

Romans 10:14,15
“What A Privilege”

What a privilege!

What a privilege for me to be the guest preacher for this Sunday on which you are emphasizing ministerial education.

What a privilege for me to serve you every day as administrator of our synod’s ministerial education schools, responsible for the schools and programs training the next generation of pastors and teachers, staff ministers and missionaries.

Before serving you in this way, I had the privilege to serve as president of Michigan Lutheran Seminary, our boarding and day school in Saginaw for students in grades 9-12 who are interested in preparing already at high school age to be pastors, teachers and missionaries in the Church.

What a privilege I had to watch them come as squirrely young freshmen, just weeks past confirmation, and leave as young adults, ready to make considered judgments about how the Lord might use them in service for the rest of their lives.

Our students began reading the Bible from their very first day on campus, beginning at Genesis 1:1. They finished with the last verse of Revelation at the end of January in their junior year, and after a brief review of church history, they came to my senior religion class. What a privilege I had to review the chief doctrines of the Bible with them, applying those doctrines to their high school lives, their lives as college students, as young married people, and beyond.

I think it’s because I taught that capstone religion class that the students stay in touch with me after they graduate. I am in contact with them almost every day. Sometimes the grads are just updating me on their lives. Other times they are saying thank-you for their religious instruction. Sometimes they ask me questions about issues we had discussed. And sometimes they ask questions that they don’t think we ever covered in doctrine class.

I had an e-mail like that recently. The graduate asked, “How is it fair that God would send to hell children who never had a chance to hear the gospel?” That’s a good question, isn’t it? How would you answer it?

I began my answer by reminding my grad of the sure promises of God, that we are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ as Savior. John 3:16, John 14:6, and Acts 4:12 are very clear.

Then I reminded my grad that God really does have a plan to pass on the message of the gospel to every person. He began that when he made the first promise of the Savior (Genesis 3:15) in the hearing of Adam and Eve. They could pass it on to their children.

God repeated that plan in the case of Noah. There were eight people on the ark, and from them come every tribe and language and nation and people. They knew the promise of the Savior, and could pass it on to the people who meant the most to them, their children. Their children could learn it from the people who meant the most to them, their parents. And God placed a rainbow in the sky to remind parents to pass on the promise to their children.

At the time just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his followers to take the gospel to all nations. They have done just that. In our fellowship, in the 1890's, we tried to find a place where the gospel had not been spoken. We found the Apache Indian reservation in northeastern Arizona, we pooled our resources as a synod, walking together, and we sent missionaries there. Today there are sixth generation Apache Lutherans. One hundred years later, to celebrate the anniversary, we searched for places where the gospel chain is still broken. We found that the harvest is still plentiful and the time is short.

I sent the e-mail. My grad responded, "OK, I admit that it's not God's fault that there are children who do not hear the gospel. But you have to admit that there are children who do not hear the gospel. Doesn't that make you feel bad?"

I admitted that it does. And there is a biblical answer to feeling bad about that: Romans 10:14,15. Where do you fit in that chain?

That was not the first time my grad had heard that answer. When he was a freshman, missionaries from home and abroad spoke to him and his classmates. When he was a sophomore, we took him to Martin Luther College so he could see the place where he could continue training for the ministry. When he was a junior, we brought MLC reps to Saginaw and invited his parents to listen to them, so his mother could get used to the idea that her son might go to college and then serve the Lord far away, and his father could get used to the idea that college might cost something and then his son might earn a salary based on free-will offerings and not commissions.

When he was a senior he shadowed a Lutheran elementary school teacher for a couple of days to see what that work is like. He shadowed a pastor on the weekend to see what it is that pastors do outside of corporate worship. He could participate every summer in Project Titus to see how the gospel works across cultures.

And every day, in chapel and in religion class, he could see people sin and God forgives them, how people fall away and God calls them back in repentance and faith, how God comes to us as we turn away, again and again, and continues to call us by his gospel.

At the end of all of that study, the question my grad asked is turned on its head in real life. It's not, "How is it fair that God would send to hell. . ." If it were fair, we would all go to hell. The real question is, "How is it fair that God would take you and me to heaven through faith in Jesus as our Savior?" "How is it fair that I know about Jesus now?"

I was reminded of that the last time I had an unbeliever in my classroom.

Every year a local public school sends a group of students for one day to Michigan Lutheran Seminary. The public school students are part of a conference Student Council exchange program.

We always try to arrange for the students to visit one period of the senior doctrine course, which I had the privilege of teaching. On that day MLS seniors learn the Great Exchange as one simple way to explain the gospel to someone who has never heard it before.

Recently the visiting Student Council group from the public school included a young woman who was wearing a headscarf that identified her as a practicing Muslim. I wondered how she would react to hearing the Great Exchange.

I teach the Great Exchange in four parts:

Part One – What God Requires

God requires you to be perfect in order to get into heaven. He says that if you have perfect holiness and no sin, you can live with him forever in the place where there is perfect holiness and no sin. “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

Part Two – What God Sees

When God looks at each one of us, he sees someone who is not perfect. In fact, regardless of how good we look outwardly, each of us has sinned. As a result, we are not perfectly holy, and we deserve to be rewarded with eternal death in hell. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Part Three – Human Solutions

When people realize the problem, they come up with their own solutions. Some people hope that they will be able to get into heaven because they are not so bad as other people they know. The problem is that they still have sin. Other people hope that they can get into heaven because they are improving in life, and are not nearly so bad as they used to be. The problem is that they too still have sin in their lives. Still other people hope that they can get into heaven because they have tried to do enough good to balance out the bad they have done. The problem is that our good works do not make up for our sin. “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10). “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Part Four – God’s Solution

God saw the problem, and sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to take care of it. Jesus lived a perfect life. He never sinned. He always did the right thing. He was righteous and holy. He deserved to live forever in heaven, but instead he took the punishment of

hell and died on the cross. His death paid for our sin, and his life is our righteousness. That's the Great Exchange, our sin causing his death, his righteousness causing us to have eternal life in heaven. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus proved that everything was true by rising from the dead, which we celebrate this morning.

When I got to Part Four in the presentation, the Muslim girl raised her hand. "That's not fair," she objected. "Everyone should be responsible for their own sin."

"You're right, that's not fair," I answered. "That's why we call it grace."

My dear friends, by grace you sit here this morning as Christians. By grace you are members and friends of this congregation, pooling your resources so that the gospel can be preached and taught in your Lutheran elementary school. By grace we are members of our fellowship, pooling our resources so that more pastors and teachers and missionaries can be trained and sent into the world.

By grace you have the opportunity to serve in this glorious gospel chain. Romans 10:14,15. You have endless opportunities to serve in this congregation. Your service is not a way for you to get to heaven, and it's not demanded. It's without obligation. You can serve with whatever gifts and with whatever opportunities the Spirit has given you. Some of you may even train to be pastors and teachers, staff ministers and missionaries.

What a privilege!