

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 2

Faith and Works were two of the major issues that consumed the ministry of Martin Luther and the reformers of the 16th century. The Catholic apologists who went to battle against Luther insisted that the works of people were part of the economy of salvation. While Luther's Roman Catholic opponents asserted that our works did not earn heaven in some crass "pay as you go" sort of way, it was also true, in their eyes, that God did accord value to the works of mankind and rewarded those works with heaven. (You can read a bit of this in the Confutation, Article IV which is easily available online, here's a link: <http://bookofconcord.org/confutatio.php> .)

Luther and the writers of the Lutheran confessions, on the other hand, completely separated the works of man from the economy of salvation. Our salvation was not a reward for works done, however graciously that reward might be given considering the works. Heaven purchased at bargain basement prices is not "by grace" but is simply a really good deal. Faith, the relationship which God establishes in Baptism, is the sole vehicle of salvation to the sinner. But please note that this means that faith is not a work, it is not something that we do.

But what then of works? Already in the days of Luther, his opponents were arguing that without the goad and enticement of reward and punishment, people would stop doing any good works. Human nature is so corrupt that mankind could not possibly have the ability to do good works unless the works were coerced out of them. Tying the works to human desire for salvation is exactly the leverage necessary to pry those good works from the hands and hearts of corrupt humanity.

Luther and his reforming compatriots would respectfully and sometimes not so respectfully disagree with that statement. (Luther could at times be rather sharp if he disagreed with you. If you want a few examples, try this website which has the "Luther Insult of the Day" <http://ergofabulous.org/luther/>) At its heart the prior paragraph simply is a statement of disbelief. God has said that the salvation event, the gracious love of God expressed to us in Baptism and Word and Supper is a creative Word, a Word who creates the "dear children" which God calls us. The human being washed in the waters of Baptism really is a person transformed by God's gracious touch. Please don't get me wrong, the old man is still there, lurking and often controlling our behaviors and thoughts. Luther was a thoroughgoing Augustinian who did not hold an unrealistically utopian view of life. But that old man could be drown daily in baptismally generated repentance. The human being who is liberated by the blood of Christ is a truly spiritual being. He can actually serve God, as Luther said at the end of the meaning to the second article: "That I may serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." Critical to that phrase is the "may." I can do this, but it is not coerced out of me by the "carrot" of salvation or the "stick" of hell's punishment.

But here is the rub. That old stinker who lives in all of us will try to work this system. On one hand he will try for a cheap grace that does not go through the purging of God's Law and Gospel dynamic. Without that brutal cleansing I will come to trust my works as works which somehow

please God, and thus reason that pleasing God must bring me to heaven. On the other hand, he might just look at God's gracious love of sinners and think, "since God loves sinners, let's sin some more – my works don't matter." These are the two perils on either side of this road which we drunkenly stumble down, sometimes falling in one ditch or, in correcting our course, veer into the other. Our imagined Christian might despair of doing good works and simply attribute them wholly to God, and hence the blame for their lack is also God's doing, and thus consider himself relieved of any responsibility. Or he might forget that they are a fruit of the Spirit's working within us after our baptism, imagining that they make him somehow lovable to God.

Jesus today charts a course down the safety of this road's middle. And it is only when he takes our feeble hands in his own, carries our weight up Calvary's hill, when this whole trip begins in a washing of regeneration that we can walk this path with God. As Paul says in Philippians: God completes the good work which he has begun in us. We dare not deny the real work of God in our lives and insist that as baptized and redeemed people we are yet incapable of being living spiritual beings (I am a worm!). To do so is to deny the regenerative work of God in baptism – the person he has washed will do good. On the other hand, if we skip the dying of baptism, the crushing of the Law, we will find cruel comfort in the result, trusting in the shifting sands of our good works.

Of course to complicate things, we are constantly immersed in the reality that we don't get this right. We are, as Paul continues in Philippians, works in progress. We fail, repent, are forgiven and will surely repeat the process over and over.

