

## **“God’s Sweet Word Leads us to do Great Things for Him”**

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of J.K. Wilhelm Loehe, Pastor (January 2)

Primary Text: Psalm 119: 97-104

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Commemoration of J.K. Wilhelm Loehe (pronounced “Leyhe”), is the Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 119, verses 97-104. The title of the sermon is “God’s Sweet Word Leads us to do Great Things for Him”. As you may have read in your bulletin under “In Preparation for Worship” today, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, is the day set aside to remember the life and ministry of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German Pastor named Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe. To just say “Pastor” does not scratch the surface of what this man of God did. As you can see he did many great things in service to the Lord. Today we are going to look at his life and how it applies to us today as Lutheran Christians.

J.K. Wilhelm Loehe was born in the German city of Fuerth in 1808. This region of Germany is a part of the Bavarian region known as “Franconia” and is located between the larger cities of Wurtzburg and Nurnberg. Loehe studied theology at the University of Erlangen and the University of Berlin and received his first call in 1831. Loehe was transferred by the church authorities to over 12 positions in just six years, until settling in as the Pastor of the Lutheran parish in Neuendettelsau. The reason he was transferred so much was that he was seen as a trouble-maker by the religious hierarchy. The Catholic king of Bavaria allowed for the Lutheran Church to operate in order to keep the people happy, but only with

certain restrictions to stop “subversive enterprises”. Loehe was seen as too theologically conservative and too socially liberal. Thus, he was confined to a small country church.

From his out of the way location, Loehe was very active in advancing the Gospel. After reading a letter from a frontier circuit riding Lutheran preacher named Friedrich Wynekan, he became active in raising funds and sending missionaries to the United States and around the world. Wynekan spoke in his letter of the dreadful lack of trained pastors to minister to the large number of German immigrants coming to the New World as well as the large numbers of American Indians who needed to hear the Gospel. Over the course of his life, Loehe raised money and used his own funds to send 185 missionaries from Germany around the world. Most came to the United States, but some went to Brazil and Australia as well. In the great Lutheran tradition of education, Loehe advanced this too. He recognized the need for pastors, teachers, and deaconesses to be trained in America. His efforts led to the establishment of seminaries in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Wartburg, Iowa, and a teachers college in Saginaw, Michigan. As many of you know, I trained for the ministry through the SMP program with Concordia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Fort Wayne and CTS are very special places to me, so Loehe has impacted me in this regard. The two main classroom buildings on the CTS campus are Wynekan Hall and Loehe Hall.

11 years ago (2010) I had the opportunity to visit another place that began as a mission plant with Loehe’s help: Frankenmuth, Michigan. Has anyone ever been there (wait for response)? It is really an amazing place that I hope to get back to one day. When there on a family vacation, we worshipped in St. Lorenz Lutheran Church. In a tour after the Divine

Service, we were told of Loehe's role and how he is represented in the beautiful stain glass windows of the church. St. Lorenz was established in 1844 a mission to the Chippewa Indians by Pastor Friedrich Craemer, funded by Loehe. Frankenmuth is named for the region of Franconia and the German word for courage, "muth". Today, St. Lorenz Church in Frankenmuth is one of the largest LCMS congregations in the country with 5,000 members (in a town with less than 6,000 people, the bulletin cover photo gives you just one sample of the beauty of this church). It is one of the few LCMS that still offers a regularly-held Service in the German language. Frankenmuth is one of Michigan's top tourist destinations with its Bavarian themed architecture, famed chicken and other German food, and is home to the largest Christmas store in the world, Bronner's, which was founded by descendents of the original German immigrants. Frankenmuth and St. Lorenz Lutheran Church stand as a testimony of God working through a small-town German Pastor.

Loehe was also passionate about being compassionate for people. He helped established a home for the aged, an asylum for the mentally ill, and is considered one of the founders of the deaconess ministry. Deaconesses are seminary-trained women who serve the Lord by, "working in faith, laboring in love, and remaining steadfast in the hope of our Lord Jesus Christ".

In his personal life, he married in 1837 and his wife Helene bore him 4 children. Sadly, she passed away after they had been married only 6 years, leaving Loehe to raise their children as a single parent. Loehe served as a faithful local pastor, by historical accounts a kind and generous shepherd who related well to people of all walks of life. If all of this isn't enough, Loehe also wrote hymns. His hymn "Wide Open Stand the Gates" reflects

Loehe's passion for evangelism through a Word and Sacrament ministry. It is hymn number 639 in the LSB, which we sang as our hymn of the day.

