

August 10, 2025

Pr. Steve

Texts: Genesis 15: 1-5; Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-34

In the name of God, Abba-Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘Only faith guarantees the blessings we hope for. Only trustworthy action guarantees the blessings we long for.’ [Hebrews 11:1-3]

“Here I stand. I can do no other.” Remember that famous quote...by Martin Luther. He'd been asked by the Church to deny everything he wrote—all of his theological treatises. *‘Recant, and we'll let you live—not burn you at the stake.’* And he face-to-face said to them, *‘Here I stand’* at the conclusion. *‘I can do no other.’*

That became the ‘Battle Cry’ of the Reformation. And Luther took his stand on the Gospel, only the Gospel. In time, all kinds of things changed. This is why the Reformation is so powerful in our history. Women's rights came into being. Children had rights. Education was included, political life changed, cultural life changed. Music, the arts, Johannes Bach—it all changed because of the Reformation. *‘Here I stand. I can do no other’* at the risk of his life. Faith hopes for the blessings that we don't see. The chief accusation against Lutherans at that time by the [Catholic] Church was they are Free Thinkers. *‘we don't want none of that around here—those Free Thinkers—do we?’* People died for becoming Free Thinkers. This is serious.

Well, imagine my surprise when Rev. Donna Duensing and I spoke recently, and she reminded me of a Conference she attended, probably a dozen years ago—the American Association of Theological Schools. (ATS includes all of the theological seminaries and institutes in the country who gather at their professional organization on an annual basis.) And the keynote address by Rev Dr. Craig Dykstra was about Seminex, the Seminary-in-Exile. And he said, ***‘The most significant experience in Christianity in the past century was that of Seminex, and it is likely as significant as the Reformation itself.’***

Now Lutherans normally, you know, [say] *‘Let's remember the Reformation 500 years ago and keep it there.’* No. This happened [Seminex], and Donna said to me, *‘Steve, you were at the heart of it. Does your Congregation know?’* I said, *‘Some, and in bits and pieces.’* She said, *‘You’ve got to tell them the story. It's on a par with the Reformation.’* So, I'm going to tell you some of the story today.

Why? Why would 480 students out of 500, and 40 out of 45 professors nail planks across the chapel door so nobody could get in, and paint on it *‘Exiled’*. Why would nice seminarians do such a thing? Aren't they taught to be polite?

We marched six miles to midtown St. Louis, and were taken in by the Jesuit St. Louis University, and we were given a rectory room, about half the size of the [Peace]Sanctuary. And tables were put around the perimeter where the professor's sat —and the joke was, you'd walk up to the table and knock, '*Can I come in?*' Yeah, we lived day by day.

How did we get into this chaotic mess? Briefly, Jacob Preus lived up in northern Minnesota. He was a hired gun. He'd already destroyed one small church body up there, and the conservatives in the Missouri Synod—and now you need to know there were Swedish Lutherans; there were Norwegian Lutherans; there were German Lutherans, who were called the Missouri Synod. So, everything I'm talking about is in this Missouri Synod.

Now, these folks who we call conservatives, but you know, that's not fair, they were narrow-minded people. They hired Preus to become their candidate to be the President of the church body, and he got elected— 1969. Now, first thing he did was get control of all the Commissions and Committees of the Church. (And I know this is true because he got 162 out of the 166 positions— my father was one of the four exceptions.)

And after that, he attacked the Seminary—because you need a scapegoat, right? That's how this works. Not only the student body and the faculty, but in particular, the President of the Students of the Seminary, John Tietjen. They held three Church trials, where [Preus] stacked the juries with his own people, and they couldn't condemn him [John Tietjen]. They couldn't find the evidence. Amazing.

So, here's what the blast became, '*They don't believe the Bible.*' Can you defend yourself against that charge? I can give you Scripture in Hebrew backwards, and all [someone] has to say is, '*Yeah but you're not sincere. You don't believe the Bible.*' That's how this works, right? Nasty.

