

Sermon at the Dedication of the Seminary Chapel Organ

by James P. Tiefel

April 14, 1991

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8,9).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

It is likely that sooner or later someone will say—and it will probably be some musician who says it—that the chapel organ has a soul. That will be a noble compliment to this wonderful instrument. But the organ does not have a soul. Only people have souls. The organ does not even have a personality. The organ is finally only a box filled with wood and metal and cowbone.

Now it is a beautiful box, to be sure, and the wood and the metal and the cowbone have been wonderfully organized and magnificently crafted; but the fact remains that when our Lord Jesus finally comes in judgment, the box and the wood and the metal and the cowbone are going to melt along with the rest of the elements on this earth. The organ may be heavenly, but it will not go to heaven. It may be a gift of God, but it is not a child of God. You and I are the children of God, and that is why it is better for us to think about ourselves today than it is for us to think about the organ.

That is what St. Paul is leading us to do in the text chosen for this organ dedication service. There are words in this passage which certainly describe this new organ. But it is surely obvious to all of us that Paul is not nearly as interested in an organ as he is in people. We do right today to dedicate this wonderful new instrument to the service of God, but we do better today to dedicate ourselves to the service of God. That is what St. Paul is encouraging, and on that basis, this is our theme:

We Dedicate Ourselves to What Is Lovely and Worthy of Praise

We do this

- I. Based on an apostolic encouragement,
- II. Following a pastoral example,
- III. Counting on a divine blessing.

We Dedicate Ourselves to What Is Lovely and Worthy of Praise

I. Based on an apostolic encouragement.

When Paul wrote the words of this text, he was bringing to a close a letter that is full of joyful encouragement and advice. He was just about at the end when he brought everything together and encouraged the Philippians to search out and hold on to all the best and noblest of God's gifts. And he showed them what the best gifts of God are with a list of eight adjectives: whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

It was probably obvious to the Philippians, and perhaps it is just as obvious to you, that the search for the best of God's gifts is not going to be easy. It is one thing to decide what is true or pure—God obviously sets the standards for truth and purity—but who decides what is lovely or admirable?

There are words in Paul's list which we usually reserve for artistry, craftsmanship and creativity. The fact is, God does not identify absolutes when he talks about things that are *noble*, *lovely*, *admirable* and *praiseworthy*, except, of course, that nothing can have any of those qualities if it opposes his will. With the words Paul chooses to use here he seems to be content to let the value judgment of human experience decide what is lovely and worthy of praise. He wants Christians to think about what is best in God's creation both from the divine perspective and from the human perspective.

If you know Paul, you know that he will insist that God's perspective comes first. But in matters that God allows to be free, in areas where God does not express his will, then the human perspective counts, too. Paul means to say: If there is anything that runs the length and breadth of human experience which is considered worthy of praise, if there is anything which human beings tend to agree is lovely, if there is anything across a broad human perspective which gains a consensus of excellence, you believers are wise to spend your time thinking about and focusing on things like that.

So, when we dedicate ourselves to what is lovely and worthy of praise, we are really doing it on the basis of nothing less than an apostolic encouragement. The one who encourages us to think about what even the world considers to be noble and admirable is one of the Savior's own "sent-out men" and one of his preeminent spokesmen.

It is important for us to remember that today. It means that we do not have to invent some convoluted defense for the joy we feel as we pursue art and music—and that is right, when we pursue a musical instrument—which are lovely and worthy of praise. It means that we can enjoy and strive for those things which even unbelievers—to say nothing of countless believers—consider to be among the highest forms of artistic expression known to man and among the noblest contributions western civilization has ever made to society. It means that we can use our time and engage our energy and spend our money on what is also lovely and praiseworthy among human beings, because God's own man allows us to—and really, it is more than that—because through his apostle God himself encourages us: "whatever is noble, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is praiseworthy think about such things!"

We Dedicate Ourselves to What Is Lovely and Worthy of Praise

II. Following a pastoral example.

Right at this point Paul added something that helps us to identify the kind of things he has in mind. He wrote: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." Paul was willing to set himself up as a model for what he was encouraging, and there have not been many models in the church's history equal to Paul's. This is especially true where Paul was contending for those things which God identified as true and right. When it came to pursuing what God considered to be the best and the beautiful, St. Paul led the pack.

But Paul was just as far out in front when it came to those things which are the best and the most beautiful from the human perspective. St. Paul was no artistic rube; he was no stranger to loveliness. He recognized what his society called noble and admirable; he understood what both Greeks and Jews found to be worthy of praise.