How was it possible that Loehe accomplished all of this? What does this mean for us today? First, the truth is that God can accomplish His purposes by His sweet Word leading us to do great things for the Kingdom of God. Verse 103 of Psalm 119 says, "*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*" The Bible speaks of God's Word being sweet in other places, including Proverbs 16:24, Psalm 19:10, Jeremiah 15:16, and Ezekiel 3:3. Loehe had a love and a passion for this sweet Word of God.

We grow in God's Word by, as verse 97 says, by making it "*my meditation all the day*". The Hebrew word for meditate, "hagah" means to "hold attention by saying the words of Scripture and praying." We should all do this. Martin Chemnitz, one of founding fathers of Lutheranism said, "*Each person in whatever station or calling he has, may meditate on the law of the Lord and speak of His testimonies.*" Growing in the Word is essential to being used by God. In fact, it is by His Word that we hear the Gospel and are brought to faith.

Secondly, we need to be bold in our understanding of God's Word even when it contradicts the prevailing wisdom of the present age. Verse 98 says, "*Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies*". Verses 99-100 continue in saying, "*I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.*" Let me be clear. The Bible does teach respect for authority, including our teachers, bosses, and government leaders. However, we can respectfully challenge authority that is not in line with Biblical principles. This is what Loehe faced in his time. Many in the church had

gotten away from the Lutheran Confessions and their Biblical teachings. Many in the church of his time had turned to emotionalism or extreme rationalism. The church leadership wanted to please the governing authorities, so they sent Loehe to an obscure parish. However Loehe, with God's guiding, accomplished much more for the Gospel than his opponents. We face opposition to Biblical truth today as well. Many churches, seminaries, and even entire denominational authorities in the U.S. have retreated from a clear reading of God's Word. Let me tell you a story to illustrate that point. (Tell story of the new convert and "liberal" pastor) The Bible commentator Matthew Henry said this, *"The written word is a more sure guide to heaven, than all the fathers, the teachers, and ancients of the church. Our relish for the Word of God will be greatest when that for the world and the flesh is least."*

The third point to remember is that God can use you wherever you are. Wilhelm Loehe had a profound impact on the growth of Lutheranism and thus the proclamation of the Gospel on three continents without ever leaving Germany. Remember that the church he pastored was in Neuendettelsau, which is even today a small German village about 25 miles from the larger city of Nurnberg. Comparing it to our context it would be like a small country church somewhere even less known than Commerce, maybe somewhere like Danielsville or Homer. However, God's mission was not "confined" to this backcountry hamlet. From there He would use Loehe to pray for, fund, and send missionaries out, start schools, and minister to the lost and hurting. These missions are still bearing fruit today. God may not call you to be a missionary to some far-off land. However, He can use you right where you live. You can pray. You can financially support missions and schools. You can witness to those that you meet in your day-

to-day life. Even someone confined to a hospital or hospice bed can share Christ with the family members that visit them and the doctors and caregivers that attend to them. One pastor who was confined to a bed in times near the end of his earthly life (Rev. Erv Rassmussen) called this his “horizontal pulpit.” God can use you-anywhere that He places you.

Finally, remember that when God works through Pastor Loehe, you and me, or any of His people it is by His grace. We don’t witness and support missionaries because we “have to” or to “earn our way to heaven.” We do God’s work because that is what Christians do. We do good works out of a love for the God who loved us enough to send His only begotten Son to die in our place on the cross. Our Psalm for today closes with verse 104, which states “*therefore I hate every false way.*” Hate is a strong word. We are not to hate any people, but we are to hate the false way-the false way of the devil that leads people to destruction and damnation. This is contrasted with verse 97, which begins our reading from Psalm 119, which says that we are to “*love your law.*” Romans 12:9, “*Hate what is evil, cling to what is good,*” pretty much sums it up.

In closing, St. Augustine comments on this Psalm and says, “*You have laid down a law within my heart by Your Spirit as it were by your fingers, that I might not fear it as a slave without love, but might have it with a chaste fear as a son and fear it with chaste love.*”

Yes indeed, not cowering in fear like a slave, but like Pastor Loehe, loving and serving God out of His abundant grace.

Amen.