As the protests continued, not only on that day, but as [Preus]moved ahead, '*The Church's One Foundation*', became the hymn of protest, which would be sung on numerous occasions by the seminarians.

There's one particular personal moment I want to share. That is—my mother spoke with Jacob Preus prior to a public event, over wine and cheese. He told her that he utterly agreed with her, about some point of argument undermining the church. She was '*absolutely on the mark*'. Not an hour later at the banquet where he spoke, and my mother is sitting right next to him, he tells the exact opposite to everybody present, he lied through his teeth, with my mother sitting right there. And that's when my mother knew. This man is not immoral; he is amoral.

But here's the toughest thing—and why I brought this whole story to you. When anybody, including my mother, would say, *'You know, he's amoral'*, what's the response? *'That can't be. He's the President of the Church; he must be a Christian.'* Mother Church must always be protected. In the midst of conflict, we can't face or hear truth. We are accused of fighting against Mother Church. *'That can't happen here.'*

We battled that for years, friends, that's just not a nicety or piety. It's The Cutting Edge. Well, on the day that we are going into Exile, Preus was interviewed by the Press. I mean, this became international news. And they asked, *'What do you think about what's going on?'* And this is brilliant. This is so brilliant. He said to the Press, *'But they what? Who? That Seminary? I mean, who? And the faculty, what? They walked away? People, who can understand them?'* The provocateur asks, *'Who can understand them?'*

So, here's a bit about my personal role in all this. I'd spent the summer working at the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota. Returned in the fall '73. I'd been elected the Student Body President.

Now, at the College I attended, the Church had seen fit to increase our academic studies by a full year, because they wanted us as pastoral candidates to have absolutely the finest, liberal arts education available at that time. (This is how we train clergy for the future.) And the school I attended, this little church school, was ranked on a par with Harvard. And I know this because the Accrediting agencies came through every seven years. On that third trip through, they said, *'Maybe Harvard is slipping a bit here.'* Yeah. But, it also became the 'provocateur' because some of these early graduates became Seminary professors. They were bringing Historical-Critical method—new ways of studying the Scriptures to the Seminary.

I ended up commuting to St. Louis from northern Indiana [the Senior College] on a regular basis, to attend all the meetings where things were brewing—because they were brewing big time. The core issue for students was this, *'Tell us/ show us where in the Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions (an exposition of Lutheran views on the Scriptures), 'Show us where are in the wrong. Show us where the professors are teaching heresies. Show us in Scripture or the Confessions where we're wrong, and we'll stop. Just show us the heresy.'*

No response ever came to us. Nothing ever happened. This is the way it works. No response. No reply. No *'We'll look into that. We'll check it out.'* Just ignore those you disagree with. Obfuscate. Pretend nothing is happening.

You're in deep and troubled waters when that's happening. So, I was there the moment that the decision was made to go into Exile. A group of eight of us met. There were six seminarians (officers of the student body) there, one professor, and myself. We'd met numerous times in the Great Hall at the great table, and suddenly in the middle of the

conversation, the president of the student body, Gerry Miller, puts his head down on his hands on the table, and he just begins weeping and weeping, and weeping. Five to ten minutes. (This is back in the day when men never wept in public.) And finally—he could barely pick his head up—and he says, ‘*We’ve got to go. We’ve got to go.*’ And that was the moment of resolve. Within the next day, they met with the Student Body, and because it was Gerry who spoke that word, 480 of 500 students agreed to leave, to enter Exile.

One of the footnotes of history, which has already long been buried, is that the students made the decision first, and the next day, the faculty voted do the same. Today it’s, ‘*The Faculty made the decision and the students followed....*’

Two things became fascinating to me in this process when I was back at the Senior College. One is watching how people would make decisions. Where are you going to go—to the new place, Seminex, or the old place? This is painful, it’s painful for people, and I learned to respect that process a long time ago. Because I saw some of the cool guys, the wild guys, start to just shrink back into narrow-mindedness because they wanted to be safe and secure—and certain about the Bible, and the Seminary, and their future. And then I saw middle-of -the -road folks, who I now deeply respect, choose to enter into Seminex. In a million years, I never would have expected it from some of them. The Spirit’s at work in people in all kinds of ways.