The fact is that most congregations are carried on the backs of 20% of the folks who really get a Lutheran theology of Good Works. They are there supporting and giving and making this parish work. The bulk of the folks to whom we preach seem to have a good works issue. They are disengaged with the good work of this congregation and they don't really see this as a problem. Have they drunk so deeply of the doctrine of grace that they use it as a license? Or is it that they have not heard/experienced the good news in a way that it has ever really transformed their lives?

Collect of the Day

O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness, by Your grace hear the prayers of Your church. Grant that those things which we ask in faith we may receive through Your bountiful mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This seems like another one of those prayers with an excess of punctuation. Wouldn't it be better without that change of direction implied by the semi-colon after mercy?

God is the refuge and strength of the believer, but we have to admit that there are times when that is an assertion which we make by faith and not by sight. Any time spent listening to the news

reminds us that floods and earthquakes, wars and famines plague mankind. Death stalks us and peace seems so elusive.

The prayer notes that God's good word does not result in comfort but in godliness. The promise is not that such things don't happen to Christians; rather, the promise made to us is that we will deal with these things differently in Christ. He is the author of all godliness, all the right, holy, goodly things in our lives. He gives the grace and peace which no storm can take away, the hope which perseveres through adversity, the joy which can laugh on the bleakest day and which never did locate its being in the successes I have encountered. He fills me with the love that reaches out to the neighbor on her day of distress and loves him when his life is in shambles.

So we want God to listen to us. He has already given us all the godliness we have, so we urge him to keep giving. Our faith often and regularly makes requests of him. We don't deserve it, His listening is always a gracious thing, and his granting is always a merciful thing. The prayer also raises the question of prayer in faith. What of the prayer, spoken in faith, that the cancer be healed, or the spouse be healed. What does that mean for the assertion of this prayer? Does it mean that must not have been a prayer spoken in faith? God reserves to himself the prerogative to say "No." Does the seemingly unanswered prayer mean anything else? A thoughtful parishioner may well be asking just such a question.

What do we say to such a question? We might try the argument that indeed, God is not a vending machine; faith trusts that God's solution to the cancer, whether that is healing or resurrection, is the best.

Is that satisfying for the person? It makes a lot of sense to the guy who believes, but for the man or woman who is suffering this might not be wholly satisfying. Why would God take my sight? Why would he take my husband's health, why would he take my child?

I think we want to be very careful here. We don't want to suggest that the prayer which is not granted as we ask is somehow not spoken in faith. We spoke of Jesus praying at Lazarus' tomb. Jesus knew that God heard him, but he spoke for the sake of those around him. Looking back on a situation we can see God's hand in difficult situations, but in the middle of those situations, we need to be a little careful. Some can handle more than others.

What might we ask in faith? Is this the prayer for the outcast, the downtrodden, the supplication for the poor man or the suffering woman? Is that what makes the prayer faithful? Is it a matter of content? Or is it the prayer in faith asking for anything, but always asking in the relationship which God has established? Is the imprecatory prayer of Psalm 137 a faithful prayer? If you have never read that one, it is in the notes below. Is the faithful prayer the trusting prayer? What do we ask in faith? What does the unfaithful prayer look like? Shall we know it by looking at the opposite?

I think that the prayer in faith might not be determined by the content of the prayer but by the relationship of the grantor to the grantee, God to the one who prays. Yes, faith will ask for some

things and not others, but it might surprise you what God's people have faithfully sought over the centuries and millennia of the Church.

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

³ Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.

I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

² And the LORD answered me:

"Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so he may run who reads it.

³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time;
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.

If it seems slow, wait for it;
it will surely come; it will not delay.

