

“Fit For Service”

Luke 9:51-62

As I mentioned in my newsletter article, due to a number of recent and upcoming milestones in my life, I have been a little nostalgic lately. This past Tuesday marked the 24th 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 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 forgot about my first Elder’s meeting. We were finishing up supper and they came and knocked on the parsonage door. I still make countless mistakes. Wearing this robe for 24 years has not taken away my sinfulness – or my forgetfulness. 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 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.

In our Epistle reading from chapter 5 of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Paul proverbially rains down fire from heaven: “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.” Notice how the list is not simply the “big” sins of sexual immorality, idolatry, sorcery, drunkenness, and the like. As if envy, divisions, and fits of anger are “little” sins.

Paul basically tells us that we should anticipate that those outside of Christ’s Church will create rivalries and dissensions and 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.

I saw a funny post on Facebook (which I shared on the church page). The image was of a family leaving church and one of them saying, “That was a great sermon on sin. I felt like the pastor was speaking directly to the man two pews in front of us.” If you ever have a thought like that, you might want to take a second look into the mirror of the Law.

. How could you read these words from St. Paul, look into the mirror of the Law, and not be terrified that there is real danger in finding yourself outside of the kingdom of God. 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 (The first president of the Missouri Synod) classically said, “There cannot be faith in a heart that has

not first been terrified.” 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. And as we see throughout Scripture, literally and proverbially, there are certain circumstances where fire from heaven is to be applied. Properly wielding that authority remains the challenge.

For those who have been terrified by the mirror of the Law, the Holy Spirit, who has created and sustained the faith of your Baptism, brings to you the sweet words of the Gospel and feeds you with the very life-giving body and blood of Christ our Lord.

As June 25 marked the anniversary of my ordination and, more importantly, the anniversary of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession (the real Reformation Day of the church, if you ask me – but they still haven’t asked me, so the calendar hasn’t been changed) 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.