Sermon at the Opening Eucharist

Pr. Frank C. Senn, STS
Senior, Society of the Holy Trinity

General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity
October 19, 2010

Text: Isaiah 43:8-13; Luke 1:1-4, 24:44-53 (the Day of St. Luke the Evangelist)

The first word of the Lord to us gathered in this general retreat is a courtroom summons. Yahweh calls up as witnesses his exiled people. By their testimony he will confront the nations with his truth. Although Israel is blind and deaf to the word of the Lord, it still has some capacity for vision and hearing. It is yet able to be enlightened and converted. This is because Israel alone among the nations has a right understanding of the meaning of history. No other nation can match Israel's prophetic tradition.

Despite their present blindness, the Israelites have been witnesses to the great saving events of the past—the passover, the exodus through the sea, the wilderness journey, the crossing of the Jordan, and the conquest of the promised land—; and Israel's continued existence even in exile remains a witness to those formative acts, even though their meaning is largely lost to the present generation.

In some ways this is the situation of our pastoral society. We have formed a ministerium to witness to a great tradition which has been largely lost in our churches. It takes generations to form people in a tradition, but a tradition can be lost in one generation. We think of how the liturgical and sacramental tradition of the Lutheran Church was lost in one generation during the age of rationalism, and how it took generations to recover it. We made great strides in recovering this tradition during the course of the twentieth century, and now, in the name of reaching the unchurched, it is being lost again. We don't have its resources, or the vision that it projects, to bring to bear on the culture of the society in which we live.

Moreover, recovery of the liturgical and sacramental tradition wasn't all that complete before we started losing it again. Here we are, a couple of generations after the advent of the liturgical movement, after denominational communion practices statements, after worship books that clearly envisioned Holy Communion as the chief service every week, and we still have barely more than 50% of our congregations celebrating the Eucharist every Lord's Day. And some of these celebrations are hardly eucharistic. But that's far more than the number of congregations that have even passing knowledge of the Daily Prayer offices, or that have access to individual confession and absolution, or that provide systematic catechesis of youth and adults, or have adult Christian education that is more than pious paplum.

In spite of this situation, or rather because of it, we have come together in this Society to practice a rule that calls us back to the great tradition. We ourselves barely know that tradition. We have not signed the *Rule* of the Society of the Holy Trinity because we are already praying the Daily Prayer of the Church or practicing the Office of the Keys or studying the church fathers, but because we aren't. Yet we know that the treasures are there, buried in the memory of the Church and waiting to be explored and discovered. Like the Israelites in exile, whose eyes had seen and whose ears had heard, however dimly or inaudibnly, of the great saving events of the past, and who were therefore

the custodians of that tradition of salvation history in the narratives of the books of the Law and the oracles of the prophets, we too in this Society (even in a kind of exile) have seen and heard the great tradition—the tradition of the gospel of Jesus Christ—proclaimed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, confessed in creeds, professed in confessions, defended by ecumenical councils, explored by church fathers, reclaimed by reformers, and we have vowed to open up this treasure, the treasure of the gospel, to an unseeing and unhearing church, beginning with ourselves.

How will we learn the gospel tradition? By teaching it to our congregations and to one another. We learn by teaching. We learn by doing.

We don't know the pattern and content of the Divine Office, so we open the breviary and start praying it. By doing so we learn to pray the psalms with Christ. We don't know how to confess our sins, so we go to the confessional with our sins, hear the word of forgiveness as if spoken by Christ himself, and then listen to the confessions of others as we stand in the stead of Christ. We have rarely considered what it means to live a life of obedience to Jesus, so we start by being obedient to Christ according to our *Rule*. We cement the gospel in our hearts and minds by preaching it. We preach the story of Christ Jesus, not any other story. We tell how the Word entered human flesh in the Virgin Mary in order to redeem us, not with silver or gold but with his holy and innocent suffering under Pontius Pilate and death by crucifixion, by his burial and descent into hell, by his resurrection from the dead and ascension to the Father. We announce that this same Christ Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, since that too is gospel, because his judgment brings vindication to those who have faith in him.

We have been summoned to a court appearance. "You are witnesses of these things," said Jesus to his apostles at the end of the Gospel of St. Luke, repeating what the Lord said to Israel in the Book of Isaiah: "You are my witnesses." Witnesses tell what they know—the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They know the truth of what they have seen and heard, even with only partial vision and hearing. They know what they have been taught, just as Jesus taught his apostles from the Scriptures (the Old Testament!) how they should understand him and his mission.

