

# “Fit For Service”

Luke 9:51-62

The Old Testament and Epistle readings caused me to get a little nostalgic this week. This past Tuesday marked the 18<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 18 years and I still can’t tell you why.

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 says. 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. Unlike Elisha, I still make countless mistakes. Wearing this robe for 18 years has not taken away my sinfulness. Thanks be to God that I have been wearing the robe of Christ’s righteousness for 44 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 Epistle reading caused me to be a little nostalgic. Those words from chapter 5 of Paul’s letter to the Galatians were the text for my 3<sup>rd</sup> sermon I preached. 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 ever, I warned them, and I proverbially rained down fire upon them. It just so happened that Malinda was with me at the church on Saturday night and she walked up into the pulpit and read my sermon manuscript that I had laid out in preparation for Sunday morning.

Never before had she done this. She has never done it again. But that night she read my sermon. And then she spent the rest of the evening contemplating ways of becoming ill by Sunday morning. And during the preaching of that sermon, she nervously crumples and shreds the bulletin.

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.”

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.

And I have never preached another sermon like that again – intentionally. Although some good came of it. No one complained to me about the “school situation” anymore. 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 us also (and not just to those *other people* who should hear these words for fear that *they* will not inherit the kingdom of God); those words are for you and me. But there was no lasting change because the message of the Gospel was not heard.

Two weeks ago, when we saw the sinful woman pour out her tears in repentance, I had quoted C.F.W. Walther who said, “There cannot be faith in a heart that has not first been terrified.” And during that sermon, I am sure I said something about forgiveness and grace 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.” The Gospel did not predominate that day.

There is a reason that Jesus rebuked the disciples when they wanted to call down fire from heaven. Thanks be to 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 has made you fit for service in the kingdom of God. Amen.