

“To Beggars”

(Table of Duties)

Ash Wednesday, March 5th, 2014

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this year for the Catechism Convocation and the Lenten Pulpit Exchange we are focusing on Luther's Small Catechism, Section 3: Table of Duties. This is a fantastically vital part of the catechism and more importantly is about the lives of those baptized into Christ and who bear His Name. This is about how Christians live. The Table of Duties list the various vocations we have and one of the most important teachings from God's Word and reinforced by the Reformation was that whatever the Lord has given you to do in your life, whether you serve as a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a child, a brother, a sister, a friend, a citizen, a student, a worker, a grandmother, a grandfather; whether you work in construction, for the city, for a prison, for national parks, serve in law enforcement, practice law, practice medicine; whether you are a domestic engineer, a bio-medical engineer, work in a restaurant, work in the entertainment industry, compete as an athlete, are a musician, work at an amusement park, work in a library, work for UPS, ESPN, the FBI, or some other abbreviated company...whatever you do as one who lives in faith in the Lord, then what you do is *sacred*. God wears a mask in what you do...you become His mask, His hands, His eyes, His mouth, His feet, His work, His service, His helping...so the Christian who prepares the food in a restaurant or the Christian who is a waiter and brings the food for those sitting down...God -- through that Christian -- is actually, truly, literally feeding other people...if you clean, God cleans through you; if you counsel, God counsels through you; if you take care of your family; God is taking care of your family through you. This is the Biblical teaching of holy vocation and it is a vital and necessary thing.

In addition and in actual biblical teaching one vocation is not better or holier than another. Once upon a time, people treated the ministry as being holier. It was suggested that if a person was a priest or a monk then now you're really doing something holy...no! If you are taking care of your child, cleaning and feeding your son or daughter then that work done in faith towards God is just as holy as the work of the pastor who preaches the Gospel! As a matter of fact, God's Word calls all believers "royal priests" (1st Peter 2:9), so you are a priest who shares God's love, shares God's service, and shares God's encouragement wherever you go and in whatever you do!

But how does this apply to the season of Lent in general and to this holy night on Ash Wednesday in particular? Lent is a penitential season and that is a fancy way of saying that this is a season in which we remember how much we need God in our lives. This is a season in which we confess our sins; and this is a season in which we admit our weaknesses which are so severe if not for the grace of God we would be completely lost. This is particularly true on Ash Wednesday as we receive the ashes and hear the words, "Remember you are dust!" Dust is the ultimate reminder that we are completely and utterly dependent on the Lord. We have to be wise not to forget that we could not even raise our hand or blink our eyes or smile if not for the preserving power of God; if not for the Lord, we could not even breathe; and if not for the Lord our souls could never be redeemed; if not for Jesus we could never be forgiven our sins...but all of these things are true, because the Lord intervenes and comes to save us dusty people.

But when we apply our dust and sin and weakness to holy vocation, it is easy to see the application. Vocations are great blessings and they can be the source of great joy, but too often – on account of sin – our vocations are strained and difficult. We see the dust of Ash Wednesday on our vocations; we see the darkness of Lent on our vocations. We see our need for the Lord in our vocations. So parents who love their children more than they can say, can still really struggle to raise their children; and children who know deep down how fortunate they are to have their parents, find it easy to rebel; and husbands and

wives who love each other in holy matrimony still find that it takes work to have a successful marriage...but sometimes it is very hard and we are easily hurt by those we love the most. Our jobs are not necessarily glamorous, and sometimes they cause great frustration and anxiety; we don't always get along with bosses and we don't always have the security we hope for. Yes, our vocations are blessings, but they too are encumbered by many trials and afflictions.

So I asked myself, "How do we approach vocations during Lent?" or rather, "What is the first vocation that we must consider?" And the answer came to me when I thought of Martin Luther who was the most important leader of the Reformation that led the Church back to the foundation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know about the single most amazing thing that was found on Luther's person when he died? Luther had with him a little scrap of paper in his pocket. In this little note he declared, "This is true. We are all beggars." Luther knew he was about to die and as wondrous and as spectacular a career he had as the great Reformer...preacher, professor, author...the list goes on and on; and full of love for his dear wife Katie, he knew his single most important vocation: he was a beggar.

