

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The 18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 1, 2023
Philippians 2:1-13
A Wonderful, but Mysterious Exhortation

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

In this morning's Epistle Reading, St. Paul says this:

...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 an apostolic teaching for which I have special affection. Let me tell you why. It goes back to Seminary days. In fact, it goes back somewhat earlier than that, to those days when I was applying to Seminary. At first, I was inclined to study at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. I made an appointment to visit that Seminary before making my final decision. It turned out to be a pleasant visit and yet somehow disappointing. I wanted to discuss law and gospel. I wanted to sit down with some professor and discuss these important Lutheran categories. But though I had scheduled my visit far in advance, no provision had been made for me at Philadelphia to do anything substantial like that — not even to sit down and talk with a seminarian about these things.

So, on the spur of the moment I phoned the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg and asked whether I could come and visit that afternoon. I was told, "Sure, welcome." And when I arrived, I was ushered into office of the Seminary President, dear Rev. Dr. Herman Stuempfle. And there, we discussed law and gospel. One of the passages Dr. Stuempfle lifted up is today's passage from Philippians 2. It is a mysterious exhortation. Let me read it for you again. St. Paul says this:

...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)

I say that it is a mysterious exhortation, and I mean to talk about it in this sermon. But in the end, I find it to be joyful exhortation, and I mean to talk about that too.

But meanwhile, I think to myself, "Where would I be, if not for that long-ago conversation with Herman Stuempfle about law and gospel and our text from Philippians 2?" If I had not decided then and there to attend the

Gettysburg Seminary, I would not have met theologians Robert W. Jenson and David S. Yeago, who have been so influential for my career. I would not have met other faculty and fellow seminarians who have been so dear to me all these years. Chief of all, I would not have met Carol, my greatest blessing on this earth, aside from Jesus. I cannot even imagine who I would be if not for Carol.

So, you see, I have affection for today's passage from Philippians. It had an important role in my life.

Again, I think that today's text is a wonderful, but mysterious exhortation. Do you catch how dazzling it is? Certainly, *we* are not *God* and *God* is not us. Yet, this verse speaks of a kind of intimacy — almost a holy confusion in which my work and the work of our Maker are one. It speaks of two kinds of work going on at the same time. You and I are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, but also we are to understand that *God* is at work in us *as* we are doing our work.

I do not want us to be intimidated by the first half of our text — the part about working out our own *salvation* with fear and trembling. On the one hand, I should imagine that there is no bigger subject for any of us than our own *salvation*. We are speaking of eternity here. It is a serious matter. And yet, the mind should immediately leap ahead to the practical question, "Well, how am I to *do* that? How am I to work out my own salvation with fear and trembling?" And the answer to that practical question puts us back on familiar ground. We are to obey *God's* holy law, but put our trust in *Jesus* for our salvation. I think that that is what the first half of Paul's exhortation adds up to. I think that that is what St. Paul himself would say if we could sit him down and ask him, "Sir, what do you mean by working out of our salvation?" I think Paul would answer, "Why, I mean live in obedience to our *God*. Do not be like Adam and Eve and go around disobeying *God*. Seek holiness of life. Conform your life to *Jesus*. Be earnest about it. Understand that you are going to have to give an account of yourself in eternity. So, be good, day by day, but trust *Jesus* even more. You are in his hands, and he is trustworthy." That is how I imagine St. Paul would answer about this matter of working out our own salvation. He is referring to the daily life of the earnest Christian. He does not want us to become slack in our Christian life. He does not want us to become careless. He wants us to remember the divine dimension of our lives.

It is the second half of today's text that interests me especially. It is the part about *God* working in us "both to will and to work for *his* good pleasure."

Here, St. Paul assures us that *God* himself is strengthening us and using *our* work to accomplish his own purposes — and those purposes are good. They are very good. This combination of ideas raises up the thrilling possibility that as we work away at living a good life during these threescore and ten years granted to us, Almighty *God* is accepting our work and using it for his grand purpose. And we know his purpose:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

God is out to save the world! And the great thing about today's text is that it encourages us to think that *we* can contribute to the saving of the world. Little, old, us! I mean, it is natural to think that kings and presidents, generals and admirals and so on can make contributions toward saving the world. But St. Paul would have us understand that we too are capable of offering up holy sacrifices to God that he means to use to help build his kingdom. It is an amazing text worth repeating:

...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)

What a Labor Day Bible text this would have been! This text gives great dignity to our good work on earth. St. Paul reveals the eternal overtones to our labors.

Look, I know you have a lot on your mind. But among the important things on our minds, let us also be concerned for our salvation. St. Paul says that we are to work out our own salvation "with fear and trembling." That sounds quite serious to me. We are to be earnest about eternity and our salvation.

But let us also think about our chance to contribute to God's good purposes on earth. I mean, everyday life is our chance to help build God's kingdom. The daily duties of life shine with a kind of radiance, then, because God is at work in them to accomplish his good purposes. As we are, let us say, folding the laundry, trying to make things nice for others, we are being useful to God! It is quite a thought.

St. Paul says a similar thing about our labors in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He teaches that our work need not be "in vain":

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58, NRSV)

The work of pirates and bank robbers and cruel people all over the world is "in vain." In the scale of eternity, whatever their present rewards, works of cruelty are outweighed by an eternity of regret. But going the other way

round, everyday deeds of goodness fitting for those who bear the name of Christ are the kinds of deeds that really help build a better world. Why? Because God is at work *in us*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

This means that none of us need think that we do not much count in this world and that our daily labors are overlooked by heaven. Some of you do interesting and creative work. You might write songs or essays or financial or legal analyses. You might diagnose illnesses and have skill to treat them. You might be teachers, which is an awesome responsibility and chance to do some good. So, some of you do work that all the world can see is interesting and important, and you might be well-paid for your work.

Others of you might do humble work that you imagine no one counts as being all that important. It is simply the daily labors that keep the world and our businesses and our families going. If we have a home with a yard, we mow the lawn. No one gives us much credit for that. If we step onto a bus, we pay the fare. Nothing remarkable about that. We go to work and put in an honest day's labor. Others can count on us. But that is nothing special, nothing saintly or extraordinary. We pay our taxes, contributing thereby to the commonwealth. Nothing heroic about that, *except* that we could remember that both Jesus and Paul asked us to pay our taxes. Wherever we are in life — whether we are in the public or corporate eye or whether we labor pretty much alone at home — wherever we are in life St. Paul would have us know that in Christ, our labor is not in vain. Not in vain! That is what I want. I think that is what we all want. We do not want to have lived and labored in vain. It would be great to reach heaven someday and to find out that our daily Christian lives have played a part in the construction of God's kingdom. It would be great to discover that we too — each of us — helped build the New Jerusalem. It would be great to have St. Paul come up to us and say, "You did fine. Thank you!" Even better, it will be great to have Jesus come up to us and say, "Well done":

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21, RSV)

Fear not, then, that you will be overlooked. St. Paul's teaching is meant for each of us, even if we are becoming old and frail, even if the world by and large feels we are nothing special. St. Paul is speaking of a great democracy in which each of us has the right to say, "In my labors, God himself is at work both to will and to work his good purposes." And those good purposes are indeed good, thanks to the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.