

"A Different Kind of Work"

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

November 14, 2010

25th Sunday After Pentecost

Christmas decorations are springing up. Christmas advertisements are on the television. And it's not even Thanksgiving. Does that fill you with joy and excitement? Or does it remind you that, with the great holiday of Christmas coming up soon, there's a lot of work to be done? That's fairly normal. Whenever there is something important coming up on the horizon like Christmas, it usually means there's a lot of work to do in preparation for it.

In our church calendar, we are now in the last few Sundays of the present church year. The emphases in the Scripture lessons has to do with the end of the world. There is nothing more important that could come up in the future than the end of the world. Does that mean there's a lot of work to be done by us in preparation for it? If so, what kind of work is it?

When many Christians think about the end of the world, they think their work in preparation for that is to "clean up their act", "get right with God", and encourage others to "get saved" as well. This can lead to a lot of guilt-producing sermons which encourage us to stop doing sinful actions, do more good things, and pound people over the head with the Bible so that they will "make a decision for Christ" and profess faith.

The bad news is that, as sinners, we can never clean up our act. We can never get right with God. We can't "get saved" nor can we help our non-believing friends, family, and neighbors (who are also sinners) get saved. That is work that we are incapable of doing.

The good news is that it is work that Jesus Christ has already done – fully and completely – for us. Jesus did all the good which God's Law commands us to do and the credit for that good is credited to our account before God. The Word of God says, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many

will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:19) That holiness is simply given to us. The Word of God goes on to say, “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” (Rom. 3:23)

Jesus has also took on Himself all the violations of God’s Law (which we call sin) and all the punishment which those sins deserve. When Jesus died on the cross, he did not say, “I’ve done my part. Now you do yours.” He said, “It is finished.” Everything needed to be done to save us has been done by the Son of God. We have no work to do in this area. With Scripture and the Lutheran reformers, “we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” (Rom. 3:28)

So, what work is there left for us to do? Maybe it’s to be busily involved in serving God. There are offices to be filled on the Board of Directors. There are Sunday School classes to be taught. There is a budget to be met. There are people to be visited. There are sermons to be preached and Bible Classes to be taught. This is the work we can be doing as we wait for the return of Christ.

Once, a group of people who had been part of the 5,000 Jesus had fed with five loaves of bread and two fish asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” (John 5:28). The answer Jesus gave might surprise you. He did not throw the Ten Commandments at them nor did He give them a number of religious activities with which to busy themselves. Rather, “Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’” (John 5:29)

That sounds like good news. Jesus has done all the work to save us. Just trust in Him. The trouble is, on our own, we are unable to do that. We are dead in our trespasses and sins, the Scriptures declare. Sin clouds our mind and reason, making it impossible for us to understand what Jesus has done for us or believe in Him. The Word of God says, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” (1 Cor. 2:14)

The good news is that, what God requires, He also gives freely. The Word of God says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) The faith which Jesus says God desires, God gives as a free gift. Many of us first received that gift in Holy Baptism. Some first received that gift by hearing the Gospel preached, taught, or shared.

And, not only does God give us faith as a gift, He also gives us gifts to nourish and strengthen that faith. Our faith is built up and strengthened by the Word of God when we hear the Word of God in the Divine Service; when we study the Word of God in Bible Class; and when read the Word of God in our homes. Our faith is fed and nourished with the very body and blood of the Word made flesh – Jesus Christ – when come to His altar for Holy Communion.

By now, you are probably thinking there is no work for us to do at all, since we can't do anything to save ourselves or to receive the salvation which Jesus won for us. You might adapt the attitude which Lutherans are famously known for: since I can do nothing, I won't do anything. Is that what the Scriptures teach? Not at all.

Lutherans are not the first ones to think this or be accused of it. It was the problem with some of the members of the church at Thessalonica in our Epistle reading for today. On the surface, the epistle seems to be a simple moral lesson on the evils of laziness and the benefits of hard work. But there's more than that. Apparently, some of the Christians in Thessalonica believed that, since Jesus was coming soon, they could just quit working and wait around. It's not so much that they were lazy or idle. The word here literally means that they had an “irresponsible attitude toward the obligation to work.” (TWNT) They felt they didn't have to work because Jesus was coming. As a result, they started sponging off their neighbors. Instead of being busy at work, they become busybodies – nosy about the affairs of others.

Paul is pretty strong here in his response to this. He commands and encourages the people in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work. He uses himself as an example as who worked while he was among them, rather than taking advantage of their generosity. He even warns them, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

Why does Paul do this? It is more than simply a moralistic lesson on the virtue of hard work. There is an authentic place for the work of a Christian in waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to return. Paul writes, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good." This reminds us of Paul's words to the Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Galatians 6:9-10)

Our "work" (if you want to call it that) is to "do good". We are to do good "to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." Why would we ever become weary of that? If we are trying to earn our salvation or better our position with God by doing good things, then we could easily become tired because we would never know if we have done enough. We might become weary because of our sinful nature's natural self-centered attitude.

However, Christ's work on our behalf frees us from all of that. His death on the cross forgives us all our sins of selfishness. His perfect life of righteousness frees us from the need to serve God. He doesn't need our service, but our neighbor does. That's not only why we feed the hungry, help the poor, clothe the naked, and so on, but also why we serve in church offices, teach Sunday School, give our monetary offerings, visit people, preach and teach. We do all those things to serve our neighbor, both inside and outside of the church without question or hesitation.

We are even free from having to look for good things to do for our neighbor. As the Word of God says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph. 2:10) We have been created in Christ Jesus, that is, baptized into His life, death, and resurrection, to do good works. And where do those good works come from? God has prepared them in advance for us to do. Opportunities to do good work for your neighbor will come your way. Be observant and seize those opportunities when God presents them.

I was all set to close this sermon with a great quote from Martin Luther. However, in researching the quote, I found that Luther never said it. But the sentiment expressed in it is so good,

I'll use it anyway (even if Luther never said it). Luther was ALLGEGED to have said, "If I believed the world were to end tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today." In other words, the work we have to do in preparation for the world to end is the same work which we do from day to day. In light of Christ's work for us in His perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection and because of His gift of faith to you, live in your vocation and serve your neighbor with food, clothing, shelter, and such for his physical needs and with the Gospel for his greatest need. Do that for anyone and everyone with whom you come into contact. Do it especially for those here who belong to the family of believers. I know that it's a different kind of work. It's not very exciting or apocalyptic. But it is the work – the only work – given by Christ for us to do until He comes again in glory. Amen.