⁴ "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Habakkuk, whose name is the bane of lay readers, is a most interesting little prophet. His work is what scholars call "Theodicy." (Scholars are rarely satisfied with a simple direct word, but feel an insatiable urge to create new and bigger words constantly. I am thinking of a new, polysyllabic word to describe this phenomenon.) They could have just said that Habakkuk is angry with God. He is struggling with an ancient question which continues to bedevil people today. If God is so strong and so good, why is there so much suffering and pain in the world? In Habakkuk's day, he witnessed the destruction wrought by Assyrians and Babylonians upon the

people of God. We sometimes blithely pass over those events in the Old Testament when it says something like “Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judea in the days of...” Warfare in the ancient world was brutal business, just as it remains today. The words of the imprecatory Psalm 137 give voice to the horror and emotions of what these people experienced.

*⁸O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you
with what you have done to us!*

*⁹Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!*

These people had been savaged, they had watched their children being slaughtered, their daughters raped, their parents left to die beside the road, and Habakkuk is wondering why this has happened. Wouldn't we do the same? He is questioning God's very goodness in the middle all this suffering. God's answer to poor Habakkuk is not terribly satisfying, as the answers to the questions of those who question God's goodness are rarely satisfying for them. God tells him simply that the righteous will live by faith. I would like something a little more substantive than that, but it is all we get. God does not bow to the argument that he is not in control nor will he let Habakkuk or any other argue that he is not good, but there is mystery here and greatness which defies the human mind. God hides it from us. For to know it would in fact render us less than human, too terrible is such knowledge for the broken minds of mankind. The righteous will live by faith, trusting in God even when that is very difficult, depending on him for the solution to the problems even when his answers are slow in coming and heaven's justice seems terribly distant. It is the only truly human response, all others either descend into the realm of beasts who do not ask or monsters who would seek to control these things. Neither option is really human.

Of course, we need to remember the role that this passage has played in our own history. Paul will quote this verse in the first part of Romans and Luther will pick up on it. The thoughtful reader may wonder how it is that Habakkuk's phrase, “the righteous will live by faith” was meant. Does it jibe with the way we read it here or at least with our expectations? Of course Luther meant that the sinner is made righteous through faith, but Habakkuk seems to be talking about simply living and only have faith in God not the ability to see the righteous kingdom of God.

I am more than a little uncomfortable with what the editors of the pericope have done to us here. Between verse 4 of chapter 1 and the first verse of chapter 2, there is actually a whole answer and second complaint in the book of Habakkuk. You might, if you are preaching on this, want to read the entirety of this brief book and exercise some caution here. While I don't think that this is “out of context” it is better seated in its fullest context. In truth, the first part of Habakkuk's complaint, which we have here, seems to point to a problem within the justice of the nation of Israel itself. It feels like the poor man is getting the short end of the judicial stick.

God answers Habakkuk in the intervening verses by telling him that He address the failure of righteousness in the people by raising up the Chaldeans to address this problem. And then Habakkuk lodges a second complaint. He raises the question of whether such a brutal instrument befits a good God like YHWH. It is in response to the second stage of the complaint that we get the answer in chapter 2:1-4. This is a much more sophisticated text than what our pericope alone might lead us to conclude.

As a result, the preacher will want to ask what does Habakkuk mean with all this. What does this “the righteous shall live by faith” mean in this context?

- 1. Is this a description of the faith which believes in God? Does the righteous man live (get saved from this destruction?) by faith in God? Surely many who had faith on that day Nebuchadnezzar came also died. Does he mean that the righteous who die on that day will also live – hence a resurrection promise?*
- 2. Does he mean this in a communal and not personal sense? Is this a promise which needs to be heard communally? The faithful man will live via the community as the nation eventually will return?*
- 3. Does Habakkuk actually mean that the righteous man will simply follow the faith, as in living out the strictures of that creed to which he belongs? In the text he contrasts this with a proud man who is puffed up. Is the righteous man, the one who is right with God, does that man live a certain way no matter what is going on around him? Is this an existentialist decision to follow God no matter what? In a corrupt society such as Habakkuk seems to describe above, this is certainly a possibility.*

There might be occasion to read any of these as you consider Habakkuk’s situation.

Clearly Paul re-uses this material in Romans and that is what Luther is reading when he pulls this phrase into his theology to support his assertion of grace alone and faith alone.

