

LTSS Bedenbaugh Award May 12, 2011

When Pastor Jon Heiliger called me a few weeks ago to tell me that I was this year's J. Benjamin Bedenbaugh Award recipient, I told him that I was particularly honored to accept because I had known and studied with Professor Bedenbaugh. It took me a while to realize that Pr. Heiliger had never had Ben Bedenbaugh as a professor, since he graduated in 2000 and Dr. Bedenbaugh died in 1993. Then I began to think that there must be quite a few alums here today, along with all of you graduating seniors, who never knew Professor Bedenbaugh either. So, today I'd like to say something about J. Benjamin Bedenbaugh and why it may be that a man who spent virtually his whole ministerial life as a New Testament prof at this Seminary is associated with an award given to parish pastors for pastoral leadership.

John Benjamin Bedenbaugh always preferred being called "Ben." But when his students, and many others, talked about him, they almost always called him "Benny." Perhaps that was because he was so endearingly vulnerable. He was a big handsome man—about 6'3" and a bit beefy, when I knew him—with a voice that could be commanding and intimidating, when he wanted it to be. Nobody ever fell asleep in one of Benny's classes. As a teacher, he was witty, learned, often brilliant. Yet, in one-to-one situations he was often painfully shy and nearly tongue-tied—and that was especially true when he was in the presence of women. When I came here in the fall of 1975, I was assigned to Dr. Bedenbaugh as his advisee. He was a bit like a scared rabbit with me whenever he had to speak to me. After teaching nothing but male students for more than twenty years, he was fearful about how women students would respond to him and to his teaching style; yet, he, like all the faculty members at Southern, believed in the theological and Biblical right-ness of women's ordination. Dr. Bedenbaugh and the entire faculty

did their best to support women students here, despite the fact that **they** were all male and that, at the time, virtually none of them had ever seen an ordained Lutheran woman celebrate Communion or preach.

Ben was the son of an old SC Lutheran family which had been here since well before the War Between the States. He had a certain Southern courtliness about him, and with it, an habitual courtesy that extended even to people with whom he disagreed. His courtly courtesy, however, never prevented him from clearly and forcefully proclaiming the Gospel to those whose political or social or cultural biases had caused them to ignore or pervert that Gospel—especially when they were loyal Lutheran church members!

Ben's students loved him; but that love was equaled by the affectionate appreciation of the laypeople in many of the congregations in the vicinity of the Seminary and throughout this state and beyond. In the 60's and 70's asking Prof. Bedenbaugh to come preach and/or lead a Bible Study was a frequent practice of his former students who were now pastors struggling with social issues in their parishes—especially the issue of Race. Benny would come and preach or do a Bible Study on, say, Luke 10--except that he would use as his text Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament. His former students had heard him read that story in class—but the unsuspecting laity was shocked—and sometimes incensed—to hear that the victim on the road to Jericho was a white man and the Good Samaritan was black!

We may have forgotten how very difficult it was to be a faithful and committed parish pastor during the era of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Vietnam War; but I think we **all** know how much courage it takes to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus in **every** time when Christ's Gospel contradicts the prevailing

attitudes and prejudices of our society and culture. Dr. Bedenbaugh was never shy or reticent when it came to defending the Gospel; for him, after so many years of study and reflection on the New Testament, the Gospel was always the Gospel of Grace, of Forgiveness, and of God's surpassing love in Jesus Christ. There is no room in that Gospel for human exclusiveness, or even for our self-satisfied judgment and vilification of those who differ from us on how to address the various issues confronting the Church. For Ben, even the Decalogue always had to play a muted second fiddle to the Gospel's Law of Love. It would be interesting to see how he would bring his deep devotion to Christ and the Gospel to bear on some of the pastoral, ecclesiastical, and social issues of this Century. I believe he would have counseled us all to "sin boldly" on the side of Grace.

Seminaries are much more than just "professional schools." Seminaries are truly "seed beds" for the growing of pastors and other servants of Christ's Church. Their students are formed spiritually, as well as professionally; and the professors teach things eternally more important than proper doctrine, or how to write a sermon or teach a Confirmation class. Professors are witnesses to the Faith. Their personal professions of Faith remain in the hearts and minds of their students long after the fine points of doctrinal and ecclesiastical disputes have been forgotten. One's seminary experience permanently shapes one's ministry, for good or ill. (I speak from more than 30 years' experience of hearing the admonishments of my professors in my head as I did everything from writing sermons to filling out parish reports!) So, if I have truly been a good pastoral leader, then I must attribute that mostly to the servants of Christ at this seminary who taught me **how** to be a pastor. I thank God for all of those faithful teachers—but most especially on this day, for J. Benjamin Bedenbaugh.