

Advent Evening Service, B. The scripture text is taken from I Corinthians 7:17-24

Tonight, as we close out our sermon series on the doctrines of “justification”, “sanctification”, and “vocation” we will look at the doctrine of “vocation”. These doctrines were very important to Luther, and to the Protestant Reformation.

In Luther’s Day, one of the things that, the Roman Catholic Church held in very high esteem, were those who separated themselves from the everyday world and life as a citizen in the community, and who would join a monastic order, so as to become a monk or a nun. That was a higher calling, than say the farmer or the blacksmith or even that of a prince.

Now as you know, Luther himself was a monk for awhile, but later was ordained as a priest, and then taught the New Testament, as a professor at the University of Wittenberg.

So for Luther, having been a monk, Luther realized that in what sense, were these acts of separating oneself, from the community beneficial? How does this help those in need?

Luther criticized monasticism for valuing not only separation from the world, but also in the case of the most honored monastics of the Roman Catholic Church, of separation from their neighbors.

For Luther, good works must not be directed toward God, because God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does.

Ok, for us today, when you hear the word vocation, what exactly is a “vocation”. The word “vocation” is simply a word for one’s calling in life.

The Christian life is lived as a calling, “a vocation”, that flows from God’s call and love for us in Christ. Through the Gospel, God has called us to be sons and daughters in His family.

This call is first and foremost a summons to a life of faith, a call to trust in the saving work of Christ, and who, and what we are, by His grace, a call to trust in the saving work of Christ and who, and what we are, by His grace, forgiven and adopted children of His love.

Christians have received their vocational call from God in their Baptism. Baptism bestows on each of us, God’s gracious claim to be His child.

God’s call, brings full and secure membership in His Kingdom. The tasks that God has given to us, enables us to act out our faith in His call.

This is the means of expressing our faithfulness to Him and His family. True piety expresses or acts, our trust in who we are in God’s call. Vocation shapes the expressions of true Christian piety.

Believe it or not, God has given you, your work. On a humorous note, one may complain, and say, “No, this the job certainly did not come from heaven, try dealing with these customers every day, or try dealing with these students every day, or try dealing with whoever every day.” Just fill in the blank.

Actually He (God) has given it, (your work to you) in His Son. I want you to turn in your Bible to the Book of Colossians and follow along with me as I read in chapter 1, verses 15 through 17. The Apostle Paul writes: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Him, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions

or rulers or powers, all things have been created through Him and for Him. He himself is before all things, and in Him, all things hold together.”

So your job, your occupation, may not be what you have chosen for yourself. Your career, may not be turning out as you had hoped.

Perhaps, you may find, lots of aspects of your life and your work intensely frustrating. Perhaps, your work may be the biggest, single reminder in your life, at the present moment, that you are not in control.

But God is, in control, least we forget. And your Father in heaven loves you. And your work, comes to you, from the hand of your heavenly Father.

We can receive our work, from His gracious hand as His gift to us in Christ. But to do that, we need to realize, that all work is valuable and good in God’s eyes.

If you are going to love your job, especially, if it is not what you want to be doing, especially, if it is boring, or menial, or even frustrating, you need to see that, never the less, it is good, and it has value.

Perhaps the easiest way to see this, is by thinking about Luther’s view of vocation for the Christian and the Christian’s life.

Luther started with the Lord’s Prayer. We pray about things that really matter to us. And Jesus gave us this prayer to say again, and again, and again.

So what is in here, must really matter to Christ. The Lord’s Prayer, contains the really important stuff, and it doesn’t get more important than this.

Now, says, Luther, consider the phrase, “Give us our daily bread”. So how does God answer that prayer?

Well, He could just magically put food on our table. God did that for Israelites as they wandered in the desert wilderness. For approximately, forty years, mana (a bread-like substance) appeared in the morning and quail appeared in the evening.

No one had to make it, or hunt for it, it just appeared. Well, God could do that for us to. But He doesn’t.

