FROM THE CHAPEL

September 12, 2001
Dr. Gregory Schulz
Text: Exodus 20:7

(Note: Dr. Schulz preached this chapel the day after the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.)

Text: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” Exodus 20:7

Dear fellow citizens of the City of God, do you know Friedrich Nietzsche’s parable of the madman?

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they yelled and they laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances. “Whither is God” he cried. “I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of the deed too great for us? Must we not become gods simply to seem worthy of it? ...

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time has not come yet ...”

It has been related further that on that same day the madman entered diverse churches and there sang his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied each time, “What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?” (The Gay Science, 125)

Nietzsche’s parable of the madman is about bravely and honestly accepting the consequences of whatever we believe or disbelieve. The people of the parable did not believe in God; yet they had not accepted the consequences of God’s death: “Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?” Nietzsche was a genius at diagnosing the unhealthy state of affairs in Western civilization – though he was certainly no healer of souls!

In the shadow of yesterday’s attacks on our country, we have a need for large-scale diagnosis and a close-to-home program of treatment. A stream of consciousness view: Yesterday. A couple of hours in my basement study…. I decide to take a break from a paper I’m writing…. Upstairs…. A cup of tea in the microwave, a basket of laundry to sort while catching the news on t.v…. It is 8:00. Smoke pours out of one tower of the World Trade Center…. Katie Curic and Matt Lauer commenting on what seemed to be a terrible traffic control accident, then in real time the second airliner impact on the other skyscraper…. As the on-air speculation develops I think of all the pilots I know and realize this: For these crashes to have happened, the entire flight crews on those craft must first have been murdered…. A report of the Pentagon attack from inside…. As I see the pictures of the Pentagon personnel milling about the point of attack, I notice especially those in Air Force uniforms, since I wear that same uniform regularly as an officer in the Air Force’s Civil Air Patrol…. Walking with my wife after supper I see absolutely none of our planes in our sky…. Late night … My daughter, who is active Air Force and happens to be home on recruitment leave this week, receives a phone call from one of her
How does one organize this stream of happenings? With an organizing principle; or rather (we must argue) with the organizing Person. Although I am heartened by the Commander-in-Chief’s evoking Psalm 23 and by the sincere Christian hopes voiced by many of the New York spokespersons, I think that you will find that many of our countrymen are able, even in this extreme moment, to voice only a paper-thin, generic, therapeutic notion of God. To be straightforward about it, Western civilization, for at least the past century or two, has been acting as if God is dead; without honestly considering the consequences. But our task cannot stop at mere diagnosis; we believers, we who have a thick belief in the true God, have construction work to do.

Before I address our task in this terrorized world, we may benefit from a bit of personal diagnosis. Have we honestly accepted the consequences of our believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (as Blaise Pascal has it)? Let me co-opt Nietzsche’s parable. Suppose that someone shows up bright and early in the Schwan library, then in your office, then in every single one of your classes (not just in Theology) crying incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” Would you be thinking, “He’s out of his mind?” Or, would you have a coherent answer for him? And then, would you be able stick with him for as long as it takes?

Now this is a very serious matter, as we can see in light of our text, the second commandment. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” To “take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” To “take the LORD’s name in vain” means to regard Him as something unsubstantial (nihil), unreal and worthless. To take His name in vain means to believe that, for all intents and purposes, God is dead.

In terms of the parable of the madman, we can conduct a thought experiment. We often say that we believe in God – I hear His name being invoked constantly (“God, your hair looks great!” “Jeez, that was a bad call!”) – but what are the real-life consequences of our belief? What is our real belief?

Here is a litmus test: How exactly would the things we say and do and plan be different if God really were dead? Would our scholarship, our term papers, the substance of our lectures and discussions, the agendas for our meetings, our performances, our conduct with our dates or our spouses, our relationships with our friends and enemies, our career commitments, be substantially different if Nietzsche was right and Moses was wrong? Perhaps the death of God would simply mean painting over a few Christian icons here and there (as Wauwatosa was compelled to paint over the picture of the cross on its city seal); nothing more.

But, “We seek God!” There is work to do before the night comes, even if September 2001 finds us in the twilight. We do not want to take the name of the LORD our God in vain; so how do we take Him for real?

By turning WLC into a madhouse. Think, really think, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. Think (as all the called workers in this school of His church have promised to do) in terms of the Lutheran Confessions. Here is a principle passage from Article 4 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “God cannot be apprehended nisi per Verbum, except through the Word.” This principle yields three consequences for us believers here today in this institution.

