

“Selected for Service”

Introduction: An Unusual Holiday

Today I have chosen an unusual topic for a Maundy Thursday sermon. Normally on Maundy Thursday, a pastor will preach about Jesus washing the disciples' feet or about the institution of the Lord's Supper. Those are the traditional themes for this day.

It is unusual for a Lutheran pastor to mention Martin Luther on Maundy Thursday. We preach about him on Reformation and that's about it most years. This year I will make what might be a once in a lifetime exception. If you read my newsletter article, you know why. Yesterday was the 500th anniversary of Luther's ordination. This ties in nicely with the themes of service and the Lord's Supper that are part of Maundy Thursday.

Leading to Luther's Ordination

As you may have read in the newsletter, Luther was not raised Lutheran. This is obvious but often overlooked. Luther was raised in the Western Catholic Church. This Church dominated Western Europe but did not cover as much ground geographically as the Eastern Orthodox Church which ranged from Ethiopia to Greece and Russia.

Luther was raised like a good Roman Catholic was at his time. He was taught to ask saints to intercede for him. One day during a violent thunderstorm he prayed, “Help, St. Anna, I will become a monk.” He kept his word, left law school, and became an Augustinian monk. He was ordained as a Catholic priest on April 4, 1507. A month or so later he would celebrate the Lord's Supper for the first time.

Holy Hierarchies

Before the Reformation, people believed that if you wanted to serve God, you should become a monk, nun or priest. People who were not academically inclined could serve as monks or nuns because many monks and nuns did physical work. Monks worked building roads and working in the fields of the monastery. Nuns worked weaving and baking food for the poor. People of all social classes joined religious orders and served God in that way.

There were several problems with this of course. I won't go into the celibacy issue. More important than that is the dichotomy that formed between "religious" people and "secular" people. People started to think that you had to be a monk or a nun in order to serve God. They thought you couldn't pray directly to God, you needed to go through priests or saints. This led lay people to neglect their talents. People were afraid to do anything because they thought you had to be an expert to do it.

Pastors still encounter this problem from time to time. Many pastors will say privately that the attitude of many lay people is, "You be the holy man pastor. That way I don't have to be. I'm paying you so I don't have to be holy."

Unleashing the Laity

We all know that this is a wrong attitude. All Christians are called to be holy – not just the pastor. All Christians are called to serve – not just the pastor. On the whole, Protestants are much more involved in their congregations than Roman Catholics are. On average, they give a higher percentage of their income too. Much of this has to do with our doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The most common verse that teaches the priesthood of all believers is 1 Peter 2:9 but our Gospel lesson hints at it too.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus washes his disciples. He then tells them that they should do likewise. He shows that leadership is really service. Christian leadership is not having a higher rank that can be exploited so that others serve you. Leadership is being willing to get on your hands and knees and do the dirty work.

When pastors are willing to serve in mundane ways, the laity will pick up on it too. Pastors make visits to the sick not just to get the job done but to set an example for the laity. Pastors share the gospel so that the laity will share it too. Spiritually mature lay people will start to follow a pastor who does these things.