Well, one great compliment I received came because of my facilitating these meetings at the Senior College on a regular basis. They often started at 8:00 at night and went to 11:00 or midnight because, you know, we’re college students. I got a knock on the door about 1:00 in the morning after one of these meetings. The two most conservative guys in the student body said, “*Steve, we’ve got just one thing to say to you. Thank you for treating us decently and with respect, for honoring us, and for hearing us, and letting us speak at these meetings. We feel we have a voice, and we thank you for that.*” That’s one of the best things about conservative people that I know. They speak up. They say thank you. They honor others in difficult situations.

I started at Seminex in the fall of ‘74. We existed day by day. After Christmas, we realized our Seminary could be there week by week. Education was intense. It was joyful. It was on the edge. ‘*How does the Gospel make a difference in our lives?*’ was the key question for our theological formation. We may not be here next week. What does it say about today? And not only for our lives, but the communities we’ll be serving. Does it make a difference or is theology nice religious platitudes? And now the student population is living in St. Louis ghettos. You bet that changed the color and context of our conversations—‘*How does the Gospel make a difference?!*’

My third year. was a year of internship or 'vicarage' as they called it, and I wanted to go get my Masters in Theater degree. I wanted that as context for my internship. And the Seminary said, '*You can't, you can't do that. We've never done anything like that before.*'

I was not surprised. I finally said, '*Fine, I quit. I'm doing the program. Let me know if anything changes.*' I'm in the program about four months—another Admin person gets in touch and says, '*Steve. Let me go to bat for you. This really matters.*' I said, '*Really. You can do all the work?*' He said, '*I will.*' He did.

Two months later, he came back with a document which had an opening sentence from the entire faculty: '*Steve Harms' internship is approved, but it does not set precedent.*' (...Because hordes of innovative people were going to descend on Seminex—all creative people who wanted to be in the Lutheran Church!) When the Admin reported the Faculty Decision to me, the fellow looked at his watch and said, '*Steve, as of 2:45 in the afternoon, we have our first innovative ministry at Seminex.*'

Hmm. A great professor named Robert Bertram taught a message none of us ever forgot. '*Friends, you are seminarians and graduating soon. You are the theologians-in-residence of the people you will work with. These are the people who are doing theology. How does it shape their lives, change their lives? Here's where theology is happening.*' Bertram said, '*I'm sitting up in the stands of a stadium watching the game go on in the Church at the cost of people's lives. I'm just taking notes. Theology is happening here.*'

The great French theologian, Oscar Cullmann, was in Paris, and he said publicly, '*The Holy Spirit is hovering over St. Louis.*' The international press was following this story. Exciting times.

When we graduated, there was no church body. I was asked my last semester (because I now had a degree) to teach a 'Theater and Theology' course as Adjunct Faculty—while I concluded my Seminary studies. And there was no church body. And so, they gave us a very special blessing, '*Go. Do something.*' And we did.

Now, the nastiness continued in the church body. The attacks on church people, on pastors being ripped out of congregations, schools were attacked, professors were attacked. The Senior College I mentioned was destroyed. They lied about it, and said, '*Oh we sent those professors somewhere else. We're not sure where they went but*'... Destroy. Missionaries were yanked up from overseas. The destruction didn't stop, because Mother Church needed to be protected.

