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Epiphany 3 One Year Series 2017

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany – One Year Series

February 22, 2017

Our Lord Jesus is revealed in Epiphany, for that is what the name of the season means, a revelation of God. Today Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God through the miracles he performs, two of them specifically, the cleansing of a leper by a touch and the healing of the centurion's servant through a word. Luther will comment extensively on both of them and in so doing return to two common themes: Faith and Vocation.

It is hardly surprising that he cannot pass up the Lord's commendation of the centurion's faith. The sermon of Luther quoted below is a rich passage and worthy of careful reading. The turn toward vocation, which Luther takes in the second and larger portion of the sermon, may not be quite as obvious. But once Luther starts on it, you can see that he is clear and insightful. Again, this is worthy material for the preacher today.

But both of these were burning issues for the people who heard this sermon preached in winter of 1533. Luther was in a perilous time. The Augsburg Confession had been read at the diet and rejected by the Emperor, Charles V. The princes who were Luther's defenders, John the Steadfast and Philip of Hesse among others, had banded together to form the Smalkaldic League, a defensive alliance which would fight for the Gospel Luther was preaching. Now John was dead and his young son, John Frederick (not yet having earned his moniker of "the Magnanimous") had recently ascended to the throne. This is a picture of him to the right. He doesn't seem like exactly an inspiring martial figure. I always thought this picture of him looked like he was a pudgy kid whose armor was too small.



Luther was preaching to a particular time and place, a time when he needed to bolster the "properly constituted authorities" who were soon to go to war against the forces of the "papists." Many of those who heard his sermon would have been sharply attuned to the notes he sounded today, both the elector who was leading them and the rest of the Saxons who would constitute his army.

The question will be what do our people need in the 21st century. Simply repeating Luther's laudable words won't be enough. The fanatics are still out there, true, trying to overthrow the duly constituted authorities. It is not the papists today who foist monasticism on us, but likely it is the evangelical who wants me to find my ministry and is unwilling to accept that being a good spouse, parent, child, neighbor, and citizen is just as spiritual of an action as going on mission trips to some distant land where I might dig wells or help operate an orphanage (as laudable as those things are to do.)

Luther properly asked the questions we need to keep asking in every age – who is this Jesus for our generation? Do we need to focus on the Jesus who broke the strictures of the Torah today? He does just that in touching the leper. (Look also at the conversation Elisha has with Naaman in the extension of the OT reading. That would not pass CTCR review!) Do we need to proclaim the Jesus who praised the heathen man? Luther goes there in his notes, but only briefly. He says that is a little like Jesus singling out a Turk (Moslem) and praising his faith. That could be a tough sermon to preach in this climate. Sometimes that is exactly the sermon we need to preach.

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look on our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever

Mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of “majesty”!? What is the hand of majesty? That rather sounds like some superpower which a Marvel Comics character might have. Is it the power of God that makes the demons and diseases flee before Jesus? Is it the ineffably sublime nature of God? Not sure we have got there yet. Do we experience this “hand” in the creation event, the stunning view of mountains or the sea which takes our breath away to see it? Do we do better to see the hand of God’s majesty in the person of Jesus himself? Is that God’s majesty extended (revealed)? What is the hand of God’s majesty for which we pray and which will heal and defend us? Can we as Christians really think this is anything other than Jesus?

Might we perhaps see the hand of God’s majesty in the hand we have raised in benediction? Is this like a king/queen who stretches forth his/her hand to do something good? The mighty hand of God shelters the children of Israel. “The strong arm and mighty hand of God” is the traditional formula to describe God’s redemptive act in the Exodus, throughout the OT. Is this the mother hen stretching out her wings to which Jesus refers in Luke? The perfect king looks out for his people, cares for his subjects. How does the gospel text show up here? Jesus summons disciples to his service.

The prayer is otherwise pretty straight forward. God has all the power and he does not wear out. He never grows weary and, unlike even the hardest of granite, he never erodes away. He is everlasting. I believe there are several brands of things like boot soles which advertise themselves as everlast(ing) which might make an interesting comparison.