Psalm 62

For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.

²He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.

³How long will all of you attack a man
to batter him,
like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

⁴They only plan to thrust him down from his high position.
They take pleasure in falsehood.

They bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. Selah

⁵ For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.

⁶ He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

⁷ On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

¹⁰ Put no trust in extortion;
set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

¹¹ Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,

¹² and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.
For you will render to a man
according to his work.

Once more the psalmist really expresses the emotional and faithful content of the OT and Gospel lessons rather well. He waits in silence for God. God is slow in his answering to our thinking, but the psalmist has faith that God will answer in his time. God is his rock and salvation. The preacher might just want to play on that last word. "Salvation" in the OT is an ancient word, even by OT standards. It shows up interestingly in the song of Moses at the Red Sea, and it sounds archaic even there. It is also the root of the name Jesus.

The end of the psalm is important. Once God has spoken, twice I have heard – power belongs to God and steadfast love. Power and Love come together and work in God alone. We cannot keep that balance. Our human nature will always lurch toward the power solution to every problem, thus God hides his power to reveal his love.

II Timothy 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. ¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

This begins the second letter of Paul to Timothy, a too seldom read little book. Many scholars doubt the authenticity of this book, but for the life of me I cannot make sense of why anyone would forge this. If they were going to forge it, they were lousy forgers.

In any event, the Church has always read this as from Paul and situated these words toward the end of his life. The setting is poignant. It has all come to this. On a late June day, probably in the year 63 Paul was led out of his prison cell to the place of execution in the city of Rome. We know where this is, it was a common enough occurrence in ancient Rome. His hands were be shackled around a pillar and his head chopped off by a sharp sword. "The flash of a blade and then the glory," wrote one historian.

This letter, perhaps his last letter, was written shortly before these events. He wrote to his friend and co-worker who now is bishop of the important city of Ephesus, his young protégé, Timothy. Paul wants his friend to come, but this letter admits that he may not make it in time. In case he does not, Paul wants him to know some important things. He has fought the good fight, he is not ashamed. Now Timothy will have to follow the pattern, but the decisions will all be his. He will not be able to send a letter or an emissary to the Apostle anymore. The days of those answers are coming to a close, now he must rely on what he has learned and the good gifts that God gave him in his baptism and ordination, so must we all. Most of all, Timothy will have to rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Timothy is addressed as that spiritually alive person. He can follow the pattern of sound words which were heard in Paul and which were seen in him, the pattern of faith and love. Timothy, by

the indwelling of the Spirit, will guard the good deposit which was entrusted to him. The deep sadness which runs through the whole book is matched by an equal confidence and joy which Paul feels when he considers Timothy. Paul will surely perish, but the Holy Spirit, given Timothy and to each of us, that Spirit continues.

This then is a text of great confidence and hope in the Church. In dark days we all might preach this message and hear it well.

Luke 17:1-10

And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶ And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

⁷ “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? ⁸ Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

The Gospel lesson is a collection of several sayings of Jesus which seem to center on various themes; at least it seems so on the surface of it. We start with a warning about temptation and woes which attend the one who leads a little one to sin. Then an exhortation to pay attention, confront the sinner, forgive the penitent, unstintingly. The apostles beg for more faith and Jesus seems to suggest that this is not exactly the right request – it is not the volume of faith, but its presence that makes the difference, for even a tiny faith is enough. One concludes that it is not the faith which does the deed, but it is God working through even miniscule faith.

Then we get the unworthy servant and he may be the one we really want to pay attention to for he allows us to tie all this together. The unworthy servant who simply does his job is also the one with the faith through which God works. The size of the faith does not really matter, what matters is the One who works through that faith. Faith even inconsequentially small is able to be an instrument for God to work great things. What does this servant do? Jesus seems to answer that in verse 3 and 4 – he maintains the relationship. Yes, we can even forgive sins, big sins, little sins, all the sins. We can do so because we are in that relationship with Christ in which he forgives sins, thus empowering me to be the instrument of his forgiveness. We call that

relationship: Faith. Far more important than a mulberry tree's relocation into the sea, we can cast my neighbor's sins into the very pit of hell and be done with them once and for all. It is God's deed, not mine, and yet I am the one who will speak the words. If I don't speak the words, if they are not heard, the forgiveness is there but not apprehended by the sinner. His sin remains with him.

