mind Jesus was to be a king of glory, not a condemned, crucified criminal. He couldn't imagine Jesus' time on earth ending in such an ignoble way. The same was true for all the disciples. When they were in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus, and it became evident that he was going to surrender to his enemies rather than fight against them, they fled disillusioned. When faced with the likelihood of Jesus' condemnation and death Peter denied that he even knew who Jesus was. What a way for Jesus' ministry to continue, in the hands of fearful men with a faulty understanding of what Jesus was all about. What a mutilated gospel for us sinners to hear.

Jesus thought so too. Luke tells us, "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." The risen Lord was no longer living with his disciples as he had in the past. But during these forty days he appeared to them on a regular basis. He did so for two reasons. First of all, he wanted them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had physically risen from the dead. He ate with his disciples. He allowed them to touch the wounds on his body. They were to know with the utmost certainty that the grave no longer held his body. He had risen and was sitting at the Father's right hand in eternal glory.

But these forty days were also a time of instruction. And the theme of that instruction was the same as it was when Jesus began his ministry: the kingdom of God. He spoke to them, Luke tells us, about the kingdom of God. What do you suppose Jesus told them? I'm sure he told them they were going to be disappointed if they were expecting a kingdom of splendor in this world with earthly boundaries where Jesus would reign with great glory and might. He must have reviewed for them what he told Pontius Pilate, that his kingdom was not a kingdom of this world, but rather a kingdom where the truth of salvation was proclaimed and where that truth resided in the hearts of its citizens. In fact, the disciples were to learn that Jesus' kingdom was more of an activity than a place. His kingdom would be wherever God's saving activity was taking place. It surely came near to this earth when Jesus began his ministry and preached God's Word to the Jewish people. And what greater display of saving kingdom activity could there be than the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But that kingdom activity would not end with Jesus' ascension. The disciples would continue the ministry of proclaiming the gospel that Jesus had begun, and when they did, the kingdom of God would continue to come near to sinners. What Jesus had told his disciples behind locked doors on Easter evening must have been a message he hammered home to them during these forty days: "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations. You are witnesses of these things. I am sending you." After forty days of intense teaching about the kingdom of God, the disciples were ready. Jesus sent them, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the good news.

Here is the scriptural rationale for our seminary training of future pastors. Oh, we want men who love Jesus, whose hearts have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. We want men who are fiercely loyal to their Savior. But we want people who are thoroughly trained in biblical truth as well.

We want preachers who will tell us that we are saved solely through Jesus' blood, not by the power of God's Spirit working changes within us as some churches believe. We want to know that the saving blood of Jesus is a well of salvation that we can return to day after day for cleansing, not that we are saved once, but then our continued relationship with God depends on how we live as some churches proclaim. We want preachers who assure us that through the water of baptism united with the divine message of forgiveness we are dressed in robes of Christ righteousness and are his children forever. We don't want baptism dismissed as simply an ecclesiastical rite of dedication as some churches practice it. We want preachers who will announce to us that in the Lord's Supper we truly receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, and not that Holy Communion is merely a ritual in which we remember what Christ has done, valuable as that may be. We want preachers and teachers who are deeply rooted in a knowledge of God's Word, men who have studied it thoroughly and who will proclaim it faithfully no matter what the pressure might be to do otherwise. Our prayer is that through the work of such men we, who are sinners often deeply frightened and disturbed by the way our daily sins affect our relationship with God, might be led daily in repentance to the cross of Christ to hear his comforting words, "It is finished!" The work of salvation is successfully completed. Christ's resurrection proclaims it so. And now he constantly pleads for us before his Father's throne. Those biblical truths are what I want my pastor to proclaim to me.

The work of training such faithful pastors takes the Holy Spirit working in the hearts and minds of such men. And it takes time and money. Could we do this work more quickly? Actually, when we graduate men from this institution, we impress on them that their training is not yet complete. We encourage them to continue their education by returning here or by using other opportunities during their time of ministry for further education, and we encourage their congregations to support them in this. Could we train pastors by a different method at a different place? Sure. But through the diligent efforts and sacrifices of the generations who preceded us the Lord has blessed us with this seminary. It fulfills an important role in the mission of proclaiming God's kingdom. Thank you for being here today. Thank you for giving of your time, on a Saturday morning no less, to support this work, our work, yours and mine, of training up faithful workers in the Lord's kingdom. Thank you for assisting us in enabling Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to carry out its mission: **TO PREPARE MEN EMPOWERED TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM.**

Amen.