We pray that God would mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth his hand. This is another straightforward line, but again might need to be expanded upon. I do believe that one of the great temptations of the evil one for our age is the temptation of self-sufficiency. Thanks to narcotics and antibiotics, most of us are not terrified of disease, perhaps cancer or heart disease,

but even there, as we look about our fellow congregants, we might be deceived into thinking that here is a fellow who survived cancer, here is a woman who has managed her heart disease, etc. The specter of being utterly helpless and weak is often hidden behind the nursing home walls which many of our parishioners never enter. Do we say that infirmities = internal, mental/psychological infirmities or do we suggest that there are other infirmities, infirmities of spirit and soul, morals and heart? How does the faith relationship with Christ help me face my own weakness? My world might collapse – but faith helps me deal with that. Is there a spiritual component here? Do we face a real and personal enemy who works on this weakness, bringing us into depression, despair, etc. Many folks also face a physical weakness which opens a door for that evil to work.

Of course infirmities might also refer to our utter weakness and helplessness before sin, before addiction, before our ruined relationships, before just about anything. The preacher will want to ask himself just what is the nature of the infirmity as his people experience it? Remember, sermons are never about other people, but it starts with the preacher himself and then the folks who will hear it with their own two ears. My sermon needs to be about these people to whom I am speaking. Why does their situation, my situation, require God's majestic hand, offered in mercy, to heal and defend?

Readings:

II Kings 5:1-15a *I have included the strange and somewhat disturbing conversation Elisha and Naaman have after this.*

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. ² Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." ⁵ And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. ⁶ And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

⁷ And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman was angry

and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.

¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; *so accept now a present from your servant.*” ¹⁶ But he said, “*As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none.*” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. ¹⁷ Then Naaman said, “If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD.” ¹⁸ In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter.” ¹⁹ He said to him, “Go in peace.”

In the collect we pray for God to extend the hand of his majesty. Naaman expected Elisha to come and wave his hand over the spot. Do we often expect God to do things a certain way and when he doesn't do we storm off in a snit? Thank God for servants who can set us straight! I pray that I can be such a servant to you and that you can be to me!

This is such a strange and wonderful text. Elisha prefigures our Lord in healing a leper, but what a leper! For a people whom God had set apart this must have been a shocking story. They were the children of Abraham. As Jesus will taunt his opponents some centuries later, it is not like there were not good Jewish lepers for him to heal. Why this Syrian of all people!? He had little Israelite girls as slaves. What sort of a monster was he, and Elisha heals him? Then look at the story which we cut out of this reading. The man asks if it is still OK for him to bow down to the gods of the Syrians. Elisha seems to give his blessing. “Go in peace.” Doesn't Elisha know syncretism when he sees it? The Deuteronomic History of which this is a part, seems to be a record of the Israelites succumbing to just such mixing of religions. This is why they got sent into exile!

And yet, here we have it. God confronts us in our comfortable sensibilities. He confronted Naaman too. He thought that the prophet should do something dramatic; instead, the prophet sends him to wash in a muddy river. It is only his servants who convince him to reconsider. Is that a sermon theme for today? Servants seems to come off pretty well today. One could strive to be that sort of a person. The servants convince Naaman and are healed by Jesus today. After last week's reading, in which only the servants really understand what Jesus has done at the wedding of Cana, you could do pretty well to be a servant in Epiphany. Stretch today's gospel reading

another story and you will see Peter's mother-in-law jump up from her sick bed so she can serve Jesus and the disciples.

But of course the big deal here is that leprosy was healed. Naaman was finally led to trust the words of the prophet and to take that seven-fold dip in the muddy waters of the Jordan River. And he was healed. Leprosy is not supposed to be washed away that way. But it was, because God's prophet had said so and God had done it. Keep that in mind as we come to the Gospel reading today. Jesus will need to directive from God, but a man will simply ask if he, Jesus, wants to heal him. Jesus does, touches the man, and he is healed. Jesus did the dramatic thing, Elisha refused, but in both events, God healed.

Psalm 110:1-4

The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

² The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

³ Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.

⁴ The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”

Romans 1:8-17

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

In the Three year series we don't often get these readings because they fall in series B, in the Sundays after Pentecost, on proper 3. But because Easter swallows up those early Pentecost readings in the years when Easter falls late, we have not seen this reading for 9 years. Here is what we said then:

Where does one start with this? This is Romans, after all. In the opening paragraph of Romans, Paul lays out the motto of his whole ministry. He has been sent to call gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. He will spend much of the rest of the book unpacking that phrase for us. This is how Paul understands himself as an apostle. He is calling people to obedience. Some have seen in this a reaction to a rumor that some were spreading about Paul that he was against the Law, that he did not think the rules applied to Christians. So, when introducing himself to these Roman Christians he stresses that he is about obedience. The rules do indeed apply to us, but our motivation for keeping them is not fear, it is not greed for some gain or reward, it is not because we are good or moral, but because of faith.

