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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32
Working Out Our Own Salvation

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

My text this morning is from our Epistle Lesson. The first part of that Lesson includes the famous teaching the theologians call the “kenosis” doctrine concerning our Lord Jesus. “Kenosis” is a Greek word meaning “emptying” or in this case “self-emptying.” And so we have the great teaching of St. Paul that though Christ Jesus was in the form of God, he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied* himself,” taking on the form of a servant, becoming one of us, that he might win our salvation and give us some hope in this world.

But in the second part of this great reading, St. Paul shifts the focus from Christ Jesus to you and me, to those who bear the name of Christ. And this is what he says to us, this is my text:

¹²...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

This is the teaching I want to explore this morning, and I ask God’s grace for that. But before turning directly to the text, let me build up to it a bit by talking about the place of this particular text in my own life.

HERMAN STUEMPFLE, JR.¹

Sometimes, looking back, we can see various points in life where we chose to take a particular path, and now we can see that it has meant all the difference. So it was with me when I decided to enter our Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary back when I was a young man. This morning’s verse had a central role to play in the path I chose.

I had not originally intended to go to the Gettysburg Seminary, but rather to the Philadelphia Lutheran Theological Seminary. Gettysburg had a world famous professor of Systematic Theology named Robert Jenson. But Philadelphia had a world-famous New Testament scholar named John Reumann. I was deeply interested in the Bible then and continue to be so now, and so I just assumed I would go to Philadelphia to study with Dr. Reumann. But to be methodical, I visited Philadelphia before committing myself there. My visit was planned far in

¹ <http://www.giamusic.com/bios/herman-stuempfle>

advance, but turned out to be disappointing to me. The chief thing was that I had assumed I would be able to talk with some real live theologians during my visit, but was instead led around by an administrator. And the classes I sat in on were unimpressive.

So, on the spur of the moment, I phoned Gettysburg and asked whether I could stop by and visit there too. When I arrived I was warmly greeted by the Seminary President, Dr. Hermann Stuempfle, and ushered into his office to discuss theology.

I wanted to try out my young man's theory on how to relate Law and Gospel. Dr. Stuempfle was a thoughtful and grace-filled man. He looked a lot like our Pastor David Lotz. He was tall and handsome with wavy white hair. He was longtime Professor of Preaching at Gettysburg, and he was a hymn writer. In fact, we just sang one of his hymns - the sermon hymn - a few minutes ago.² I told him that I sorted out Law and Gospel this way: that they were *both* to be proclaimed unconditionally and whole-heartedly. He tended to agree and pointed to this morning's passage in St. Paul as an example of whole-hearted proclamation of both Law and Gospel:

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

Well, it turned out that Gettysburg also had a world-famous New Testament scholar, Gerhard Krodel. I learned a lot from him about the Bible and even more from Systematics professor Robert Jenson. Then Carol arrived on campus and that all sealed the deal. I have been a happy guy ever since.

THREE QUESTIONS

Now, let me linger with our text by asking three questions inspired by it. They are not fancy questions. In fact, they are rather plain, almost childlike questions. But I think they give us some way of entering into this great apostolic exhortation: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Here are my three questions:

- 1) Are we going to leave such an important task to someone else? Are we going to leave the work of *our* salvation in the hands of someone *else*?
- 2) Do we have anything better to do with our time than to work out our own salvation?
- 3) Do we have a chance, any chance, at doing this? At working out our own salvation?

So, let's dive into these three questions, one after another.

² [O Christ, Your Heart, Compassionate](#) Text: Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., 1923–2007 Text: Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., 1923–2007

TO SOMEONE ELSE?

First, are we going to entrust the work of our salvation to someone else? Well, if any one other than St. Paul or Jesus himself had said, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” we could dismiss that one as a poor theologian. If Hercules, for example, fresh from his twelve mighty labors, were to urge us to work out our own salvation, we could set that aside, figuring that Hercules knew a lot about laboring, but nothing about Jesus and therefore could not encourage us to entrust our salvation to Him. Being well-schooled Lutherans, when we face the question, “Are we going to leave the work of our salvation to someone else?” we could give the rousing answer, “Aye, yes indeed. I mean to leave the work of my salvation to Jesus!”

But the thing is, this exhortation about working out our own salvation does not come from Hercules, but from St. Paul, probably this world’s greatest preacher of Jesus Christ and of our utter dependence on the goodness of our Lord. In his own way, St. Paul was a mighty laborer too, as great as Hercules in terms of how noble he was through his incredible adventures and sufferings. I mean, listen to St. Paul’s account of some of them, and ponder that this is not a mythical man, but a man of flesh and blood, same of you and me:

²³Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.

