

"The Difference"
Luke 6:27-38

February 24, 2019

7th Sunday After The Epiphany

Ever since the time of the Reformation, Lutherans have faced one major criticism and that is we are soft on so-called "good works". We don't require them. We don't talk a lot about them. The Catholic Church at the time of Luther accused the reformers of doing away with good works because of all the emphasis on grace. Modern-day criticism of Lutheranism can be summed up in a conversation I had with a Christian of another denomination. He said, "You Lutherans make salvation so easy because all you have to do is believe to be saved."

Although we steadfastly deny such accusations, it seems that we live as if they are true. Many Christians act as if the Christian faith is only about believing the truth of the Bible. People think that faith consists only of knowing certain teachings about God, but no action is required or desired by God on their part. They may talk about knowing that they're going to heaven and be with Jesus, but they don't desire any contact with God and His Word nor do they wish to change their lifestyle while they are alive here on earth. Faith amounts to sort of a "divine fire insurance policy" which exists only to save you from hell, but not to change the way you live your life.

On the other hand, other Christians (as well as many other non-Christian religions) act as if Christianity is all about doing good things. People strive hard to be "good enough" to be accepted by God and go to heaven. While believing the truth of the Bible is important, living out the truth of the Bible is even more important. People will say, "It's all about deeds, not creeds." While these people may not actually think that doing good will earn them forgiveness and save them from sin, death, and the devil, they do believe that it figures in there somewhere.

Who is right? Is Christianity all about believing what the Bible says? Is Christianity all about doing what the Bible says? Here is where the criticism by the Catholic Church and others may be justified. We rightly put our faith in the Gospel which says that God, in Christ Jesus, has done everything necessary for us to be saved from sin, death, and the devil and given everlasting life. Therefore, there is nothing we have to do in order to save ourselves. And, since we don't have to do anything, we end up doing nothing at all in terms of good works. We say that, since we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation by grace through faith alone, good works are not necessary.

There is one very important Person who begs to differ with us regarding this matter of doing good. He says that the people of God will most definitely do good works. And these good works are much tougher than we think they should be. This person is Jesus Christ.

In, what has been called, His "Sermon on the Plain" in the Gospel according to Saint Luke (which is quite similar to His "Sermon on the Mount" found in the Gospel according to St. Matthew) Jesus describes what the life of a Christian is to be like as he shares in the life of Christ. This life consists of two things: "being" and "doing". Last week, Jesus' words, which are often called "the Beatitudes", describes what it means to be a Christian and why it is so blessed. It is not what we expect. Jesus says we are blessed when we are poor, hungry, sad, and hated and excluded by the people of this world.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus continues on to describe what it means to live as a Christian. It, too, is not what we expect. We think that we probably think that we have this "living life as a Christian" figured out. We likely feel that living the Christian life simply means

to be a nice and decent person. This is the view in many of today's religions. Many professing Christians ignore or reject the Law of God when it becomes difficult and unappealing to us. We talk ourselves into believing that all God expects of us is to be nice.

Well, Jesus certainly has a big surprise for us. The Christian life consists of actually doing good things, not just believing. These things are not only very difficult, but are, in fact, opposite to our sinful nature. It is natural to be angry with or even hate those people who oppose us. Jesus says to love our enemies. It is entirely natural to ignore, avoid, and not help those people who hate us. Jesus says to do good to such people. It is most natural to respond to angry words and curses (that is, words which call for harm) with even more angry words and harsher curses. Jesus says to bless (that is, to wish well for) them. It is only natural to respond to those who abuse us with anger and harsh words. Jesus says to pray for such people. It is only natural and a matter of self-preservation to fight back and punch anyone in the face who has punched us. Instead, Jesus says that we are to turn the other cheek and let them punch that one. It is natural and financially responsible to protect our own personal property when someone tries to take it from us and to not let them do it. Jesus says let people take and keep your property, to give to people who want your stuff, and never demand anything back.

What is our reaction to what Jesus has just said? I think a lot of us would be working hard to try and explain why Jesus didn't really mean what he said. We try to tone it down and think that Jesus surely must've meant just that we should be decent people doing good for decent people.. Love your friends, family, and fellow church members. Help those in need that we know and are good and deserving of our help. Don't put up with physical violence or theft of our stuff. We should demand restitution for what we deserve.

That all seems well and good. At least you are doing good in helping someone. However, Jesus criticizes such a view of good works. As Jesus' Beatitudes reminded us last week that Christians are called to be different in our relationship with God through the work and merits of Jesus Christ, Jesus reminds us today that we are called to live differently in our relationship with other people. We are different than the rest of the people in this world as a result of Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross. We are the children of God. We live differently than the rest of the people in this world. Not only are good works a part of the Christian life. Not only is the content of these good works different. But the manner in which we do good works and the people for whom we do good works is different as well.