Of course any preacher who attempts this will need to have a handle on what he means by faith, and fortunately, or unfortunately, Paul picks up that at the end of the passage. But his words there are not terribly helpful, in fact they may confuse us as much as they help us.

Before we get to the end of the passage, however, we need to spend some time on the middle and the whole reason for the letter. It is always a dicey thing to think that we can crawl into the head of a person who died two thousand years ago, but that never stops us from trying. Paul gives us a number of clues in this book as to why he is writing it. We believe he wrote it on the boat on the way back to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. He has been out collecting money for the starving Christians in Jerusalem because of a famine.

Now he is casting his eyes to the west and unreached peoples, especially in Spain. Until this point his base of operation was always the city of Antioch in Syria. They had sent him on his prior journeys and he had come back to them to make a report. It is quite likely that they supported him with prayers and finances on his journeys. Antioch, however, is just too far away to be a realistic base for a missionary journey to Spain. They are on opposite ends of the Mediterranean Sea. He needs a western congregation who will support him, probably financially and certainly with prayers and perhaps even people to go with him. He has his eyes on Rome.

He seems to write this letter as an introduction to his ministry and as a preparation for an intended visit. But he is not just looking for a night's lodging. He wants much more from them, and that means he needs to make his case for their support. Probably in order to condense his time necessary for this support building, he sends this letter with Phoebe, a deaconess from the region of Corinth. She will be coached to read the letter and interpret it for the folks in Rome.

Is it the case that there are rumors about Paul that he needs to correct? Is it the case that they know him? Some have wondered if there wasn't a problem in the church at Rome he wants to

settle prior to getting there so he can have a healthy place to send him on his journey to Spain. All of these are possible, none of them are clear. If you read the commentators you will find great divergence in the rationale for the letter and in a description of the audience.

So what does Paul say about faith? Verses 16 and 17 serve as the thesis statement for the whole book. The book is really one long sustained argument or position paper on a single subject. This is the longest sustained argument in the whole NT. We are not used to reading this stuff and it sometimes gets us into trouble when we do.

In rhetorical literature of the time, the thesis statement serves as a condensation of the whole work. This is Paul telling his audience exactly where they are going, but it might have been in such technical language that they would not have understood it very well. The rest of the book will try to unpack that.

The thesis statement in a literal translation reads like this: For not am I ashamed of the Gospel, for the power of God it is into salvation for every believer, the Jew first and for the Greek. For the righteousness of God in him he revealed out of faith into faith, just as it is written “The right one out of faith will live.”

Does that actually make anything clearer for you? What is particularly perplexing is the section in verse 17 in which he says that the righteousness of God is revealed “out of faith into faith.” A quick survey of translations will reveal that this has been regularly worked over pretty hard a translators have tried to render this in idiomatic English. Each of those translations is a form of interpretation.

Recently scholarship has again noticed that this is the same OT verse and phrase which shows up again in chapter four. When this is coupled with the restatement of the thesis in chapter 3:20-27, they have rather forcefully argued that Paul thinks that our faith comes from the faith of Jesus. In other words, Jesus believed and our faith is actually a participation in the faith of Christ. Out of Jesus faith and into our faith.

At first that might seem hard to swallow. How does God have faith? Are we saying Jesus was not God? No, that is not what we are saying. Rather, this is suggesting that as a man, Jesus also believed. He went to the cross trusting in the Father’s promise to let his holy one not see decay. That was trusting a promise, that is faith.

This is the best way that I have found to make sense of this otherwise very important but difficult passage. The righteousness of God is revealed out of Jesus’ faithful action and into our faithful participation in the Christ event. As this was explained to me, I found it made this whole book, if anything, more Lutheran to me. The hard part of it is that it will run headlong into Luther’s very existential or psychological interpretation of the book. Is that a contradiction? Perhaps. In calling Luther at odds with an interpretation which I find more Lutheran than Luther perhaps I am making a serious mistake.

So what is one to say here? I would run with the idea that faith itself, even this most essential thing we must have to be a Christian is a gift from God. The faith we have we share with Christ who trusted the father far better than we ever can. He is the author and perfecter of faith

(Hebrews). Out of this faith will come the obedience to which Paul is calling us. Don't forget that part, but it begins with faith, with the God-given relationship in which God saves and we are saved.

Or

Romans 12:6-16 This reading picks up and breaks off in the middle of a thought so I have included the passages prior and following.