Meanwhile, my classmates and I went in all kinds of directions. One guy went to Seattle to work at a Skid Road ministry. That's what it's called originally. Lumber used to be dumped down there in Seattle Bay. Skid Road [was] where all the ne'er-do-wells hung

out. That became his ministry. Some folks went into Hispanic Ministry, others Indigenous Ministry, people in Nevada. Here's one of the coolest ones. Eight to eleven guys, eventually got together in Cleveland to form a Team Ministry. This really is the future of the church—mutually supportive, processing what are we learning—working in new and significant community ways together. My favorite became a guy who went to work in the carnivals. He did the ministry among the ‘carnies,’ you know, traveling around those little shows. That was his ministry—with the carnies.

And so, I came out here with Bev. We did Ruach Ministry, Arts ministry, Night Ministry. I worked three or four interims—all kinds of things on the creative edge. We were called ‘Worker Priests’, working in the context where we found ourselves.

Consequences—not just at that time, but how they bore fruit. The first is a small, little ex-Missouri Synod church came together, and I believe we actually embarrassed the Norwegians and the Swedes to come together, because there was no difference between any of us. That happened in 1988.

However, one of the first things that the new church body [ELCA] did was work to get rid of all the Worker Priests, because we are Free Thinkers. And we can't have that in the church, can we? We have to get things under control. And they demolished worker priests, eventually. Some of us fought for quite a while.

The second big thing that happened is the ordination of our own Bishop Jeff, and Phyllis, and Ruth in 1990—an illegal ordination. But let me say, 95% of the clergy, who brought this whole movement of gay/lesbian affirmation forward, 95% were the ex-Missouri people. That's why it happened. And the other Bishops throughout the country almost cursed those ex-Missouri guys. Yeah, that's how that went for the next decade.

We had said one thing regarding that illegal ordination. *‘Show us, Bishops, where according to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, ordaining gay and lesbian people is in the wrong. (Where do you think we picked that argument up from?) ‘Show us!’* No attempt was ever made. Are you surprised?

Ten years after Seminex, so, 1983-1985, it was decided to deploy the Seminex faculty to three different seminaries—Chicago, Texas, and here at PLTS. It was tiring work to sustain Seminex; it was hard work. Professors had put themselves at risk, but it was also time to go back to the Mother Church. Two professors, Robert Bertram (I mentioned earlier), and Ed Schroeder, spoke out and said, *‘No, this is not our calling. We're here to stay on the edge. We've been shown a new way to intersect people's lives and the shape of what the Church is to come.’* And they received a letter from the president of the Seminary, the one who'd been attacked all those years, and from the Board of Control which said, *‘You will cease and desist, or you will be fired.’* And I know this is true because I've read that letter. Wow!

'Everything gets corrupted'— that's a great theological insight. Everything gets corrupted, especially the best among us. But Christ always remains with the vulnerable, the poor, the weak, the chastised, and the ostracized. *'Where your treasure is, that's where your heart will be too.'* [Matthew 6:21]

These were great people I got to work with—fine professors. They paid a price. *But the truth is—we abandoned our calling.* The church is not a thing to be managed. It's an imaginative Beloved Community, meeting people where they are. It's all about the transforming relationships we experience in Christ.

And that's why on the bulletin cover today, that Sikh woman is here praying in our church. You see the title, *'The New Lutheran.'* If she has nothing to do with us, and we have nothing to do with her, we're not Christians. The boundary-less infinite compassion includes her. If she's written off, considered merely an outsider, well, we haven't approached the work of Christ yet.

Clearly, this work gave me a lens to see through and expose how power works. It also gave us students the courage and backbone to know that when things are impossible, they can still be faced and changed.

Imagine my surprise when Donna Duensing said, *'Have you told your people about Craig Dykstra, and what he taught us— that Seminex was the most pivotal experience of the past century, on a par with the Reformation? Have you told your people?'*

There's no love without risk. There's no Church without risk. There's no Gospel without risk, because that's where the Spirit works with us, revealing what is possible now. Only Faith guarantees blessings—we hope for only Faith. We're often going to travel against the grain. And I hope we continue to be Free Thinkers.

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.