Our attention may also focus on the last little parable. The servant who is merely doing his duty is not thanked by the master. But is that the way we think of our good deeds? Do we give our gifts out of duty? If we do, are they really gifts? Can you imagine giving your wife flowers and then telling her you are only doing your duty? I don't recommend this. She won't appreciate it at all. If you don't believe me, just ask her what she would think of such a statement. And then be ready to run!

It is true, if we are but servants of God, this is what we do. Perhaps the angels live this way, but I think not. The master does not die for the servant, at least not in any world I am familiar with. God did not die to win servants, but he has called us children. It is true that commands are to be obeyed, but has Christ commanded or invited us to obedience? What exactly is the difference?

I am thinking that this text may not be the simple exhortation that it seems to be. Like the Sermon on the Mount which crushes the hearer into sinful paste, only to see the Lord pick up the leper and the centurion and the countless others in miracles and wonders, this text seems to be telling only part of the story. This story too is followed up by Jesus loving the unlovable, cleansing ten lepers, one of whom returns thanking and praising God with a loud voice.

Yes, servants, slaves really, must do the good works which God has commanded. They must do them or be punished, and that punishment is savage and eternal. But children of God are another story entirely. The leper in the story which follows is a Samaritan; he worships the Christ. Was his praise, noted and blessed by Jesus, a work commanded or was it something else? Was it the response of a heart made alive again? Was it the first of many gifts to be given to the God who saved him?

Jesus starts this whole thing off talking about our duties, but look at those duties again. Love the children, have a care for their wellbeing, forgive the brother, not once but many times. Yes, this takes faith, but that is not the real story. We are in the final analysis completely incapable of really fulfilling these commands, at least on our own. The real story is the one who works through the faith. Servants/slaves are not what the kingdom of God is really about, as if he were some ancient conquering king who enslaved his enemies. It is about the Samaritan lepers who love to love the children and whose hearts are filled with the love of God which overflows in an eternal well-spring of forgiveness. The real story here is the continuing miracle which Christ works in us.

I am increasingly thinking that verses 7 and following are actually spoken in some contrast to the faithful forgiving in the first verses. If we do our Christian life as an act of servitude, a life

which is done in some sort of economy, that life is simply what it is and we should not expect God to notice that. Our works really don't show up on the heavenly economic scale. But if our life is lived in faith, even the tiny faith of the mustard seed it does show up in that heavenly economy. The forgiveness to which Jesus exhorts us in the first verses of this chapter are not in the servant economy at all. It is in fact a divine event, not a servant event. The faithful act, the forgiveness which we are exhorted to do, is not a deed which we are doing in some servant relationship. This is a moment when God acts, even if our faith is tiny. What we are bringing to the table, our service, our gifts, our very selves, is not the question here. God is working, that is what makes this different from the servants. This is the master's deed, not the servant's deed which has no reward. In this sort of an understanding, the humble servant depicted at the end of verse 10 is really as good as the life lived in servitude gets. But doesn't verse 5 suggest something more than this?

In scenario the servant life is honestly appraised. It is just a humble servant, but in vss 5-6 Jesus says that my pitiable little life is also an occasion for God, not me, to accomplish something really big. Vss 3-4 which speak about the life of forgiveness is giving shape to that miracle of God's presence in the humble servant's life.