Instead, God gives us our daily bread through the vocations of various people. For example, if you are like me, I like bacon, eggs, and biscuits for breakfast in the morning.

For instance through the vocation of the farmer, who raises the chickens, through the vocation of the truck driver who transports those eggs to the market, and through the vocation of the restaurant owner, he or she goes to the market and purchases those eggs, to be consumed by the patrons of his or her restaurant.

The same thing can be said about the vocation of the hog farmer who raises the hogs, who through the vocation of the truck driver, delivers those hogs to the slaughterhouse, who through the vocation of the butcher, produces the bacon, and through the vocation of the restaurant owner, he or she purchases that bacon to be consumed by the patrons of his or her restaurant.

The same thing can be said about the vocation of the farmer who grew the wheat, through the vocation of the truck driver who gets the wheat to the miller, who through his or her vocation makes the bread dough, and through the vocation of the baker, makes the biscuits, you get the idea.

Think about this when you go to the grocery store, whether it is H.E.B or Wal-Mart, or whatever the grocery store, through the vocation of the person putting the products on the shelf, day or night, or through the vocation of the check-out clerk, God uses the mundane, everyday work a day ritual, to work in their work.

But do you see, what dignity it has? It is not just that they are serving us. God is serving us through them.

In their work, in our work, God is working, to do something that Jesus thought was important, so Jesus put it in the Lord's Prayer.

Now in our American culture, our view, of vocation goes something like this: First find your gifts, find your talents, find your passions, and once you find where they intersect, follow that path which leads to that dream career.

When I think about who fits this profile, I think about Olympic Athletes, who compete and win gold and silver medals in the Olympics, because they have been training all their lives for that one moment, that one event and afterwards, when Olympics are over, what do they do? Well most usually coach younger kids, athletes, to compete in future Olympic games, that way these former athletes can continue to practiced what they enjoy doing and get paid for it.

So for you, if you have those things together, you have a vocation. And if you don't have those things, too bad, so sad, you'll just have to settle for a job, doing this or that, hey at least it pays the bills.

And at best, maybe this, "not-so-great-a- job", could be a "stepping-stone" to finding your passion, your true vocation in life.

Now some people can do what they are gifted at, and passionate about. And if that is you, great, "Go for it!" and "Thank God for it!"

But recognize two things: First, most people in the world, don't have that luxury. Of all the people in the world, how many people, really get to do what they want?

I wish I had a dollar for every time, I heard someone say, "Man, I hate this job, I need to go do something else."

Only a tiny percentage of people in the world have that luxury. The fact that, that view of vocation is even conceivable to us, is the result of a happy accident, of parents who took an interest in their children, who had the time, the money, and the resources, to give to their children, to pursue their dream, their passion.

But the Bible's view of vocation is different. For a Christian, your vocation in life, is simply where God has put you, and what He (God) has given you to do.

For example: You may be a student getting ready to go to college, or perhaps getting ready for grad school. You may be a waitress, working part-time and going to school part-time, or you may be

working as a secretary, or may be driving a truck for UPS, perhaps waiting for another job to open up that pays more and has better benefits.

The Bible does not share our culture's aspirational upwardly mobile view of vocation. For instance collecting trash, is just as much a vocation, and has just as much dignity in God's eyes, as someone working for a non-profit organization or being a doctor.

Just because a job, requires a graduate degree, or involves a commitment to change the world, doesn't give it more dignity or make it more of a vocation.

This is wonderful news, that even if your job is really not where it is at so to speak, nevertheless, it is God's good gift to you. So you can find joy in this fact, that as you work, God is working through you.

God works through natural means, by working through human-beings. This is because God desires for us, to serve each other.

According to Luther, vocation is simply a "Mask of God". God is hidden in the vocation. We see it in the check-out clerk, or in the sales clerk, or in the farmer, or in the rancher, or in the artist, or in the accountant, or in the zoo keeper.

However, looming behind this human mask, God is genuinely, present and active in what they do for us.