³ *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* ⁴ *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,* ⁵ *so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.* ⁶ *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.*

⁹ *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.* ¹⁰ *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.* ¹¹ *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.* ¹² *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

¹³ *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

¹⁴ *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* ¹⁵ *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* ¹⁶ *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.* ¹⁷ *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* ¹⁸ *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* ¹⁹ *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* ²⁰ *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Matthew 8:1-13

¹ *When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.* ² *And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."* ³ *And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.* ⁴ *And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them."*

⁵ *When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him,* ⁶ *"Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly."* ⁷ *And he said to him, "I will come and heal him."* ⁸ *But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof,*

but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

Luther

1. There are two marvelous works told in this Gospel: first, the healing of the leper; second, the account of the centurion who servant Christ restored to health.
2. However, the first and foremost thing in this story, which Jesus extols and commends so highly, is the faith of the centurion, a heathen, of whom Jesus says that he has not found such faith in Israel. It was indeed a wonder that a heathen, who did not have the promises s the Jews had, should nonetheless have had such great and excellent faith as to surpass all of Israel. The Lord welcomes such faith gladly and, as he longs to do, says to the centurion, “Go thy way, and as thou has believed, so be it done unto thee.”
3. We see from this what is the best and most acceptable service e before God, namely nothing pleases out Lord God more than that we believe and trust in him from the heart. The Lord, our God, does not ask for beautiful temples or splendid, shiny works, but rather for inner devotion of the heart, that is, for faith...We should, therefore, know that when we serve God from the heart, with faith, we are then his servants, priests, children, and heirs, who will be with him in heaven.
5. The Evangelist informs us that the centurion’s faith manifested in two excellent features. First, with this faith there is great, deep humility, as he says, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my room.” This amounts to saying, O Lord, why would you even bother with me? I am wicked, you are holy; I am a sinner, you are righteous. Indeed, I have heard that you do great miracles in Israel, that you restore health to the sick, and I dearly wanted to have my sick servant helped; but I consider myself unworthy for you to come into my house.
6. Second, there is an effulgent magnificence to his faith in that he understands that Christ is true God, and attributes to him such power and might that, even though absent, he could still heal his servant. He confesses not only his unworthiness that Christ should come into his house, but also that it would not actually require so much trouble, for Christ could effect that for which he petitioned merely by his word, even though not personally present. The centurion had heard that the Lord had previously raised the dead, and from the same report he had concluded

within himself that it was not necessary for Christ personally to come to his servant. He need but speak the word and his servant would be well. So firmly does he believe this that he draws an example from his own life, "I am a man under authority..." I can with one word cause things to be done. If my word, then, is so powerful, your word is many more times so, because you are not mere man but the Lord God over all creatures, who demonstrates power and might everywhere by great signs and wondrous works.

8. This is such wonderful, excellent faith and such beautiful, deep humility on the centurion's part that Christ marvels over it, and bursts forth with joyful heart to say, "verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west..." The tables are being turned. The Jews, the children of the kingdom who had the promises, will be cast away because of unbelief, while the heathen, who lack the promise, will be received into the kingdom because they believe.

11. The leper is cleansed from his leprosy by the Lord and sent to the priests... (Jesus says,) They have to give certification, and that I won't contest. Theirs is law and they have the authority to examine the lepers and to offer gifts for them; that prerogative I won't take from them. In the case of the centurion, however, he did not say, God let yourself be circumcised and become a Jew. Even less does he say now, Give up your vocation, run to the monastery and become a monk, or that the servant be given his freedom; rather he lets the centurion remain a centurion, the servant, a servant.

12. In this way Christ shows us that this kingdom does not overturn secular rule and the world's vocations. All stations in life, given and established by God, are good, and to become a Christian a person is not required to have a specified external station. A husband and wife need not part and run to the cloister in order to be Christians and serve God. They can be Christians and serve God where they are, yes, be better Christians and serve God more than by leaving their vocations and running from each other. It is the pope who labeled all other vocations worldly, calling his alone spiritual, as also that of his monks and clerics. That is a perilous line for the world, and indeed false and fabricated. We see how the Lord lets the Jews retain their law and authority; and if they had received him, he would have let the whole of Jerusalem, with Moses, the temple, the kingdom, and the priesthood stand and remain; even though they were wicked rascals, yet he would have let them abide.

17. To sum up, Christ wishes to let each man abide, but instead of serving Satan he wants him now to serve him. Those who accede to his wish shall not only abide but they will also be built up...Whoever refuses will be destroyed.