Now it is true, Paul certainly understood how sinful humanity misused beautiful things, but that abuse did not disallow Paul's use. Gamaliel had seen to it that Paul knew the best of Jewish literature; Paul could quote the Greek poets with perfect accuracy. He made some of his clearest doctrinal points by quoting early Christian hymns. He extolled psalms and hymns and spiritual songs on several occasions. And some scholars maintain that no author, either sacred nor secular, surpasses Paul as a master of the Greek language. Paul gives us an outstanding example when he encourages us to dedicate ourselves to what is lovely and worthy of praise!

But it is very important that we do not separate Paul, the lover of loveliness, from Paul, the pastor of pastors. Paul's dedication to loveliness is obvious, but Paul the pastor understood that it was not loveliness or eloquence which changed hearts. It was the preaching of the Savior's cross that brought life and immortality to light. It was the gospel that was the power of God for salvation. The power was not in the art of his persuasion, but in the authenticity of his proclamation.

Paul did not strive for what was lovely and noble and worthy of praise so that he might be more effective as an apostle. He did not put loveliness and effectiveness into a cause and effect relationship. Paul pursued what was lovely and worthy of praise because they were gifts from God, and Paul considered himself to be a steward of the gifts of God.

Paul also considered himself to be a steward of the mysteries of the gospel. And Paul was confident that through his faithful stewardship of both God's creation and God's salvation God would effectively accomplish whatever he willed, including his will that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

As we dedicate ourselves to what is lovely and worthy of praise, we are wise to follow Paul's pastoral example. We dare not strive for the best and the beautiful while entertaining the thought that we will then make the gospel more effective. But at the same time, we dare not compromise our stewardship of God's lovely and praiseworthy gifts simply because something less lovely might seem just as effective.

This is an appealing temptation right now. It seems as though everything we do these days has to be cost-efficient and task-effective. In the technological world we live in, loveliness and nobility do not fare very well, primarily because they do not seem to be either cost-efficient or task-effective. The question comes from all over, even from inside the church, and it usually sounds like this: "Could not something else be just as effective—and certainly less expensive?"

The question is well-intended, but does it not really miss the point? Believers pursue loveliness because this is God's will; believers proclaim the love of Jesus because this is God's will. And then believers are confident, as St. Paul was, that as they do both with heart and mind and soul and strength, God will surely give his blessing, and he will give it very effectively!

We Dedicate Ourselves to What Is Lovely and Worthy of Praise

I. Counting on a divine blessing.

How can we tell Paul is confident of that? We can tell by the way he brings this encouragement to a close: "And the God of peace will be with you." Paul was ready to strive for whatever was loftiest in God's creation. He was just as ready to place the results of his striving into the hands of God. And he urges us to do the same. God's hands are made for that.

We have nothing to fear when we put our lives and our work into his hands. You see, there is no adversarial relationship between us and God. God is at peace with us, and we are at peace with him. Jesus has seen to it. He lived the perfect life God wanted us to live. He endured the punishment God handed out for sin, the punishment Satan would have liked us to endure. And then he rose again, and on a Sunday just like today, he promised that his peace would never come up short. "Peace be to you," he said to his apostles on that Easter Sunday evening and "Peace be to you," he says to us today. The peace that Jesus gives brings God's forgiveness, and peace that brings God's forgiveness brings us confidence.

You know what that means, do not you? It means that we can do God's will in God's way, that we can accept this apostolic encouragement and follow this pastoral model, that we can dedicate ourselves to what is lovely and worthy of praise—and then simply count on the reality that God will bless us. We do not need to ask how or when or where God will bless us; we can just expect that he will—and that is the end of it. And the God of peace will be with us.

And so we install and dedicate this new instrument, the Martin Ott pipe organ, Opus 54. As we do, we are putting into practice in a very tangible way the encouragement which St. Paul has set before us in God's Word. With our money, our time and our abilities, we have put our minds on things which are lovely, noble, admirable and worthy of praise by the highest standards of human comparison. With that encouragement and because of his example we can do what we have done with eagerness and enthusiasm; we can do it with purpose and for the pursuit of continued excellence; and as we do it we can count on God's blessing. So let the organ sound. Let its lovely tones accompany our praise to God for his greatness and grace. Let it proclaim the love of Christ as it is played by competent and confessional musicians. And more than that—

Let every instrument be tuned for praise,
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise,
And may God give us grace to sing always: Alleluia!

Amen.

Pastor Tiefel serves as professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

This article is taken from Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Fall 1991, v 88#4. Reprinted by permission.

Since 1904 the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has published a theological journal, originally call Theologische Quartalschrift, now the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. This journal is issued by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as a testimony of its theological convictions, as a public witness to the saving truths of Holy Scripture, and in the interest of the theological and professional growth of those whom the seminary is training for the public ministry and of those already active in this ministry.

Subscriptions: Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 North 113th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284, 414-475-6600 or 1-800-662-6093.