Similarly, as we carry out our various vocations, we too, are masks of God. Evangelical Christians often talk about what God is doing, "in their lives".

Vocation, encourages reflection on what God is doing, "through" our lives. Just as God is working through the vocation of others to bless us.

I wanted to share this story with you, because I think that this is a good example of how God works through our vocation, so as to serve others and to bless others.

Back in January of 2004, when I was first stationed at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri, we lived about 30 miles west of Fort Leonard-Wood, in a small town of about Fifteen thousand, the name of the town was Lebanon.

In this small town of Lebanon, the main employer of this town, was the Independent Stave Mill. The Stave Mill produces the wooden barrels that are used in the making of wines, burbons, whiskeys, etc.

Anyway, my next door neighbor, Mark Armstrong, worked at the Stave-Mill as a purchasing agent. He was the guy who purchased parts to make sure that all the machines kept running smoothly everyday.

I had not been in Missouri very long, and one afternoon Mark stopped by to talk to me, he saw me, as I was just getting back from the Fort, he knew I was Army, and he had asked me to speak to the Bible-Study group there at the company. He told me, how the president of the company was a very devout Christian, and had brought in a "part-time" pastor for doing Bible Study, and counseling for the employees of the company.

I almost fell over, because I had never heard of such, since when does the CEO of this company, whose job is to run the company, manage its resources, and to watch the bottom line, worry about setting up a Bible Study for his employees, or set up counseling services for his employees. This CEO who is not a pastor, and who is not a missionary, through his vocation, as CEO, to serve God and others.

This is what being justified by grace through faith, and that justification by God's grace being sanctified (in other words set apart for service in the world looks like) It is through our vocation.

In our vocations, we work side by side with God, as it were, taking part in His ceaseless activity and laboring with Him as He providentially cares for His creation.

So what is the purpose of our vocation? The Bible is clear. The Apostle Paul tells in the Book of Galatians, chapter 5, verse 6, (Please turn in your Bible to the Book of Galatians, chapter 5, starting at verse 6.) Paul writes: "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working in love."

So according to the Reformation doctrine, the purpose of every vocation, from the accountant to the zoo-keeper, is love and serve our neighbors.

Luther said: "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does." Our relationship with God is based completely on His work for us, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Since we are justified by grace, sanctified by that same grace, we don't need good works for salvation.

We come before God, clothed not in our own works or merits, but solely in the works and merits, that Christ has imparted to us.

Having been justified by grace through faith, God in love, sends us out into the world in our given vocation, to love and to serve our neighbor.

Thus is fulfilled, "all the law and the prophets", first to love God (Not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us and has come to us in the person of His only begotten Son.)

And second, to love the neighbor, which is also the working of faith. Now every vocation, has its neighbors.

For instance, in the Church, Pastors are to love and serve the members of their congregation, and the members of the congregation are to love and serve their pastor and each other.

Another example is that of the family. Husbands are to love and serve their wives, and wives are to love and serve their husbands.

Parents are to love and serve their children, and children are to love and serve their parents.

In vocation of the State, the leaders (those in positions of authority) are to love and serve those under them, and those under them, are to love and to serve in office and each other.

Employees are to love and serve their customers and employers are to love and serve their employees.

You think you get the idea. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we leave here tonight remember this: God has given to you, your gifts, your talents, and your abilities, that you, who you are, as His child, claimed in holy baptism, forgiven of your sins, given the promise of everlasting life with God our Father in heaven, and set apart for service in this world, may you be, the best that that you can be, so God may be honored and gloried through your vocation as you serve your neighbor.

Go therefore out from here this night, and use the gifts that God has given you to serve your neighbor and in so doing, you are serving God through your vocation. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, heavenly Father, You have called each of us, to our given vocations in life. Let us use our work, our time, our talents and the gifts that You have so graciously given us, so that we may serve others, our neighbors, as Christ has served us. All these things we humbly pray in Jesus Christ's most precious and holy name. AMEN.