
Graduation Address, Wartburg Theological Seminary, April 2017

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I must begin with thanksgiving: to God for allowing me to live until this auspicious year for Lutherans and for giving me the opportunity to share the gospel all over the world; and to you for inviting me to speak and for bestowing this singular honor upon me. I am especially grateful to your president, formerly a vice president at my seminary in Philadelphia and to my former student and your beloved teacher, Martin Lohrmann. With the demise, or rather, reconfiguration of my seminary, your gracious reception now allows me to consider this seminary home.

I'm a preacher at heart. My former students will tell you that. Years ago, one came out of a lecture on the Lutheran Confessions and told me, "All we needed was bread and wine, and it would have been worship." And, as a preacher, I need a text in order to speak. It occurred to me that, as a Reformation scholar, I could borrow a famous line from the grounds of this very campus: "Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr vergehet nun und nimmermehr."¹ God's Word and Luther's teaching will never, ever pass away. It's tempting, but it just seemed a bit over the top.

Then it occurred to me that a biblical text might suffice, but that, too, seemed a bit pretentious and ignores the fact that this is a graduation speech not a sermon. But it is tempting. Romans 14:19: "Let us follow after the things that make for peace." Galatians 6:14: "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ." Of course, one could make like some Christians do in our country's Bible belt and open the book randomly. But that, too, could be a bit dangerous: "Judas hanged himself" [Matthew 27:5], as a first attempt; "Go and do thou likewise" [Luke 10:37], as a second. In using a scriptural text, I should perhaps follow the example of one of my teachers at Luther Seminary, Gerhard Frost—more poet than professor. When he preached his final sermon to us in chapel, he started by saying, "My text for today's meditation is the entire Bible." That, too, has a certain appeal, but I doubt you want to sit still for three hours as I expatiate on such a topic.

In truth, I do have a text. It occurred to me almost immediately upon receiving your invitation. The words were written by a recluse who scarcely dared see her words in print. She lived a sheltered life in New England, and yet, as a commentator on the human

1. An inscription on an outer wall at Wartburg Theological Seminary. It appears widely in nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources, including over the portal of Luther's birth house in Eisleben, renovated in 1866.

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condition there is, I believe, no wiser American than she. Many of you may have already guessed her name: Emily Dickinson, who became one of my favorite poets in high school and after whom my daughter is named. The first time I read her words, back in 1965, in a sophomore high school English class, I committed them to memory.

"Success is counted sweetest By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a Nectar requires sorest need."²

The trouble with graduations, you see, is that they look for all the world like success. Two years, or three, or four or—for those second-career students who take their time—ten years, and finally you have the prize: a piece of faux parchment with high-sounding words and the appropriate signatures. Even if the faculty held its breath or its nose when it voted you in, you have achieved something: sweet success!

Now, this "success" may not simply be related to surviving Greek. It may also be more vocationally oriented, so that—with so many congregations out there needing leaders—some of you may already have a call in hand. In the old days, it was not unheard of that graduation from a Lutheran seminary also implied marrying a nurse and getting ordained—all in the same month. How's that for success? For others, of course, a call will not be as instantaneous as the first notice of payment on your student loans. Chances are that, even if you do find work, your salary will not be commensurate with your abilities, to say nothing of the size of your debt.

But, one way or another, the quest for success seems part and parcel of the human condition, particularly for those of us who become pastors, or deacons, or other rostered leaders in the church. You may begin in a small, struggling congregation, sure,

2. Emily Dickinson, "Success is counted sweetest," from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, Ralph W. Franklin, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999), 112; accessed at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45721/success-is-counted-sweetest-112>

but there are only a few out there who, like Mother Teresa, will find fulfillment—another kind of success—in ministering to the impoverished all the livelong day. “I’ll pay my dues now,” we may think secretly, “but a successful career as religious guru cannot be far away.”

But then there’s our dear Emily, whose entire life revolved around a plain house in a simple town. “Success is counted sweetest by those who ne’er succeed.” Not: “who only succeed late in life,” or “who pay their dues and then succeed,” or “who are lucky enough to get ahead.” Or, like the Chicago Cubs, finally win another World Series. No! They “ne’er succeed.” Never! Miss Dickenson refuses to break her arm patting herself or anyone else on the back, telling them to buck up, because the best is yet to come.

Success, you see, is only sweet in your failure or, as she says in the next line, in your thirsty need of nectar. That’s the true heart of ministry in the church! Failure and need! The French nuns of the fifteenth century, cited by the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, understood the dilemma: “Wer verliert, gewinnt,” he used to quote them as saying. “The one who loses wins.”³ Or, as my teacher Gerhard Forde once wrote, “Loser takes all.”⁴ That kind of neediness and failure is what this institution has been preparing you for. For the success and nectar of the Christian church is measured in the splash of water on an infant’s head, in the foolish meal of a morsel of bread and a thimble-full of wine, and in the weak and sinful nature of the one pouring the water and distributing the meal and preaching the gospel. “You want success?” Emily asks us in the church. “You can’t handle success.” We can only lay down our lives for a flock that is not our own but the Lord’s.

To appreciate the outrageous paradox of Emily Dickenson’s words, we need only read the poem to the end, where we discover that the inspiration for these words was her witnessing or imagining a parade in honor of the victors in war. Surely they knew the sweetness of success, her contemporaries doubtless imagined. But our dear Emily looks elsewhere, to the pathetic loser, dying in the field, to discover that he, not the victors he could hear, understood, comprehended, the sweet nectar of success. This juxtaposition knocks all the wind out of our success-driven sails and may finally shock us into comprehending the dire situation in which we find ourselves today—losers all, with no hope for “victory” in a world gone mad.