Law

1. We too often see our church life as a work to be done, instead of an act of God, working through us. It is permissible to be joyful at worship. Piety and joy are not mutually exclusive terms. Why so glum?
2. This failure to rejoice often leads us to a dry and servile sort of life. Yes it is good to be a servant, but that is not really what we do, is it?
3. Often we find ourselves asking the "why" question and turning to God and wanting answers. But his answers are often unsatisfactory. We wish we could explain why the world is so messed up.
4. That questioning keeps us from the life of service to which God has called us. Energies devoted to unanswerable questions are energies which are not spent in His service.

Gospel

1. God delights in the gifts his children bring him. He is a doting father in that respect.
2. Through faith, God has worked a great work in us, yes even a miracle. The dead flesh of the old man has been restored, the heart that could not love him has been made anew in the waters of baptism, We truly live in Christ.

3. That life is a life of faith, and that faith trusts in God. God's answers do not satisfy the skeptic, it is true, but they satisfy the believer, the child of God whose sins have been forgiven, whose life has been owned by God. I no longer need those answers, God has them.
4. God enters this scene and frees our hearts and minds in faith from senseless and empty questions. Habakkuk will go on to praise God. Jesus charges us to be people of forgiveness and promises that he can work through miniscule faith. It is not us, it is him!

Sermon Ideas

1. He alone is my rock and my salvation! (OT and Psalm - That the hearer, moved by the Spirit of God, would rest in the peace that God really does mean it when he says "all things work for the good of those who love God" even when things don't feel that way.)

This sermon is best seen as an inoculating sort of approach. It is living by faith, Habakkuk style. The person who is going through terrible times of stress and doubt about God's goodness is not really ready to hear this sort of a sermon. Mostly they need you and me to be simply the loving and caring hands, feet, eyes, and lips of God's gracious presence. Thus this sermon does not have such people immediately in mind and if your parish is filled with such people, you really need to look at another sermon.

But we can also do our people a great favor by preaching a message which prepares them for a time a trial. We have not really endured such things as a body of Christ in North America. That said, there are potent voices which are predicting that this is coming to an end for us. As a child I grew up in a place which prided itself on religious liberty and freedom. We even encourage other countries to emulate us in this regard. Mostly, our times of trial come individually as we face our own mortality and the difficulties presented by economic or relational stresses. Are we entering a period of state sponsored persecution of Christians over issues of Biblical morality, religious expression, and/or the attempt by some to merge the two kingdoms?

Christians in other parts of the world, places like India or Pakistan or parts of Africa simply might teach us a thing or two. They expect a measure of persecution. They do not perceive this as some terrible things which cause them to doubt the goodness of God. In fact, they often find that these times of trial and testing serve to strengthen their faithful relationship with God. Some of that is simply the gift God gives to his people in those times. But some of it really is an approach to God, our suffering, and his promise. This sermon seeks to encourage that last approach to God and suffering before the suffering comes to us.

Habakkuk looks at what God is doing in his time and he is really disturbed by it. The good man is cast down, the scoundrel is lifted up. This seems to go against the very

nature of God and his justice. When Habakkuk raises the question, God reveals his intention to send an army of Chaldeans to take them away into exile. This is not what Habakkuk wanted. He sees the terrible destruction, rape, pillage, and death which the Chaldeans will wreak upon the people of God. How can God use such a blunt and terrible instrument? Innocent children will die; the old, the lame, the blind will not be able to go into exile, they will be simply killed. This seems like a terrible way to deal with the injustice which Habakkuk sees.

God answers Habakkuk with the phrase we are so familiar with as Lutherans, “The righteous will live by faith.” We are used to celebrating those words on Reformation Day, but in Habakkuk’s sense they also meant that the righteous man, the guy like Habakkuk, who looks at the world around us, cannot expect things to reflect God’s love and law very well. The scoundrels will often do well and die in their sleep after long lives which enjoy their ill-gotten gains. The righteous man, the believer, might toil away in obscurity and humility only to find he cannot afford health insurance and misses out on the same medical treatment which saved and extended the scoundrel’s life.