²⁴Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

²⁵Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

²⁶In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

²⁷In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

²⁸Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28, KJV)

But as far as St. Paul is concerned, he would in no wise trade all his labors, nor his learning, nor his heritage as an Israelite for his Saviour Jesus:

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (Philippians 3:7-9, NRSV)

St. Paul then discounted his own labors, and would not trade them for his knowledge of Jesus. Yet, in our passage, he who would discount his own labors is the one who turns to you and me and urges us to labor on:

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Furthermore, we cannot dismiss this apostolic exhortation by saying that it was a momentary slip by St. Paul, who had briefly forgotten about our Saviour Jesus. No, this is no slip by St. Paul, for his exhortation is placed right in the context of his mighty proclamation of Jesus. Indeed, he urges Christians to have the very mind of Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not grasp after his equality with God, but emptied himself for our sakes. Apparently, St. Paul does not believe that the mighty labors of Jesus excuse us from our own labors.

Some of us here had mothers and fathers who prayed for us. Maybe at certain times in life, they wept for us, sick at heart over how we had strayed from Christ. Some of us had pastors who prayed for us, as Pastor Raymond Shaheen prayed for me and as I pray for you. But I think we also know that we cannot depend upon the labors of others to get us into heaven. I can hardly think of a more fitting way of expressing this than we find in this morning's First Lesson, from Ezekiel 18. The Lord says this:

⁴Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die... (Ezekiel 18:4, RSV)

Neither the sins nor the saintliness of mother or father shall determine our standing before God. We are the ones responsible for our own souls. So, let us work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

SECOND, HAVE WE SOME MORE IMPORTANT TO DO?

Second question: Have we something more important to do than this, than attending to our own salvation? Are we so pressed that in good conscience we cannot pay attention to this matter - the matter of eternity? No, there is nothing more important than this, than the question of eternity.

Recently I heard a solemn conversation between two men. One was commending the other for a good decision -- not an easy decision, but a good one. And the one who commended the other said something like this: You will continue with your life, and God willing it will be a good life. And then, one day, when you lie on your deathbed and you are about to go to God, you will be able to think to yourself, "I have tried to live with integrity." And then he said this, "For that is all we have!"

And it is true. Life has been granted to us. Some span of years, maybe threescore and ten, maybe less, maybe more, but whatever it is, time has been granted to us. And we are the ones accountable for that time. I do not think we have anything more important at hand than that we should try to set things straight.

²⁶For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?
(Matthew 16:26, KJV)

And is there a sadder scene in the Bible than that good young man who walked away from Jesus? He walked away sorrowful, but he walked away:

²¹Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. ²²But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:21-22, KJV)

It was a poor exchange, in my opinion. The young man had "great possessions," it is true, yet he had those possessions for but a short span of years, though he should live to be as old as Methuselah, and during that span of years, his great possessions were no guarantee of salvation:

¹⁹Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (Matthew 6:19-20, KJV)

Adding it up, I think that getting first things first requires that we work out our own salvation, with fear and trembling.

HAVE WE ANY CHANCE? HOW CAN WE DO THIS?

And my last question is simply this? Have we any chance of success? Have we any chance of working out our own salvation?

Well, apart from Jesus, I think we must say that, no, we cannot work out our own salvation, whether with “fear and trembling” or without such fear. Without Jesus, we are too dismayed by death to have enough strength left to work out our own salvation. As the apostle put it, Jesus took on flesh and blood and died that he might deliver us from the diminishment of life that death’s shadow casts on us:

¹⁴...that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; ¹⁵And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15, KJV)

Furthermore, without the friendship of Jesus and the shelter he gives us, none of our merits would suffice for our salvation. So, no, we cannot work out our salvation all by ourselves.

But St. Paul is not talking about working out of our salvation all by ourselves. Rather, the apostle is talking about a great mystery -- the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

Let us, then, consider and cherish the conclusion of St. Paul exhortation:

¹²...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³*for God is at work in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

Notice that the apostle is writing to Christians. He is not writing to *some* of the Christians there in Philippi, but to all of them. He does not need to examine them one by one. He needs only to know that they are baptized, and if they are baptized, God has promised to take up dwelling in them.

It is the same for you and me. Amazing thought! But it is a thought that our own heart confirms, I do believe. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to convict us, to trouble us when we stray into sin, to find some lodging in our hearts for the Word of God, so that we do not always hear that Word, but remain unmoved by it. Altogether, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to do as his name suggests: to make us holy. He does not do so by compelling us, but by beckoning to us. He does not work in us in such a way as to diminish our humanity, but rather to let us find it at last.

So, let us labor on! We will not earn our salvation through such labors, but when we lay our heads down on the pillow, we can say “At least I tried to live with integrity, and I will leave the rest to my Saviour Jesus,” to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.