

Sermon August 8, 2021 The Spirituality of the Cross Part IX:Vocation

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The main theme that has run through this series so far is that we find God in the places where we would least expect him. The epitome of this truth, of course, is that God's greatest work in Jesus Christ is not found in his countless healings, miraculous feedings, walking on water or calming mighty storms. The greatest work of God is his work on the cross. Crucifixion is normally about the most humiliating, gruesome, loathsome death ever. Yet in that very circumstance Jesus redeemed the world back to God. So, we now draw closest to God in the suffering and need of others and in our own suffering and need. This is the heart of what we mean when we talk about the spirituality of the cross.

This spirituality of the cross also transfers to everyday living. People put the greatest value on those times and events when God works the miraculous. In Old Testament times God's people put the greatest emphasis on their exodus from Egypt. Devout members of Judaism celebrate the Passover meal of that remembrance to this day. In our day we favor stories of miraculous deliverance from danger, bad luck, and cancer. However, these events that glorify the nature of God are far and few between. No matter, because God is working his loving care each and every day just the same through us. Yes. Through us. God is tending to our needs through the work of others. It looks like its just ordinary people going about their ordinary work. That is how most people see it. However, when we understand how God is actually seeing to the needs of people through the work of other people, our work and position in life take on eternal meaning and significance.

What else is all our work to God – whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government – but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things. Luther's Works Vol. 14

God gives people food, water, clothes, homes, cars, appliances, health care, education, justice, protection, art and entertainment all by means of the work of

people. Luther says it is like God wearing the masks of the faces of all these people through whom others receive the things they need for life. Our work is hard. It is often drudgery. But when we realize we are fulfilling the work of God's love to others in our work, we get a new picture of the importance of God's law in our lives. In gospel-based churches like ours we continually hear about how we are saved by God's grace. Last week's sermon on Christology brought that truth to light once again. When our every thought, word, and deed is placed in the scales of God's justice, we are found wanting and owe an unpayable debt to God. There is no way we can make it right. Jesus became human and balanced our scale with his sacrifice on the cross. The only contribution God's law makes in our salvation is to condemn us, bring us to repentance, and to fall on God's grace and mercy in Jesus to be saved and reconciled with our heavenly Father. But we still have God's law after we are brought to repentance and faith. Why? God's law now leads us into serving, not God, but our neighbor, wearing those masks of God as we love our neighbor as ourselves.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:14

It is as we so often hear in the Bible and as Martin Luther says, "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does." This is God's will for our lives, that we love our neighbor. How do we love our neighbor? Not in the ways we choose, but in the ways God chooses for us. We can only see how this works when we recognize the vocations God has given us and then faithfully perform the work that goes with each of those vocations.

"Vocation" comes from a Latin word that means "calling." It used to mostly only stand for positions within the church: Priest, monk, nun, etc. Martin Luther broke from the popular understanding in his day that church workers had the important jobs and every other type of work was at a very much lower level of importance. He taught that all work was important as it served our fellow man, and all the different types of work people did were all vocations just like the work of priests and monks and nuns. The common people liked that, and it gave much more dignity to working in the fields, slaughtering hogs, chopping wood, cutting hair, washing clothes and cleaning toilets. All that work, too, was being done in the name of Christ in the service and for the benefit of the neighbor. For Luther, in order to perform a good work, you actually have to help someone - do something

that benefits a neighbor. All the pious thoughts and hearts on fire towards God do not amount to a hill of beans. Performing good works means getting involved and getting our hands dirty, so to speak.

Vocations are present in the four locations, or “estates” that have been identified in society. The four estates are 1) family; 2) citizens; 3) Church; and 4) the common order of Christian love. We all find ourselves in these estates. We have vocations, or callings, in each of the estates of which we are part. The family is the most fundamental estate, and the first in God’s creation. The vocations here are husband and wife, and then parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and so on. As citizens we are members of our neighborhoods, boroughs, cities, counties, the commonwealth and of the United States of America. In the church we are pastors, teachers, evangelists, teachers, elders, musicians, ushers, committee members, altar guild, and the entire communion of saints. In the common order of Christian love, we pray for all people, feed the hungry, love our enemies, suffer evils from others like when the joker who smashes into your car has no insurance and leaves you with the bill.

One more important thing about vocations – we do not choose them. God chooses them for us. It is not healthy for us to think that we decide what we are going to be when we grow up, or that we occupy any of the vocations in our lives by our own choosing. God saw to that for us. He “calls” us to a particular work or relationship and surrounds us with a particular set of neighbors. He gives each of us unique talents, skills, gifts, and inclinations. He puts us in specific types of circumstances which we understand as the providence of God. We get hired to a certain job, are asked to join a certain group, maybe meet someone who decides they would like to marry us, have children of varying characteristics or are able to adopt a certain child. The list of God’s providence goes on and on and on.

In the next sermon I hope to cover more of the hiddenness of God and the spirituality of the cross as we bear our crosses and are presented with the need to make self-sacrifices in the estates and vocations in which we have been called by God. Until then, God bless us as we find him working in and arranging our everyday lives and as we seek to fulfill the laws of God through good works offered in service of our neighbor. Amen.

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