Worse than this, sometimes we might see justice meted out on a terrible scale. Many a vet who came back from Japan and saw the destruction wrought at Hiroshima or Nagasaki was profoundly troubled by what he saw, and then was often made to feel guilty about his misgivings. What of the many young men and women who have returned to the US since the ongoing wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan? Does God hold the sins of tyrants, emperors and wicked powerful men against the children of a city?

Our answer is not entirely satisfactory. We must live by faith, which means trusting that though these things are beyond our comprehension, they are not beyond God’s. Even though we are on the receiving end of injustice and persecution, we are always and also on the receiving end of God’s gracious love and care. Paul is our example here. He faces his own execution, but he says that he is a prisoner of Christ, his suffering is connected to the cross, to the salvation which God wrought in the suffering of his only-begotten. Paul is not ashamed, he does not flinch or turn away from his sentence, but walks boldly into it, confident that God is faithful to his promise, and in the “Day” God will keep that promise and Paul will draw breath once more.

This sermon will turn our eyes to the greatest injustice ever perpetrated, to the hill outside of Jerusalem, called Golgatha, where the world’s only truly innocent human being shed his blood, meekly submitting to an act of barbaric injustice, and we believe. The righteous will live by faith. The God who did that, who saved the world through that suffering, that God has my suffering in his perforated hands. There I will rest.

2. That mustard seed faith (Gospel - That the hearer would recognize God’s amazing love and work in his/her life as he/she engages in the forgiveness and service to which God has called every Christian.)

Based on the Gospel lesson, this sermon seeks to have the hearer see the world through God's gracious activity. Jesus, having spoken the last several weeks now about forgiveness – parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, parable of the unjust steward, and parable of the rich man and Lazarus, now turns his attention to our lives of service in his kingdom. From the notes above, we might see the law as the notion that we are actually in some sort of servitude here. Does Jesus actually say this is rather dry and lifeless, a humble servitude which could be so much more. We could see our lives as servitude, God will receive it, but he will not jump and down about it. Does Jesus invite us into something more in vs 5-6 of this pericope when he suggests that even when we are miserable servants we are also instruments of God doing something great? We are likened to humble servants, but Jesus also speaks of powerful things at work in our lives, through small mustard seed sized faith. We can do much more than cast a mulberry tree into the ocean. We can cast the very sins of another into the fires of hell and relieve that poor soul of its fiery guilt. My servant life is now connected to the very palace of heaven – the center of divine activity. I can forgive.

Of course, it is God who at work in our faith, not my good nature or innate ability. It is God who makes those forgiving words effective. He empowers my ability to forgive the persistent sin, not my large heartedness. I would stop after one or two times, but not God. Likewise it is God who says that the little ones are important and that enables my service to them to be pleasing and healthful for them.

It is God who in the waters of Baptism has made me a servant and laid before me a life which finds its meaning in him, and in him alone.

Here I think the preacher would do well to bring into this sermon the story of Paul as he writes this last letter to his friend Timothy. As he looks back on his apostolic ministry, he can say that he has run a good race, fought a good fight. He says there that God “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,…”

Paul would travel far and wide, preach before kings and governors, write books of the Bible and found churches. Even today people still name their churches after him. But Paul notices that it is God at work in him which has wrought all of this.

Yes, we are humble servants, but servants to whom God has given a holy and precious charge. Our service is to bear the very love of Christ to this benighted world. He has not sent angels or other more noble and heavenly messengers. He has sent us. God's angels rejoice when one sinner repents and hears the words of forgiveness we utter. (Luke 15:1-10) You really can change the world, certainly the world of this sinner or that one. You really can, or more accurately, the Lord Jesus in you can through you.

3. “Pay attention to yourselves” (Gospel - that the Holy Spirit move the hearer to reassess what it means to live and to act upon that assessment.)

Perhaps the realm of sales and business can teach us something. Good salesmen tell me that a good sale is when the customer gets what he wants and perceives that he/she is making a great decision. A good sale is when the customer goes and tells another person where he/she can buy this product. Good sales involve the increase of the sales force. Satisfied customers are the increased sales force. Do we see the congregation as the mission field or as the mission force? Are we really just here to go to church on Sunday and throw a check in the plate, or are we called to something bigger.

