Classis Huron - Fall meeting – 2024.

Water Street Church council requests Classis Huron to include Joshua Sweetman on its Spring agenda (Feb 2025) for a license to exhort.

Grounds

1. Joshua has previously held a License to Exhort in Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan from October 2018- October 2021
   1. That examination included
      1. Sermon Text: Luke 15:11-32 (The Prodigal Son)
      2. Sermon Evaluator: Rev. Cameron Fraser (that evaluation is below)
      3. Classis Examiner: Rev. Paul Verhoef (Chaplain at University of Calgary)
   2. Joshua preached there a minimum of once a month and has preached at churches in Lethbridge, Taber, Iron Springs, Medicine Hat, Burdett and Edmonton.
2. While Water Street Church is still, technically speaking, vacant we have extended a half time contract to Rev. Kasey VanderVeen who will preach here halftime and mentor Joshua as he continues to serve here as Pastor of Faith Formation.
   1. Part of that mentoring will include discerning the extent of God’s calling on Joshua’s life in ministry.
3. Classis Huron still has a number of vacancies for whom consistent preaching remains a challenge.

**Sermon Evaluation: Josh Sweetman**

Josh Sweetman is a sweet preacher. His assigned text was the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32). He preached at Maranatha, Lethbridge, on Thanksgiving Day and the sermon was titled “A Prodigal Thanksgiving.”

**The Sermon**

Josh planned and led most of the service. There were three readings by congregants following the order of the younger son, the elder son and the father. Each was followed by a suitable prayer by Josh focusing on: those wandering and our own wanderings, forgiveness for attitudes of anger and superiority, thankfulness for the amazing gift of grace respectively. The sermon followed this outline.

Josh began by referring to art works, especially Rembrandt’s “Return of the Prodigal Son.” He quoted from Henri Nouwen’s book with this title in which he says, “Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger.” The sermon proceeded to look at the lostness of both sons, followed by the father’s welcome and invitation to both. Josh noted that the younger son’s lostness is easy to see. Even his resolve to return home “is a bit self centered. He is saying I’m sorry for sure, but notice he still wants work, like it will be fine - dad will bail me out by hiring me.”

The elder son’s lostness is harder to see. “And maybe many of us would agree with the older son. How come this rowdy brother comes home and is seemingly rewarded? That’s just not fair…The older brother doesn’t even realize he is alienated from his father. He has been so concerned about rule following and himself, he has forgotten his role. As Tim Keller puts it in his book Prodigal God- ‘Elder brothers believe that if they live a good life they should get a good life, that God owes them a smooth road if they try very hard to live up to standards.’”

Josh illustrated this with an amusing illustration involving his father-in-law Mark and Mark’s brother Joel. Joel frequented a convenience store every day on his way to work. Mark went there maybe once a month to fill up with gas. But Mark received the “customer of the year award,” which didn’t seem fair to Joel.

“Sounds like the older son doesn’t it? And, folks, sadly that can be and is us. We see the Christian life as staying on the straight and narrow…We’ve done our part, carried our weight. And here comes reckless Joe Blow off the street and he’s saved by grace. No way, we think! He hasn’t put in the ‘work’. That’s not fair! And as we can see the older son is lost and in need of grace.”

Next comes the father’s response. “Put yourself in the father’s shoes for a moment. Two sons - one who has taken money and ran, the other who has a stinky attitude about life. What’s your reaction? Are you mad? It would be hard not to be. But notice it is not anger that the father shows but a big heaping of grace.” Josh noted the cultural aspect of the father picking up his robes and running towards the younger son. “That would be to humiliate one’s self. Yet this father does it for a reckless son. He is willing to humiliate himself for his son. This would have shocked Jesus’ original listeners - the Pharisees. And it should bring us great hope and put a song of thanksgiving on our lips, because that’s our situation, folks. Because that is Jesus. He humiliated himself for us. Even in our recklessness he humiliated himself. And he welcomes us home.

“But what about the older son? Where’s the grace there. Well, notice the language used when the father comes out to see the older son outside the party. It does not say he laid into the older son - no he pleaded with him. Another act of humiliating himself…It is the character of Jesus, folks. He pleads with us to come home. Follow me! There is a big wave of grace and we can either let it hit us and breathe it in or we can run from it.

“In the parable, the younger son lets it hit him. And the celebration begins. The older son, we don’t see what happens. It’s my hope he accepted his father’s invitation of grace and went into the party, but he could have just walked away unchanged as well - we don’t know.

“And we have the choice are we going to let the wave of grace come over us or are we going to run from it, focusing more on rules? I don’t know where you are at this morning - which son you connect with. But it’s my hope that this morning, wherever you are, that you accept the invitation of grace and let the wave wash over you. Be healed. Be forgiven. Come home!”

**Comments**

It’s hard to mess up with this parable. But Josh not only did not mess up, he did exceptionally well. He had an easy delivery, speaking with passion, but pleasant to listen to, moving around a bit, not too tied to his notes, although he could have used more eye contact rather than looking down or sideways as he did at times. He gesticulated constantly, not just during the sermon, but also the prayers and other parts of the service. Gestures can be effective means of adding emphasis, but in my view at least, if they are overdone, they lose their impact.

I hesitate to criticize what was an excellent, moving gospel sermon. Take the following not so much as criticisms as food for thought:

* The sermon was called “A Prodigal Thanksgiving.” This was reminiscent of Tim Keller’s book, which Josh quoted, *The Prodigal God*. Keller makes the point that “prodigal” can mean either to wander away or to be lavish in one’s generosity. Spurgeon, among others, made the same point. This leads one to expect a sermon focused on the lavish (prodigal) grace of the father. Certainly, that was there, although the word “prodigal” was not used in connection with it, but it was not the focus of the sermon from beginning to end as the title might have suggested.
* Josh rightly pointed out that the father humiliated himself by picking up his robes and running towards his younger son. I would have liked him to have taken that a step further and shown how by drawing attention to himself rather than his son, he was taking the son’s shame and humiliation upon himself. Liberals argue that there is no substitutionary atonement in this parable. Josh showed that there is by relating the father’s humiliation to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, but I felt the point could have been made a bit more strongly.
* Josh rightly pointed out that the immediate audience was the Pharisees who were represented by the elder son. I would have liked a bit more reference to the context, showing how this was one of three parables Jesus told to justify his and his Father’s priority of welcoming sinners and eating with them (v 2).

These are minor points and perhaps if Josh had said all I would have liked to hear, the sermon would have become too cluttered. As it was, it was extremely clear and memorable. The congregation was obviously attentive. I had a rotten cold and had hardly slept the night before. I really didn’t want to be there, but it was a blessing and encouragement, one of the best sermons I’ve heard in a while.