

Pentecost 5B – Proper 9 (7/5/09 – *The Scandal of Christ and His Gospel*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Christ and His Gospel are – quite frankly – *scandalous*. That’s what our *Holy Gospel* for this *Fifth Sunday after Pentecost* is telling us in verses 2 and 3. *And on the Sabbath He began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astonished, saying, “Where did this Fellow get these things? What is the wisdom given to Him? How are such mighty works done by His hands? Is not this the Carpenter, the Son of Mary and Brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?” And they took offense at Him.* [MK 6.2-3] The original Greek of that last sentence uses the word we get our *scandalize* from. We could translate: *And they were being scandalized in connection to Him* – they began to be scandalized ... and they continued to be scandalized with regard to Jesus, His Word, and His deeds. That Jesus had lived a normal life among them thirty years relatively unnoticed – apparently He did **not** do anything miraculous as a child, contrary to the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* – and was **now** doing miraculous signs and preaching such a powerful message was a scandal to them ... an offense ... a snare for their souls. And the evil one takes full advantage of this – also in our day.

That **is** the way of unbelief, you know: to be scandalized by Christ, by His Truth, and by His Gospel. And as Christians we need to be fully aware of this – both for ourselves and for others. For ourselves, because our own sinful flesh is just like those Nazarenes who heard about Jesus and the healings that He had performed elsewhere in Galilee and heard His authoritative preaching and teaching of God’s Word ... and then rejected Him. **Our** flesh is just as offended when we hear God’s Word condemn **our** actions (or thoughts or words). **Our** flesh is just as scandalized when we are brought to the truth that we cannot believe in Jesus Christ by our own reason or strength. **Our** flesh looks for plausible excuses **not** to apply God’s Word of the Law to **our** situation. *Yes, God’s Word may talk about that ... but it doesn’t apply to what I’m doing, it’s for those people over there doing that. Yes, God’s Word says that ... but that was then and this is now. Yes, God’s Word may condemn what I’m doing ... but it’s really a very small thing ... there are much worse sins – I’m not so bad, really ... far better than the average. Look at the scandalous life of that governor in South Carolina ... or any number of people in Hollywood.*

Beware of your sinful flesh – don’t let the truth be a snare for your soul! *Sin boldly*, as Luther said – that is, **own** your sin ... **own up** to your sin ... admit freely that you are a sinner ... and that God’s Word condemns your sin (and you along with it, if you don’t repent!). Admit your sin ... repent of your sin ... receives Christ’s forgiveness for your sin.

Now if, on the other hand, **we** insist – like Jesus and the Apostles did – that the Word **does** apply ... well, that's offensive ... a scandal ... maybe even a hate crime! *Away with such a Fellow! Where does He get this stuff?* We really shouldn't be all that surprised when people are offended when you talk about sin and repentance ... and Christ and His Gospel and God-given faith. Neither should you be surprised when relatives, friends, neighbors, or coworkers reject Christ and His Gospel. Christ and His Gospel are just as scandalous to the world as they are to your own sinful flesh.

Why did Jesus marvel *because of their unbelief* then [MK 6.6]? Because unbelief – the rejection of Christ and His Gospel – is really amazing in the face of what that rejection means ... how the Gospel comes to the world ... how Christ comes to us ... and the fact that salvation is absolutely free! Being scandalized by Christ and His Gospel is like turning down a pay raise in the midst of this recession. It's like turning down the lottery after you receive the winning ticket as a gift. As the sainted Dr. Buls said: "Unbelief is an amazing thing. It's like suicide, like cutting off the limb behind you, like preferring darkness to light." Actually, if I may be so bold, unbelief is even worse. It's like deciding you'll try to swim to Hawaii all alone after being handed a plane ticket paid in full – you'll never make it.

So it is with unbelief. Without faith, try as we might, we'll never get to heaven. And Jesus has already made the way for us by His Cross. The world and our own sinful flesh are scandalized by Christ and His Gospel because they require us to own up to our sin, admit we are unable to make ourselves righteous, and receive the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord **for us**. But the **real** scandal is unbelief. And that's why Jesus is amazed. That's why we are amazed at unbelief as well.