We are witnesses of these things. We gather here in retreat to hone our witnessing, to practice the story we have to tell, just as witnesses meet with attorneys to articulate more clearly and with greater confidence what they have seen and heard. If you have ever gone through grilling by an attorney, you know that you are not asked to falsify your witness, but to be clear about it.

We hear in our second reading today the words of the Apostle Paul to Pastor Timothy: "always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." Paul then goes on to discuss his own situation in the reading we heard. But I suspect that the pericope begins with the end of the admonition to Timothy because of the reference to doing the work of an evangelist, and we are commemorating today St. Luke the Evangelist. But these words come at the end of a passage that is relevant to many of us, in which the apostle discusses the situation in which the work of evangelism and ministry is done. Paul says: "the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

Reference to the search for personal teachers and the embracing of myths alludes to the gnosticism which flourished around and within the early Christian church. It seems to me that the enormous curiosity and even hunger for spirituality that we see all around us has much in common with what Paul is describing. I tend to view it a bit more positively than Paul, but I think I get where he is coming from. The description of "itching ears" need not be heard as a bad thing. It simply means that people want to hear something. They are curious and eager to hear something that will speak a word of hope and direction for where they are at. They are hungry to hear a message that will bring some spirit back into the vacuous materialism and relentless productivity of modern life.

A couple of generations ago, people with itching ears would have naturally turned to the Church as the place where they expected that need to be met, but now it seems that the Church is the last place they think to look. And it's hard to blame them. When people read in the media what is going on in the Churches, it's no wonder they are turned off to religion.

But the hunger is real, and people have found plenty of other ways to begin feeding it. People find their way to various teachers, to courses, to support groups. There is a wondrous smorgasbord of spiritual options out there, almost all of them offering something worthwhile. Whatever people are looking for, they can probably find something that appeals to them.

I tend to think that if they find their way into a Christian congregation that knows how to welcome people and that demonstrates faith active in love, they will not associate that local community of faith with "religion", which to them is so negative. They will believe that this is the "spirituality" they have been looking for. What's going on in any of the denominations is seldom reflected in the actual life and ministry of local congregations and parishes.

Welcome people genuinely and engage them in mission. But keep front and center the gospel of Jesus Christ, practiced in a tradition that cultivates a whole world view that makes sense of reality as we experience it. Let the gospel be preached as it was proclaimed in the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke: "a message of great joy for all the people." For a Savior is born for us in the preaching of the word and in the administration of the sacraments.

I know that many of us have been caught up in the troubles of our denominations. Like many of you I felt it was my duty to report, month by month in our parish newsletter, what was happening in the ELCA and in the so-called reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism. There are in my congregation, as in yours, veteran Lutherans who are interested in these things. But one day the chairman of our evangelism committee said to me, "Pastor, what are we supposed to do with this information? It's a real downer reading these things month after month. I don't think we should hide the truth from people. But how does this denominational business relate to the joy of the resurrection we invite people into on Sunday morning?"

I admit that I was stumped. And I decided to find more circumspect ways of sharing denominational news with our core members. This is not stuff that has to be broadcast to the whole community. Talking about the foibles of religion does not proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no salvation in hearing about it. It does not bring healing into people's lives. It is not to this that we are called to be witnesses.

People find God far more interesting than the Church. How exciting in our first reading that God wants to take on the gods, that he wants his people Israel to witness to him before the nations with the very tradition they have received. The nations are challenged to match that tradition and so prove the validity of their tradition and the reality of their gods. But they cannot, says the Lord, because "Besides me there is no savior." So I encourage us in this Society to claim the great tradition and bring it bear in our churches and make it a contender in the world of ideas and myths.

And I admonish us gathered at this retreat to find circumspect ways of discussing our church troubles, if we must discuss them. Our Society best serves us by transcending our denominational and parochial issues. Our retreats give us something more important, and more interesting, to do: to worship God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We are an orthodox Christian fellowship, and this is how orthodoxy is practiced: with right worship. During these days together let us, like the apostles at the end of St. Luke's Gospel, be continually in the Temple blessing God. That will enable us to return to Jerusalem, or to wherever we are returning, with great joy. What an encouragement it will be to our people to have joyful pastors. Amen.