



Worthy of the Calling

Psalm 51:1-12 & 2 Thessalonians 1
Pentecost 10 - August 1, 2021
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That is quite a reading to interrupt our perfectly peaceful and idyllic Sunday morning, isn't it? We stand on the brink of diving into Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians and the tone is so different than what we have been reading in his first letter. Well, at least the start of these two letters are so different that scholars are led to believe that this is probably not the work of Paul at all, but rather one of his associates who is writing in his name. Regardless, we recognize it as containing the witness to God's Word in it and so we must, if we have any integrity at all, listen carefully, prudently, and receptively to what we have heard.

I think a good many of us would be caught up first and foremost with all the threats that seem to breathe out of this first chapter; this concern for the coming judgment of God and the threats of vengeance upon those who do not get their acts together, so to speak. However, the underlying message here is not so much a threat as an acknowledgement that the life of the Christian should be worthy or reflective of the great grace that God has granted us. The writer of this epistle, Paul or otherwise, implies that the knowledge of God's judgment is meant to actually be a means by which our lives might demonstrate a certain worthiness or responsiveness to God's love and mercy. It is the knowledge of this judgment that spurs us on, that throws us not back upon ourselves and our resources in fear and loathing of God, but upon a dependence on God and God's great goodness rather than our own works or righteous behavior.

This is a different way to look at this judgment and the worthiness of one's life than what we regularly might hear from pulpits, churches, and loud gospel radio programs. For a good many Christians, judgment is about the bad guys and gals in our life getting their just dessert and all we good little girls and boys getting our reward. Again, I warn you, that is not a biblical view of judgment ... it is what we might want in our shallowness and our weakness of character and our lack of trust in God's mercy and grace, but it is not what is conveyed to us in Jesus Christ and the witness of scripture overall.

Leading a life worthy of God's great calling in Jesus Christ is about living into what God grants us in this life with all the patience, seriousness, joy, love and grace that the living Spirit of God might muster within us. Living lives worthy of God's great calling is not about our getting all our pious ducks in a row and trying so hard to be good and wonderful – it is about realizing that the good that is within us, that the good within our grasp to do this day and tomorrow, is there because of God at work in our lives, rather our being at work on God or on God's conscience. A worthy life is one lived with the anticipation of God's work in us AND in those around us. It is an openness to the growing mercy and grace within each of us that enables us to live with open hearts and open hands towards other. It is a realization that this is really the meaning of life.

I have been reading a little-known American philosopher and ethicist named Leon Kass, and though I don't agree with everything I read there, I was struck by this statement:

Today, we are super-competent when it comes to efficiency, ability, speed, convenience, and getting ahead in the world; but we are at a loss concerning what it's all for.

In our world, unless we are duly mindful, it is so easy for any of us and all of us to lose track of what this is all about. We have our glimpses, our great discoveries maybe on Sunday mornings or Tuesday afternoons, but we soon lose the thread again and wander about even in our efficient little lives wondering what it is all for.

Here, in this passage from this second letter, we are reminded that we are called to live lives reflective of the goodness of God; but we are not called to be experts in it – we are called to just live it. And if we are called to live it, then we know almost intuitively that we will not do so perfectly, for what do we do perfectly in any manner of life? We ought to be prepared for not always being fully and completely worthy.

Peter Gomes, the late-great chaplain of Harvard University, once addressed his chapel congregation the week prior to commencement and said:

[It] is a wicked conceit that suggests that the only calling available to you is greatness.

Can you imagine addressing members of the graduating class at Harvard University to tell them that greatness was not necessarily in the cards for them? It is amazing that they didn't storm the pulpit and pull the poor, distinguished good doctor out of the chapel by his ear! Of course, it was Harvard and not Penn State or Iowa or Pitt for that matter!

However it was received, what Gomes told that graduating class that pleasant and sunny Sunday morning rings out loud and true to us and to our text this day. Being called to be worthy of God's calling in grace and love is not a calling to being perfect; it is a calling to a great dependence not upon our well-honed abilities and talents, which may well be considerable. No, instead it is a calling to be dependent upon God; to trust in the goodness and mercy of God to inform us, to lead us, and ultimately to judge us.

Gomes followed that amazing statement just mentioned with the following:

[We] need people who are not waiting for their crescent moment in which to excel and to do a heroic act: rather, what we need are people who regard their daily life – the routine, the ordinary, the mundane – as the place in which they mean to do ordinary things extraordinarily well.

One of the purposes of our knowledge of the coming judgment of God is not to put us into a perpetual terror or fear of living lest we do something wrong or make a misstep, but rather to goad us into action – to live lives worthy of the grace and compassion that we have come to know in God. The life well-lived is a life lived in turning to God and returning to our neighbors ready and willing to share love, grace, and compassion with all whom we meet. But living a life worthy of God's calling is meant to put us squarely and wholly in a place of trusting in God's love in Jesus Christ.

Gomes wrote of this late in that same sermon directed to the graduating class at Harvard:

This, in case you haven't recognized it, is a commercial for God. Put your confidence in something that works. It is God who will keep you when all else has failed you; and it is to God to whom you will turn when you have exhausted all of the alternatives. It is God on whom you will call when you get that fateful diagnosis; it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out; and it is God on whom you will call when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair, when life itself seems not worth the living and you cannot remember your last victory; and it is God on whom you will call with your very last breath.

A life worthy of the calling of God is a life that is turned toward God with expectation and hope; a life that is then turned towards others with the same grace and love that we have received from the hand of God – a life that is lived always under the merciful and gracious judgment of God.