

“Saved by Grace for Good Works” Sermon for Week 4 Lent (Year B)
3/15/2015 - Based on Ephesians 2:10; John 3:21

Now a certain man died and arrived at the pearly gates. St. Peter said: "You need one thousand points to get in. How many do you have?" "I don't know," said the man. "Well," said Peter, "tell me all the good things you have done in your life and we'll see what you have earned." So the man began ticking off everything he could think of. When at length he had finished, St. Peter added up the score and told him that he had accumulated one hundred points. His ego thoroughly deflated, the man hung his head and sighed, "I guess it's only by the grace of God that I'll ever get into this place." "That," said Peter "is worth nine hundred points. Come on in!" [1]

Although we have to remember that this is only a joke, nonetheless there is truth in it. We Presbyterians like to keep the main thing the main thing. WE BELIEVE AND LIVE BY THE BIBLICAL TRUTH THAT WE ARE SAVED BY GOD'S GRACE ALONE. It is not our 'doing' that earns salvation. Thus, most of us would disagree with the joke that St. Peter would even give the man one hundred points in earning his salvation. We would argue with Peter and say NO, GRACE ALONE SAVES US. We don't need 100 points! Our scripture readings today are classic biblical texts that affirm the saving power of God's grace in Jesus Christ. All of us find great wisdom, comfort, and inspiration in this theological and biblical truth.

Yet, as I read and studied, something else jumped out at me larger than life. I'm talking about two verses in particular, which complement each other. In Ephesians 2:10 we read: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus FOR GOOD WORKS, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

And in John 3:21 we read: "But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that THEIR DEEDS HAVE BEEN DONE IN GOD."

This is one of THE MOST PROFOUND PARADOXES OF OUR FAITH. YES GRACE SAVES US! NO QUESTION ABOUT THAT! However, both of these verses from Ephesians and John teach us that OUR RESPONSE TO SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE IS DOING GOOD WORKS!

Paul says we have been created in Christ for doing good works and that God has planned such good works before we even do them. In other words, God has planned out our destiny before we even realized it; and our destiny involves doing good works. God marks out for each one of us, the particular good works, the time, and the way, which He sees best. God both makes ready by His providence the opportunities for the works, and makes us ready for their performance. That we should walk in them - not 'be saved' by them. WORKS DO NOT JUSTIFY, BUT THE JUSTIFIED MAN WORKS.

In our gospel, we learn that doing the truth is seen by others, and as such, the deeds bear witness to the activity of God at work in and through us. The image our gospel uses here is the comparison of light with darkness. Light shows up; light reveals to those who have eyes to see it. Light reveals or shows someone or something for what it truly is. BECAUSE DOING WHAT IS

TRUE DOES NOT HIDE OR AVOID THE LIGHT, PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO SEE CLEARLY THAT GOOD DEEDS HAVE BEEN DONE IN GOD.

Martin Luther himself noticed the important place of our response to what God has done for us in his explanation to the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism, when he said, "Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, SERVE AND OBEY HIM (i.e. God)." Serving and obeying God obviously refers here to an active faith; a faith that responds to saving grace by doing good works.

This ability to recognize someone or something for who and what it is I believe is a powerful witness to the world. For example, I'm convinced that even some atheists and agnostics have a difficult go of it trying to deny the validity of the good works of say a Mother Teresa or an Albert Schweitzer. Good works DO REVEAL TO THE WORLD GOD'S SAVING ACTIVITY IN AND THROUGH US.

If that is the case, then we have a great deal of good work ahead of us to do! But again to emphasize—NOT BECAUSE WE'RE SAVED BY WORKS, BUT BECAUSE WE'RE SAVED BY GRACE AND WILL TRULY WANT TO DO SOMETHING IN HUMBLE GRATITUDE TO EXPRESS THE REALITY OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US; BECAUSE WE'RE DESIGNED, WE'RE CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS BY GOD, WE WILL DO THEM. A PERSON OR A THING USUALLY DOES WHAT THEY ARE DESIGNED TO DO—OTHERWISE, THEY MISS OUT ON LIFE'S MEANING AND PURPOSE.

Once there was a rooster who crowed at sun-up each morning without fail. One day, the barnyard dog said to the rooster, "I guess you think your crowing raises the sun into the sky every day. Well, I've got news for you. The sun will come up whether you crow or not."

The rooster looked at the dog with surprise, and said, "I know that! I didn't make the sun, and I can't raise the sun. Only God can do that."

"Then why in the world," asked the dog, "do you get up in the dark every day to holler your lungs out?"

The rooster eyed the dog disdainfully and said, "God gave me a voice. If God is going to raise the sun into the sky, the least I can do is to use my gift to show my appreciation."

[2]

Only God can create us; only God can save us; only God can give us the ability to do good works our whole life long; which is our response to what Christ has done for us all on the cross. For that, thanks be to God! Amen.

LET US PRAY.

1 Cited from: Emphasis March 1985, Vol. 14, No. 10, (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), p. 21.

2 Cited from: Faye Neff, "Raised from the Dead," in The Clergy Journal, January 2003, Vol. LXXX, No. 3 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions Inc., 2003), p. 39.