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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/22/2009, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21
Good Works

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.(Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

We are made for good works, that we should walk therein. It is a good and noble path. Indeed, it is the path back home. And so, if, perchance, we should be lost in life, then let us turn to good works in the name of Christ and find ourselves again. Even if we should be the prodigal son or the prodigal daughter who has squandered our substance in riotous living, let us come to ourselves and head back home by returning to Jesus and his path of good works.

We have before us this morning such a glorious and rich teaching that I am longing to explore and to rejoice in various facets of it. In particular, four questions come to mind when admiring St. Paul's teaching that we are made for good works, that we should walk therein. First, who is this God who crafted us so, who built us for good works? Second, what are good works? Third, how far should we walk along the path of good works? And fourth, who is called to the path of good works?

I mean to touch briefly on the first three questions, because the chief thing on my heart this morning is the fourth question: Who is called? Who is bidden to the path of good works?

So, I begin with the question of divine identity: Who is this God who has created us for good works? This question could well frame the sermon for Trinity Sunday, this coming June. The formal answer is that the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have crafted us and are crafting us still, even now. It is their joint work. Each of the divine persons has a distinctive contribution to our creation and preservation, but they are united in this intention: we are created for good works, that we should walk in them.

A simpler and perhaps more moving answer is to refer to this morning's magnificent Gospel reading, especially to John 3:16. There we learn that the God who bids us to good works is the God who knows whereof he speaks. The God who created us for good works has himself done good works and does them still. The God who made us to walk in good works has trod that path himself, aye, all the way to the Cross. And the God who bids us to be people of love is himself a God of love, of overwhelming love. And so we read that verse that so thrills us:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.(John 3:16, KJV)

It is no strange manner of life to which we are bidden. Rather, it is God's own manner of life. It is the ultimate nature of reality. We are creatures meant for good works.

Second, what are "good works"? Well, they are not necessarily the same thing as "being nice." The father who sits down and talks with his child, and perhaps must discipline the child, is aiming at a good deed though it might not be pleasant for either father or child. The wife who cannot bring herself to give up on her sluggard or addicted husband, but urges him on toward repentance and amendment of life, is aiming at a good deed. God bless her strong! She endures so much trouble as she pursues the welfare of her husband. It is a good deed she does, though she might not seem nice at the time. The police officer or the assistant district attorney or the soldier might not be nice or gentle, but are nonetheless pursuing the path of good works, for they are trying to honor the responsibilities of their vocation.

There are other paths in life than the path of good works -- of course there are! Yet none of them are quite so good for us as the path of good works. Some of those other paths are ruled out for us by the Ten Commandments - the ways of idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, dishonoring our parents, murder, theft, false witness, and coveting. Those ways of life are unworthy of a human being and we should flee from them. They are out of harmony with our being, like some terrible false note played on a violin.

Put positively, our natural path is to love God and our neighbors. That is the path for which we are created.

How far should we walk in the way of good works? Well, out there in the world of nature, some people can walk a good long ways. Daniel Boone, for example, could walk all the way to Kentucky. Some people can hike in the mountains all day long. They seem never to weary. My wife Carol is like that. In fact, I am exercising on an elliptical machine these days, trying to prepare myself to keep up with her this summer hiking in the Adirondacks. There is something about Carol's metabolism and her spirit such that the closer she gets to the peak of the mountain, the more energetic and determined she becomes to get there. She walks continually; she hikes without ceasing.

Well, that seems to be the apostolic intention concerning good works: We are to walk in them our whole life long. It is not enough to walk in good works while we are young, but then turn to other matters. Nor is right to neglect good works when we are young, figuring that we will turn to them when we retire. No, the apostolic exhortation is rather simple, addressing us at each stage of our life: We are made for good works, that we should walk therein without ceasing.

So that's the third question. How far should we walk? All the way. And if we have stopped for a while, we should begin anew.

But most of all in this sermon, I want to linger with the question, Who? Who is built for good works? Who is most at ease in this world when they turn to good works? You know the answer in general, I am sure: *Each of us* is called to good works. No one is excluded from the pattern of Christ's life. Each of us is created by God to resemble Jesus in a life of good works. The call to goodness is universal, welcoming everyone.

Yet I think there is some benefit for our souls in focusing on some specific groups of people God has created for good works. I am thinking of three groups in particular:

(1) The weary. (2) The sinner, even the most hardened, black-hearted sinner. And (3) You. And me. Let's take them in order.

I start with a hard case: Even the weary one is called to walk in the way of good works.