Sinners (that is, non-Christians) can, to some extent, be good and decent people. They can be nice people and do good things. However, God's people are to live differently. They are to do that which is not natural and for whom it would not be natural. If good works are done as a quid pro quo – that is done only to reciprocate for that which is done for us, how is that any different from the way non-Christians live? Jesus says, "if you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to get back the same amount." He goes on to say love those who don't love you; do good to those who don't do good to you; lend and expect nothing in return; and so on.

How do we respond to Jesus call to live this way? Our sinful nature will complain about them. We don't like to do any good works, much less those which are difficult or unfair to do. We may reassert strongly the non-necessity of good works that we have to do because we have been saved by grace. We ignore these hard words from Jesus or we revise the list into

tasks that are easy to do and that we don't mind doing. We may be even become upset with Jesus because He is being so unfair. Does He know how bad some people treated us? Does he get how strongly some people have hated us? Does he care that we may lose our shirt (literally) if we just let go of all of our stuff? Can he really understand?

Yes! Jesus is merely calling us to live as He has already lived. As our Lord and Savior, He is inviting us, His followers, to follow in the way of life which He is already lived. The story of Jesus' ministry is of dealing with those who were His enemies and loving them. He experienced the hatred of the people and, especially, the religious leaders and did good to them.

Jesus was cursed by the people and leaders in the trial and falsely convicted him, as well as those soldiers who crucified him. However, He blessed them and prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing." He was struck in the face and all about the body by Temple guards and Roman soldiers. Not only did He not stop them, He allowed them to continue. He gave away all that he had – his cloak and His tunic when he was crucified and did not expect it to be returned.

This was all prophesied by Isaiah who wrote, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:3) As difficult as this was, Jesus did even more according to the prophecy, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement with brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Jesus didn't love just His friends. Jesus didn't do this for people who had done good to Him. Jesus literally "practiced what he preached" as Paul tells us in the book of Romans. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good person one might there even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-7)

By doing this for whom He did it, we have been declared justified (that is, right with God) by the blood of Jesus Christ. We have been saved by Jesus from the wrath of God whose holiness compels Him to punish. And, as Paul reminds us, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stay and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:1-2)

This changes everything for us. By Jesus' incarnation, birth, perfect life of ministry and service, sacrificial death on the cross, and glorious resurrection from the tomb, we have been declared by God through the forgiveness of sin received by faith to be as Jesus is: beloved by God and His dear children. By that same work of Jesus Christ, we are now called and empowered by God through His mercy to live as Jesus lived: doing good for all, even those who don't deserve it. We live the life and do the deeds which Jesus calls us to do, not in order to get saved, but because we are already saved. That is the true teaching of the Reformation.

Nevertheless, Jesus' words in our text might still see too impossible for us to do. Certainly, based on our sinful nature and our natural desires, this would seem to be true. However, Jesus says exactly how we are able to do these things. First, he tells us why we will desire to do all of these things. We don't have to worry or be upset over what we lose because of those who oppose us, hated us, cursed us, abuse us, mistreat us, and take our stuff. All of those things which we hold so dearly mean nothing. Jesus says, "Your reward will

be great.” All of these things will pale in comparison to what God has in store for us in the life which is to come. And what God has for us will never be lost. As Martin Luther wrote in his famous hymn, “And take they are life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Though these all be gone, our victory has been one; the kingdom hours remaineth.”

Secondly, He tells us how we will be able to do all of these things. Jesus says, “And you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” We will do these good works, even the difficult works for the people who have been difficult to us, because of who we are. We are children of the Most High. He operates on the basis of mercy, being kind to the ungrateful and the evil, not because it is easy, not because it is fair, and not because they deserve it but because of Who He is. And we, His children, who have experienced that mercy which we did not deserve and have not earned, will live by that mercy in doing the good which God calls us to do.

As Christians, especially as Lutherans, we really need to rethink our attitude toward and performance of good works. Although good works do not save us, they are a necessary part of our faith. They are not optional. Rather, they demonstrate that faith exists in us. Any so-called definition of faith which does not include works is dead as Saint James tells us. Nor are they intended to be done only for the “nice guys”, but also (even especially) for those who are not good and nice. Our good works are proof of salvation, not the cause of it. They are, by nature, difficult, not easy. They require a high price and will most definitely cost us. Yet we do them because we are children of the Most High. We do what our Father does. Our Father has shown mercy to us while we were weak sinners in opposition to Him. Therefore, we will also show mercy to others, while they are weak sinners in opposition to us. We will show mercy to others, not only in what we say, but in what we do and how we live. That is the difference between the Lord God and any other man-made God’s. That is the difference the good things which God calls us to do and any other man-made system of good works. Dare to be different. Dare to act and live as you have been called to be Amen.