For example, those of you who are Lutheran belong to a dying church. The baby boom of the 1950s and ’60s, which lulled us into grasping that chimera called success, has slowly withered into the world we see today. The lure of commercial success and mega-McChurches leaves Lutherans, once again, as the odd person out, mumbling liturgy and giving lip service to an Augustinian friar turned heretic and outlaw. But the broader Christian church in this country is scarcely faring any better, as the good news of

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God’s mercy has slowly given way to the moral rectitude of right thinking or right acting—“Gottes Wort and Luthers Lehr” indeed!

So is that it? Can we find no message of happy hope to comfort us? Not from our honest poetess! She knows the score of life better than we ourselves, and she insists with a Puritan severity on telling the truth about life on earth. And yet, her very pessimism or, better put, realism paves the way for Christians preparing for ministry to look at their lives in a completely different light. Think about the failures of which ministry consists. You will baptize babies whose parents will never show their face in church again. You will confirm eighth graders who will treat it like a graduation rite. You will bless the unions of folks who will betray one another. You will announce forgiveness to sinners who will keep on sinning. You will bury folks who fought death and lost, despite their best efforts. Losers all! And you yourself will be no better than the ones you serve—sinning and dying along with the best of them. But that very failure *is* your tasting success. Take it from me! Like *your* professors, I’ve done my best to prepare an entire generation of Lutheran pastors and other leaders for ministry, only to hear later how much they mucked it up. I am still waiting to write a bestseller—and even if I did, who would believe what I’ve written?

And yet, far from such thoughts stealing hopelessness from the jaws of victory, so to speak, we who are Christians know a living, risen Lord, a God who was also a loser, who intended nothing but loss from the manger to the cross. St. Paul knew it better than many of his later interpreters. He proclaims in 1 Corinthians 1 a foolish message—foolish to those looking for signs of success or wisdom. “But to those who are being saved . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” There is nothing sweeter than the needy wounds of this dear savior.

And yet, Paul goes on to say still more. Talking directly to those recalcitrant Corinthians, he reminds them that they were not powerful or wise—in fact, that they were nothing. Nevertheless, God took these losers to shame the wise and successful. Sweeter words still! And yet, Paul even looks at his own life in chapter 2 and admits what oftentimes seminary education is designed to drive out of us: that he himself came not with lofty words of wisdom

3. Lecture of Jürgen Moltmann, attended by the author in November 1980.

4. Now in Gerhard Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 98–100.

So, my fellow Christian failures,
Drink deep from this spring and
have your unending thirst quenched by
the one who cried, “I thirst.”

but in fear and trembling, clothed only in Christ’s righteousness and the Spirit’s powerful weakness. Thus, the message, the hearers, and the messengers all fulfill only foolish failure. These are the sweetest words of all.

To comprehend this nectar of failure in the church, we need another poetess, this time from the Reformation—the first woman ever to see her Christian hymn in print.⁵ She defied once and for all those Pauline strictures on women keeping silent in church and instead fulfilled Joel’s majestic words “Upon my maidservants and manservants I will pour out my Spirit.” Elizabeth Cruciger, nee von Meseritz, penned a five-verse hymn praising Christ that includes this prayer: “Let us, from your love drinking, of Wisdom take our fill; remain in faith, ne’er shrinking, and serve the Spirit’s will; our hearts, now having tasted your sweetness, never wasted, will thirst alone for you.”

So, my fellow Christian failures, drink deep from this spring and have your unending thirst quenched by the one who cried, “I thirst.” Have your sins forgiven by the one who cried, “Father, forgive them.” Have your cruciform death swallowed up in the victory of the one who said, “Today, you shall be with me in paradise.” In the midst of those darkest moments of abandonment, find comfort in the one who shouted, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” and thereby rent God’s heart from top to bottom. And, finally, commit your spirit to the one who committed himself to God’s merciful hands. Sweet, foolish failure! Alleluia! Christ has risen! I have spoken.

Appendix

Author’s Translation of Elizabeth Cruciger’s “Herr Christ der einig Gottes Sohn”

(original tune: Evangelical Lutheran Worship, no. 309)

Christ comes from God forever, the Father’s only Son;
From God’s heart, ceasing never, as prophets long have sung;
“He is the Star of Morning,
Whose beams afar are soaring
Above all other lights.”

Now, at the end of ages, Christ comes a human born.
The poor receive God’s wages: sin’s judgment from us torn.
Now death for us is broken,
And heaven’s portals open;
Life blossoms forth again.

Let us, from your love drinking, of Wisdom take our fill,
Remain in faith, ne’er shrinking, and serve the Spirit’s will:
Our hearts, now having tasted
Your sweetness, never wasted,
Will thirst alone for you.

O Maker of all creatures, come with a parent’s hand
Forever rule o’er nature; in strength come take your stand.
Our hearts you will be moving
Your love our senses proving
That from you we not stray.

O, slay us through your goodness, awaken us through grace;
Bring to the old such sickness, that we new life embrace.
Then we, on earth now dwelling,
Your praises will be telling
With mind and sense and tongue.

5. See Mary Jane Haemig, “Elisabeth Cruciger (1500?–1535): The Case of the Disappearing Hymn Writer,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 (2001): 21–44. For the entire hymn, see the appendix.