First, we must be verbal in order to be godly. “God cannot be apprehended nisi per Verbum, except through the Word.” Nisi per Verbum can initially be translated “except verbally.” There is a Herculean task facing this college. It is the interpretative task. How do we, in this postmodern and post-God period, apprehend God in the respective academic disciplines and in our work as a whole? Come, let us reason together: The means and methods of most of our college’s disciplines are data, graphs, calculations, icons and symbols. These are non-verbal. Our task is to connect these things with the Gospel. It would be disingenuous for a Christian liberal arts college not to establish and then to fail to maintain this connection. But the Gospel is verbal. It would be impious to expect the Gospel to be translated into the idiom of our disciplines; our disciplines must be interpreted in terms of the Gospel.

This means (to put it philosophically) that our discourse needs to be Aristotelian, so to speak. Aristotelian logic is the logic of verbal language. It is the logic of verbal terms (words), which express concepts, which represent the essence(s) of things. You might say that this is the metaphysics of the Christian Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions and of the historic Christian discourse (see for instance Luther’s 1518 Heidelberg Disputation).

One implication of the realization that we apprehend God and reality verbally is, in my view, that we (students, yes; but faculty and administration in particular) need to do a great deal more writing and in-depth discussing among ourselves regarding Christian (i.e., Lutheran) teaching and scholarship. Christian Today reports that every faculty member at Wheaton College, Illinois is regularly required to produce a 30-
page paper demonstrating how he or she integrates the Gospel of Jesus Christ with his or her specific discipline. As a college of individual students and individual teachers, we don’t know what we know until we write it out. Not to integrate the Word of God into our work is the academic version of taking His name in vain; it makes Him unsubstantial and unreal here and there. So, let us rejoice at every opportunity to write – as the biblical strong man rejoices to run a race!

Second, we as a college must be verbally devoted to the Word of God Incarnate. This LORD of our commandment is Jesus of Nazareth. “God cannot be apprehended, nisi per Verbum, except through the Word.” John’s gospel tells us, “In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God ... The Word became flesh and tabernacled for a while among us.” The Latin translation of “Word” in John 1 is Verbum, the same word used in our confessional principle. In Philippians Paul writes about this Word “who humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted Him and gave Him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow – in Heaven, on earth, and under the earth – and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” Jesus is the LORD of this commandment.

Jesus is the same yesterday (on the Tuesday that will live in infamy) as He is today (on the day after), as He will be tomorrow, no matter where we are deployed. Our confessional principle is part of an article that’s all about our faith in this Jesus who has justified us. His cross must not be painted out of our hearts and minds. We must become what we are, by God’s grace: Christians.

This means that we believers cannot help but cultivate a being-toward-Christ. Our being is hierarchical. Christ is the head, we are members of His body. This has undeniable implications for our roles as teachers and as learners, as men and as women, as ministers and as laity. We will not let the world around us “squeeze us into its own mould” (Phillips’ translation of that Romans 12 passage), we will not limit ourselves to the aspirations of our aspiration groups. The blood of the Redeemer is the blood that we bring to the hurting and the dying of this country and of this world. In obedience to Christ we aspire to bring every thought captive to Him, to live out our vocations for Him, to live in line with His will for all our relationships – which is another way of saying that we apprehend God “through the Word.”

Third, we as a college must be deliberately employing “the visible Word”, the means of grace. “God cannot be apprehended nisi per Verbum, except through the

Word.” Augustine, and after him Luther, refer to Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution as “the visible Word.” These means of God’s grace are the lamp lit in these early morning hours (or perhaps I should say, In these waning twilight hours) of the twenty-first century for people to find God. More technically, they are the lamp by which God calls, gathers, enlightens and institutionalizes people into the City of God, the Holy Christian Church.

Contra Nietzsche, this lamp of the visible Word is something we human beings did not kindle; it was handed down to us, across the generations. This Verbum is our intellectual bloodline. But, of course, we can extinguish it through disuse and inattention. We can, if we wish, take the name of the LORD our God in vain. For a time. Still, in this day and age as in every day and age, God cannot be apprehended except through the Word – verbally, in Christ Incarnate, through the “visible Word” only.

I give you a new parable, my brothers:

Have you not heard of those madmen who held up a lit lantern in the twilight and built a college and cried incessantly, “We teach God! We teach God!” It has been related further that in these last days, amid the laughter of the crowd in the marketplace, fearful lest they take the name of the living God in vain, they yet persist in proclaiming the foolishness of Christ crucified. “God is alive! God remains alive!” they insist – with all their actions and in all their words.