For the past several weeks we have had a sub-theme running through our texts which focused on first commandment issues. We have said that God should really be the priority in our life and we have focused on the fact that God is trustworthy for us. He deserves that place of priority, not only because he is God but because he is good.

But now we come to a difficult thing for Lutherans, one of those cooperative moments for Christians to work hand in hand with the Spirit. Sometime ago NPR had a great article about a philanthropist which might make for some interesting discussion. Here is a link to the story, you can also listen to it through the same web site if you want.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14749316&ft=1&f=10>

For Lutherans this is the hardest part. We have ingrained so deeply in us the idea that we are worthless sinners and only God can do a good thing, so that we have a very difficult time talking about the fact that God does in fact do good things in our lives. At its worst, this is ignoring God’s good work. At its best, this is a form of humility that we can say keeps us from excessive pride and work righteousness. There is a healthy way to talk about God’s good work in our lives, to rejoice in it, and to hold it up for people to see and give glory to the Father. I think someone once said something about our good works along those lines and perhaps we need to listen to him.

So how do we do that? This takes extraordinary care on the part of the preacher. Between the pit of pride on one side and the chasm of saying nothing lies a narrow but solid path which can be wonderfully rich with Law and Gospel preaching for people. Watch how you phrase this carefully. The originator of the action is God. He has come to us, he has found us dead on the road. He has raised us up and now he delights to see us walking on the path and making progress. He strengthens our limbs and gives us voices to sing, hands to act, and hearts which joyfully give. But he also loves the fact that our love is truly a gift we can give to him. He has not so overpowered us that we must give it. It is a true gift we give him when we serve. He seeks no robot love, but the genuine human hearts that he created and now he has redeemed so that they may truly love him. This is why he has set aside his power and majesty and glory. He has taken the humble frame of a man, a simple carpenter’s son because he values our ability to say no to him much more than we do. He

takes very seriously that our humanity is preserved. So he has kept it, freed it, and now when our hearts and minds are moved by his graciousness, he loves to see that.

As I think of this, I am reminded of watching a little football team I helped coach in college. These kids were living in Seward, Nebraska which is almost rabidly football focused. They were not very good, but when they started to actually run the plays we had given them, and they started to do the things we wanted them to do, it was really great to see. I did not run the plays, they did, but it delighted me. That was really the first time had really experienced that. Now, I get this feeling when students follow instructions and write a great paper or when my own kids do the right thing when it matters and I was not there to tell them what to do. They just did it. You know what I am talking about. This is I think what is going on a little bit with God. Perhaps this is why he wants us to call him Father. The relationship he has established in us means that he wants to be proud of us and when we take even those first and halting steps toward glory he is our loudest cheerleader. The deeds are ours and yet God's too. They are impossible without his help, and yet we are actually doing them.

I think another great illustration of this is baptism. God does the work in baptism. He forgives the child, takes the child into his kingdom and loves this child. Yet, if the parents don't bring the child, if the water doesn't get splashed, the words said, the deed done, God doesn't do the deed. If we don't baptize, the baptism doesn't happen. God might find another way to bring that person into his kingdom, but the baptism doesn't happen.

So we now want to talk about life. Let us be clear here. God will use our time, our money, our whole being to do really good things, but he does not need it, at least not in some absolute sense. What he really is after is the heart that follows the life lived. For where the treasure is there the heart will be. Having made us alive in Christ he calls for the life to be lived for him. He has replaced the heart of stone with the living heart of a real human being.

Preachers who are faithfully applying Law and Gospel need to keep this in mind. Despite what the world often thinks and too often our people as well, it is not really about the money, but the hearts that come with it. It is too easy to think it is about the money, but in those sermons the bad guys win, or at least they can win. The psalmist makes vows and keeps those vows. That is a good way to live. God delights in the vows of his people, the promises they make and keep.