19. That is what Christ has in mind here, as he sends the leper to the priests. We are not to understand the Christian faith as the fanatics do, who straightway overthrow constituted authority; nor as the papists, who define spiritual life in distinction from worldly life in terms of

an outward discipline. On the contrary, we should know that a Christian and believer is one who has gotten another Lord. As far as his outward life goes, it remains as before,...It does not follow that for the sake of the Christian faith a person external life itself is altered; rather it remains as before.

25. To the centurion Christ does not say that he should go to the priest, nor does he put him under the Jewish Law, but allows him to remain a centurion under Roman imperial authority. The centurion's office was sanguinary business, and yet Jesus allowed him to keep the sword, lets him carry on his bloody office, and does not forbid him from engaging in war and pursuing his bloody tasks. He, on the contrary, upholds the centurion in his post, and with his miraculous word heals his servant...This is not to say that everything which their soldiers did pleased him, but he permitted these stations and offices to remain.

26. This is the nature of Christ's office and work, and for this reason he came, that the devil's kingdom might be taken off of us, and that the people who formerly served the devil might now serve him. So we teach too: Whoever under the papacy served the devil idolatrous practices, Masses, vows, and the like, should now take his stand against these and serve God, believing on Christ, that through him alone, without worthiness of his own works, he is righteous before God and saved. If that remains sure and solid, then we rest at peace. If one tonsure is not enough, then let there be two; it makes no difference to God. But without and apart from Christ, to rely on caps and tonsures, God will not tolerate, but will smash it to smithereens. That's why Christ says, "I will not take things from you, take nothing away from me either; you remain you, and will remain myself, If then you die, you know where you will go. In short, Christ wants only to destroy the devil's kingdom, and beyond that lets things be.

(Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. Pp. 242-252.)

Sermon Idea: A Difficult Business (That the Holy Spirit would call and confirm the hearer in the difficult vocations to which he has called us.)

Lutherans love to talk about vocation. We have some stock images we often trot out at this point. We take a stand against the reformed who often limit vocation to our job. We say that the mother changing the diapers or the neighbor helping the elderly person who lives a couple doors down is also answering a call from God and living out a vocation.

But God calls us to do some things that might seem a little odd to us. The mother who cares for her children is also called to discipline them, yes, to be cold and hard in the face of their tears. The loving mother does not cave into the temper tantrum in the grocery store checkout line when the child asserts that her life will be over if she does not get that package of candy. That is fairly easy. Sometimes you must let your children fail at something so they learn to deal with failure.

One of my favorite stories was related by a man I knew who one day walked out of his home to gather the newspaper, coffee in hand. It was trash day and as he walked back onto the porch of his home he heard a rhythmic crashing up his street. He looked up to see a young man in what was obviously his father's very large car gleefully driving down the street and knocking over every garbage can which had been so neatly lined up, awaiting pick-up from the garbage service. Now you should know that the city in which we both lived had adopted mechanized trucks and special, very large garbage cans. The truck pulled up, extended a mechanical hand of sorts, grasped the can and lifted it up and tipped it into the truck. These were powerful devices capable of lifting the very large trash containers which were provided to us.

My friend calmly looked up the street and did nothing but stop, take a sip of coffee and watch. He knew something that the young man did not. The can immediately before him in the path of the miscreant teenager belonged to his neighbor. He had helped that neighbor the prior weekend remodel the bathroom. He knew that there were about 500 pounds of broken tile the can just up from his trash can.

He stood, out of sight on his porch, and watched. Bang, bang, bang, went the cans until the neighbor's – crunch. The can stayed upright and the fender was crushed. My friend later said, "I bet he won't ever do that again."

In a very real sense he was being a friend to that young man. I am sure that when he got home and had to explain to his father what happened to the fender of the family car it was mighty uncomfortable. But fenders can be fixed and this was not the end of the world.

Vocation, you see, is not always doing something that people want you to do. An emergency room doctor may have to amputate a limb from an accident victim. But that is easily explained because we can see that he is saving a life. The same for the fireman who breaks down my front door to gain access to a burning house and to save lives and property. But what about the soldier or the police officer, men and woman who carry a gun because sometimes they have to use it on a human being. Is that a sacred service rendered to God?