But notice that Christ remains undaunted in His task of bringing His Gospel – despite the rejection. The last half of verse 6 says: *And He went about among the villages teaching*. Then beginning in verse 7, we hear that Jesus wasn't satisfied with proclaiming His Gospel by Himself – *He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits*. [6.7] Our Lord's desire to bring His salvation to people was so urgent that Jesus basically sent the Apostles out as they were. He didn't want them to waste any time preparing. He didn't want them carrying a bunch of things with them, because they would be weighed down and unable to travel as quickly. Such is the sense of urgency of the Gospel. But note, too, that going as they were means that the Lord Himself will provide – just as He always does. Going without extra provisions means that the Lord will take care of them – they are to trust in God ... for their daily lives ... for the message they are to proclaim ... and for the results of their

preaching. Nothing is their own – it's all God ... all Christ.

And yet, despite that urgency, our Lord also desires that the people be taught thoroughly. *Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.* [6.10] The Apostles were not just to come into town, do a quick Evangelism Crusade, and then leave. Apparently Jesus also wanted the people to be well-catechized. There is no Gospel-reductionism here. The message isn't just: *Jesus loves you!* But must have included more ... the equivalent of what we teach in the Creeds and Catechism ... the essentials of the Christian faith – much more than just a sign with “John 3:16” on it.

And notice that in sending the twelve, Jesus also prepares them for what to do if (and when) Christ and His Gospel become a scandal and are rejected by the hearers: *And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.* [6.11] It is as if Jesus would say: *You will be rejected, just as I am rejected. Your message about Me and My Gospel will be an offense to some. Don't think that it is your fault – just as little as you can take credit for someone's faith, so little is their unbelief on your shoulders. Simply proclaim My forgiveness. You may marvel at the sadness of their unbelief – but don't become discouraged in the task. Yours is simply to go and proclaim – My Holy Spirit is tasked with creating and sustaining faith through My Gospel. But do this – so that the people realize just what it means to reject My Gospel: shake the dust off of your feet. Hopefully they will at least begin to realize that rejecting Me and My Gospel – proclaimed by you – ultimately means rejection by My Father in heaven. It is My earnest desire that all people receive Me ... receive My Gospel ... receive My forgiveness, life, and salvation. If they are scandalized and offended, perhaps this testimony against them will shake them to their senses ... and they will yet hear and believe.*

And this is precisely how our Lord deals with us ... patiently ... persistently ... lovingly – year after year ... week after week ... day after day. Whenever we are scandalized by the demands of Holy Scripture and try to soften the Law and dismiss its condemnation of us ... the Holy Spirit gives witness through the Word that it is, indeed, meant for us – we cannot escape the Law and its judgment. Whenever we are scandalized by the simplicity – the utter “freeness” – of the Gospel ... the Holy Spirit gives witness that our salvation in Christ is, indeed, totally and completely free ... a gift ... prepared by Christ ... wrapped up in His mercy, grace, and love ... hand-delivered to each of us again and again in Word and Sacrament.

Now ... **this** is **true** independence! – when all our guilt and shame and the eternal punishment we deserve for our sins has been taken away by our Lord and

Savior Jesus Christ ... and we, in return, receive His holiness, righteousness, and eternal life in exchange. In Christ is the true pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. So do not be offended – scandalized – by this Gospel. Simply receive this truly Good News: Jesus of Nazareth – True Man ... Who was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem ... Who grew up as a Boy and young Man in Nazareth ... Who learned the trade of carpentry from His step-father and guardian, Joseph – Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God, Who has taken your sins away ... Who heals your diseases (especially the truly mortal disease of your sin) ... Who declares you righteous through faith in Him on account of His life and death and resurrection. This Jesus comes and proclaims the scandal of His Gospel to you today. Receive it ... receive Him ... with joy that will last forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]