

Fear, Weakness, and Trembling

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).²

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

Even in kindergarten, I knew that I wanted to be a minister. At that time I didn’t know how I knew. I just knew. A former pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Winter Haven, Florida, often reminded me of how, as a kindergartener, I tugged on his sleeve one day and said, “Pastor Kuehne, I’m going to take your place.”

On occasion I coaxed my younger sister into playing “church” with me. I was the pastor. She was the parishioner, and there she sat, alone, in the middle of the living room, listening to my sermons, standing and sitting at my directions, and singing hymns of my choosing. I can’t recall for certain, but I may have passed a collection plate.

Admittedly, there were times when I considered other callings or occupations—a doctor, lawyer, fireman, astronaut, President of the United States, but the desire to minister never left me. Even though I didn’t always return to Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary for theological reasons—sometimes the reasons were classmates, basketball, and yes, girlfriends—I did keep returning. As the hymnist wrote, “God moves in a mysterious way.”

Finally, in 1978, along with my two classmates, I graduated from the seminary and became what I had always wanted to be. More importantly, it was what I had always believed God wanted me to be—a minister of Christ. It was precisely then, when I stepped from the classroom into the realities of ministering, that I asked myself for the first time and not the last, “Why did I want to be a minister?”

Perhaps you’ve never asked that question. Conversely, perhaps you have asked it after a contentious voters’ meeting, or after a casual observation like, “Pastor, that wasn’t your best sermon,” or after struggling with a sermon text late into Saturday night, or after any number of congregational or pastoral challenges.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians: *“I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling,”* (1 Corinthians 2:3). Frankly, I can’t imagine any minister of Christ not saying the same.

Fear, weakness, and trembling arise at the accountability of the pastoral office. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:2-4, *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by*

any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me." That's the accountability.

Fear, weakness, and trembling arise at the responsibility of pastoring the people of God—people redeemed with the blood of Christ and precious in His sight. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus, Acts 20:28, *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."* That's the responsibility.

We face fear, weakness, and trembling at the magnitude of life's heartaches and losses. During my first year of ministry, I received a phone call shortly before dawn. Scrambling to the kitchen, I snatched the receiver from its cradle—this was long before cell phones—and said tentatively, "Hello, this is Pastor Weis." At first I heard only sobs and gasps. Eventually, I realized that I was talking with one of the members of my congregation. Through the broken syllables and incomplete sentences, I finally understood six words: "The baby is dead. Please hurry."

Thirty-eight years have passed. Yet, I will never forget the look on the parents' faces. I will never forget the grandfather saying, "Pastor, what did we do wrong? Why is God punishing us?" I will never forget how, amid the grief and weeping, the small mobile home still smelled like baby powder. I will never forget the weakness, fear, and trembling in which I prayed, "O God, please give me the right words to say."

On our own, who among us is up to such a task? No one. Certainly not me. Not even the apostle Paul, who reminded the Corinthians, *"I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."* Yet, dear brothers in Christ, is it not in our personal and pastoral weaknesses and fears and trembling that almighty God has again and again demonstrated His strength?

This blessed reality led Paul to write in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

The overall theme of these devotions is "Ministers of Christ." I'm under no illusion that I can tell you anything new. Rather, I'm merely privileged to share Biblical encouragements of which we, as pastors, need to be reminded—in our weakness, in our fear, in our trembling.