Today we have heard the accounts of two soldiers. Let's not pretend here. These were brutal men who had done brutal things. Warfare in the ancient world was not some sanitized video game where only faceless enemies die and the hero gets to be regenerated if he runs out of life points. In Luther's words above, it was bloody business. Naaman had a slave in his house, the little Israelite girl who told him about Elisha. I bet her father died protecting her. Her mother...we don't want to go into what probably happened to her. Does Elisha refuse to heal the man, calling him a monster? He could have, some would have likely called him a war criminal today. The centurion who comes to Jesus was not a man without blood on his hands either. Centurions were the men who had risen through the ranks of the Roman legions. They

were successful, career soldiers. They had survived, succeeded and been elevated to their rank because they got things done. Roman armies rarely did nice things.

Here are Luther's words from "Whether Soldiers too can be Saved" (1526). Can they be heard today? We might find them shocking. (I am attaching the whole document for you)

Now slaying and robbing do not seem to be works of love. A simple man therefore does not think it is a Christian thing to do. In truth, however, even this is a work of love. For example, a good doctor sometimes finds so serious and terrible a sickness that he must amputate or destroy a hand, foot, ear, eye, to save the body. Looking at it from the point of view of the organ that he amputates, he appears to be a cruel and merciless man; but looking at it from the point of view of the body, which the doctor wants to save, he is a fine and true man and does a good and Christian work, as far as the work itself is concerned. In the same way, when I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is; and I observe that it amputates a leg or a hand, so that the whole body may not perish. For if the sword were not on guard to preserve peace, everything in the world would be ruined because of lack of peace. Therefore, such a war is only a very brief lack of peace that prevents an everlasting and immeasurable lack of peace, a small misfortune that prevents a great misfortune.

The past year has seen a great deal of attention paid to the police forces of our nation's cities. As Luther also says, in the notes quoted from the house postils above: "This is not to say that everything which their soldiers did pleased him, but he permitted these stations and offices to remain." Where police men or women have violated the law, they should be accountable to the laws they have broken. But have we passed over into the "fanatics" as Luther would call them when the police officers I know admit that they feel that they have a target on their back whenever they step out of the precinct or station into their patrol cars or onto the street?

Christ has not come to redeem only the nice and neat parts of our lives. He is also revealed today forgiving, healing, and working through those who are soldiers, police, and yes parents who turn hearts of stone toward their squalling children and through surgeons who tear into our bodies with scalpels and lasers. For you see, he has redeemed the whole of humanity. The sin, it will perish. Do not cling to it or you might go down to hell's fires with it, but never imagine that Christ's love and forgiveness are not for you, or for someone you love, no matter how difficult their business really is.

Sermon Idea: Jesus, Savior of All (That the Holy Spirit would place the hearer in the middle of God's amazing, gracious love for sinners.)

We hear today about three unlikely recipients of God's goodness and grace, here expressed in healing. Naaman is a piece of arrogant work. He storms, he rages. He enslaves little girls and is generally not a likely candidate for God's love. He has been a commander of the armies which have tormented the people of Israel. But God heals his leprosy.

The leper in the story has broken taboo. He has approached Jesus and knelt before him. He was supposed to be far off, declaring his leprosy and uncleanness. We get upset with someone who has a cold who comes too close to us. This guy had a fatal contagious disease. They wanted him to stay away. He was not supposed to be there. But Jesus reaches out and touches him. The leprosy which was supposed to leap from the leper to the healthy finds that the situation is reversed. The health of the Son of God infects the leper and he is cleansed.

Then you have the centurion. If there is anything a good Jewish guy knows, it is that centurions are way outside the kingdom of God. But listen to what Jesus says about him. Jesus marvels at his faith and declares that he is more inside the kingdom than many who consider themselves to be inside.

You could extend this one more story too. Peter is the recipient of the next miracle as his family member is healed. Of course we know the story of Peter so well. Remember, yes, he is the great friend of Jesus, but he is also the guy who denied Christ when Jesus was on trial. Jesus died for that one too. People inside, outside, naughty folks, enemies, and more all get the love of God today. Jesus has come for them all, you see, and he has come for us. We might pick up the story of Sosthenes last week. He tried to kill Paul, but is embraced as a brother in the first verse of I Corinthians.

The preacher will want the hearer to know that somewhere between all these extremes the hearer stands. Yes, there are reasons God should not love every person in this room. We all are sinners and deserve nothing but God's wrath and judgment, but that is not what we get. Rather, God so loved this whole benighted world, every man, woman, and child of it, that he sent and gave his son, Jesus for our salvation. He should have given us terror and death, he gave instead his son into terror and death for our sake, to redeem us, to make us his own.