

# “Fit For Service”

Luke 9:51-62

As I mentioned in my newsletter article, due to a number of milestones in my life, I have been a little nostalgic lately. This past Tuesday marked the 24<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of my ordination. As we read of Elijah anointing Hazael and Jehu and Elisha for their various offices within the Kingdom of God, it always makes me wonder “why?” Why are they chosen for that task? Why am I or any pastor fit for service within the Kingdom of God? It’s been 24 years and I still can’t tell you why.

Why am I even fit for any position within the kingdom of God, let alone called to be a shepherd? When the man said, “I will follow you Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” We hear Jesus say, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

By this standard, it can be assumed that the prophet Elisha was not fit for service within the kingdom of God. After all, he said to Elijah, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Elijah is not happy with Elisha. He says, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?”

Elisha did not have a great start to his prophetic ministry. Yet, he faithfully assisted Elijah for many years until Elijah was taken up into heaven. Elisha even receives a double-portion of his spirit, as Scripture

records. Elisha had a faithful and useful ministry. He just had a rough start.

All that any of us can ask for is that we are faithful and useful within the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit is the One who does all the work. As Luther says in the Small Catechism, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts (of Word and Sacrament), sanctified, and kept me in the true faith.”

Like Elisha, I made countless mistakes at the beginning of my ministry. I still make countless mistakes. Wearing this robe for 24 years has not taken away my sinfulness. Thanks be to God that I have been wearing the robe of Christ’s righteousness for 50 years, since the day of my Baptism. I am still a sinful man, but my sins have been covered – just like yours.

In our Gospel for today, the disciples early in their ministry were not received well by a Samaritan village. They ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” “Oh, please, let us do this!”

Jesus rebuked them, and they went on to another village.

I said earlier that the readings today caused me to be a little nostalgic. Those words from chapter 5 of Paul’s letter to the Galatians were the text for (I think it was) my 3<sup>rd</sup> sermon I preached after being ordained. I am sure I have told the story before, but when I arrived as a newly ordained pastor in Mellen, WI, that little town of 850 people was completely divided over the school superintendent. One group was working to get him fired before his contract was up. The other group was fighting to keep him.

It was ugly. Families who had been close friends for decades were not speaking to one another. For three weeks, every person I met offered their opinion on the “school situation.” And then I read Paul’s words, “if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. . . the works of the flesh are evident (they are obvious): hatred (that is what enmity is), strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy . . . I warn you that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

And in my third sermon after being called to serve these people, I warned them, and I proverbially rained down fire upon them. And I told the people in no uncertain terms that you cannot control the way that other people act. In fact, we should anticipate that those outside of Christ’s Church will remain in their hatred, strife, jealousy, and fits of anger. As Paul says, “the works of the sinful flesh are obvious.” However, these are not the works of the people of God and Paul says “those who do such things will *not* inherit the kingdom of God.” Those who are conducting themselves in such a way are outside of the kingdom. That is not a place you want to be.

And many people on the way out of church thanked me for saying what needed to be said, because there were people they knew who needed to hear that sermon. No, it was meant for you.

I have never had cause to preach another sermon quite like that one – thankfully. Although some good came of it. No one complained to me about the “school situation” anymore. That was a positive. And there were phone calls made between former friends who were on the opposite sides of the issue. Some measures of reconciliation did occur.

But there was no lasting change that came about, because, even though the truth of the Word of God was spoken; even though the words of St. Paul are a warning to both sides (and not just to those *other people*); and those words are for you and me. But there was no lasting change because, for most of them, they didn't see the need to look into the mirror of the Law and be terrified that what they are doing is putting them outside of the kingdom of God, and when a person looks into the mirror of the Law and is not terrified, the perceived need of the Gospel is greatly diminished.

Last week I mentioned the sinful woman from Luke 7 who poured out her tears in repentance over sorrow for her sin. Simon the Pharisee saw no such need for tears from him. C.F.W. Walther classically said, "There cannot be faith in a heart that has not first been terrified." And I did my best to terrify them that day. But, as C.F.W Walther also rightly says, "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Gospel does not predominate in teaching." Walther goes on to say that properly applying Law and Gospel is the "highest art of the Christian in general and the theologian in particular."

There is a reason that Jesus rebuked the disciples when they wanted to call down fire from heaven. There is also a reason that the disciples knew that this was an option. As June 25 marked the anniversary of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession (the real Reformation Day of the church) I thanked God that it is not for this robe that I must work to inherit the kingdom of God. For my salvation and yours, a different robe has been washed in the blood of the Lamb. The righteousness of Christ which covers your sin and mine is the only way that any of us are fit for service in the kingdom of God. Amen.