The Bible cares about the weary ones of this world. A couple months ago, we tried to reckon with one of the great promises of the Bible: Isaiah's promise concerning those who wait upon the Lord. Through his servant Isaiah, the Lord phrases his promise in such a way as to acknowledge human weariness. Twice in that great passage we hear mention of weariness:

²⁹He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

³⁰Even the youths shall faint *and be weary*, and the young men shall utterly fall:

³¹But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, *and not be weary*; and they shall walk, and not faint.(Isaiah 40:29-31, KJV)

Indeed, one important way of describing the ministry of Isaiah is that he is called by God to comfort a weary and discouraged people:

³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.(Isaiah 35:3-6, NRSV)

What an image of revival that is: for the lame man to be so strengthened that he shall "leap like a deer." I bet you've seen deer bounding along in the meadow. They reach a stream of water or an old wall of stones and they do not even pause. They just leap right on over. No weariness for them. No hanging of the head, no drooping of the shoulders. It is springtime and they go leaping! It is at the heart of the Gospel message that the weary ones should be strengthened.

Think of our Lord's most moving invitation to this world and all its people. He is addressing a weary world:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.(Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

That a weary world should have some rest is part of the Gospel.

And yet another part of that Gospel is that even those who are weary should walk in good works. And that can be a rather hard thing to say when we think of some of the weary people in this world. Recall that great lament from *Showboat*:

I get weary
And sick of trying
I'm tired of living
And scared of dying¹.

It is hard for a pastor, I say, or for a friend to go to such a weary one and to say, Nonetheless, you are created by God for good works, that you should walk in them. When I think of some of the weary ones of this congregation, it humbles me and calls me to gentleness to try to say to them, "I know you are tired and sick of trying, but please do not give up. Try to continue in the path of good works."

Sometimes you and I become discouraged. Perhaps you are in such a season of life now: Joy seems to have deserted you and everything seems laborious. Coffee loses its punch, even basketball appeals to you less! You feel confused and disheartened. You are like a ship without a rudder, a sheep without a shepherd, you hardly know which way to turn. If so, this morning's text comes along and as gently as possible urges you to try your hand again at good works. Do not grow weary in well-doing, as the Bible says.(Galatians 6:9, 2 Thessalonians 3:13)

The call to good works never gives up on us. It seems that we can never reach the stage when we have the right to say, "This is enough and more than enough: I have endured enough in this world and no longer need to walk in the path of good works."

Let us remember that the pattern of Christ's life included weariness, yet perseverance. Christ collapsed under the weight of the cross and the exhaustion of his interrogation and beatings. It is not an extraneous part of the story. Christ was weary, to the point of death, but walked on in the path of good works. We are bidden to the same path.

And so that is the case for the weary one. Do not let your weariness be your undoing. A noble path is still available to us. Ultimately it is the path of Christ's yoke and so will bring rest to our souls.

Now, let's consider the sinner. Some of us in this congregation might find ourselves thinking, "Well, Preacher, it is all good and well to speak of good works to people of delicate conscience and mild sins, but I am not such a one! I have sinned

¹ Or, as the singer puts it:

Ah gits weary
An' sick of tryin'
Ah'm tired of livin'
An' skeered of dyin',
But ol' man river,
He jes' keeps rolling' along.

fiercely. I have sinned deeply, and if I don't watch out, I'll do it again! I'm just made that way. I'm easily tempted, easily annoyed, easily vexed. I'm built for sin!"

To which I must answer, "No, my friend, you are built, not for sin, but for good works. Even *you* are meant for them. There is no sin in your past so horrible that it can somehow disqualify you for the path of good works. Nothing you have done can place you outside the call to good works. I *know* this is true of you, my brother, my sister. I know you are the one called to abandon sin and to walk in good works because I know the Master. I know the One who bids us toward good works. And it is his character always to have mercy. He is the One who leaves the ninety-and-nine safe in the sheepfold and heads out into the hills and the valleys, the scorching heat and the chilling rain to find the one lost sheep. He never gives up! It was an accusation brought against Jesus, but an accusation he takes as an honor: Jesus is a friend of sinners! And in his friendship, he means never to exclude you from the path of repentance and amendment of life.

Finally, let me speak to the ones most dear to me: you people who sit right in front of me now (or who might be reading this sermon online someday.) You are some mixture of weariness and sin. You are somewhere on the continuum between innocence and joy, on the one hand, and weariness, guilt, and misery, on the other hand. And you are the ones who are created for good works, that you might walk in them.

There are children here, and there are elderly folk. You too are meant for good works. Old men like Simeon in the Temple who held the Christ Child and gave thanks that he had lived to see that day, and children like the three young Israelites who dared face Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace and young David who stood up to Goliath... all ages and manner of folk are created for good works and we will never rest till we rest in Him and in his ways, to Whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.