We cringe at such a designation and our human pride – which is full of sin – wants nothing to do with this tag. But it is true. We are beggars. But know this dear Christian to have this knowledge and to know this truth is not a curse (it isn't a bad thing at all), because it puts you in the mentality that before you can do anything (engage in any of your other vocations)...that before you can DO, you must RECEIVE from God. He must grant you grace; He must give you life; He must empower you to move, and to believe, and to worship, and to pray; and to serve...and if the Lord does not make the first move to come to us poor beggars, then we are hopeless. But guess what? The Lord DID make the first move! While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us! (Romans 5:8). When we were God's enemies and hopeless, Christ covered our sins with His blood and wiped away our condemnation!

Have you ever felt helpless and hopeless? It happened to me this past August. Over the years I have had many parishioners describe having had a panic attack. I had heard, but I really couldn't relate, because I had never had one before last August; and when it occurred, all semblance of the idea that I had control was out the window! I was driving on the highway when it happened and it was a terrible feeling as I was convinced I was going to die. I was helpless...and as I was taken to the emergency room, I became a thorough beggar...begging for the necessary medical attention; begging for help; begging for mercy...perhaps I said very little in my words, but my heart was clear and I was like a beggar.

But thank God that He has a special place for beggars in His heart...in fact they are the only Ones He saves, because if you're not a beggar then you don't really believe you need God and that is a far worse than being a beggar. Then you need the Lord as much as any beggar, but you refuse to acknowledge your great need for the Lord...and when this happens people go to great lengths to feel good about their independence until they're spiraling down a dark pit (that's what a panic attack feels like).

Jeremiah knew about this. He suffered in his life as a prophet of the Lord in some extraordinary ways. First of all, he was despised and rejected in his ministry. Conducting his vocation wasn't a lot of fun for Jeremiah. In fact, as we learn from chapter 37 in his book, his vocation led him to be imprisoned; and then after he was released, things went from bad to worse in chapter 38 which records that he was cast into a cistern...he was lowered by a rope and this cistern was full of mud so that Jeremiah sank into the mud (verse 6). And in chapter 15, Jeremiah sounds like a beggar. He says at verse 10: "Woe is me" and calls himself "a man of strife." He describes that others "curse" him (vs 10) and describes himself as having bourn "reproach" (vs 15), but in the midst of this darkness, Jeremiah brings forth these words, *"Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart."* (vs 16a).

And in a most profound way Jeremiah teaches us about how God works. When he sees us in a dark and dusty beggarly way, He has mercy on us. Christ came for such as these! Our pain may be as Jeremiah describes: unceasing (vs. 18); our wound may be as Jeremiah describes: incurable (vs. 18), but at verse 19 the Lord says, *“If you return, I will restore you...”* These words do not lead us to try harder, but to simply see what is really contained in them: mercy, help, relief, rescue...our Lord comes to the broken-hearted; our Lord comes to those who are weary and heavy laden (Matt. 11:28); our Lord comes to the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks (Isa. 42:3)...our Lord comes to beggars and because He does we receive strength for every other vocation on our plate.

In the end, the Lord assures Jeremiah: “for I am with you to save you and deliver you.” (vs. 20) This is the help beggars receive; they receive the help of the Lord and it is not on account of anything we’ve done. How can it be? We’re just beggars! But it is on account of His love in Christ; His mercy in Christ; His deliverance in Christ who as our Savior and as our Brother became as one of us. As He was beaten and as He hung on the cross, He very much appeared as a Beggar, but in this way He took your place so that your sin became His; your punishment became His; your death became His and now what is left for you goes far beyond what beggars normally receive...you don’t just get enough to get by, now God Himself is for you and your every vocation is a blessing; everything you do is as if God Himself is working through you. You are blessed...so come forth to receive the ashes...it is a sign that the beggars become rich; it is a sign that the beggars become strong; it is a sign that beggars inherit the Kingdom of God; it is a sign that beggars who are dust shall rise above it in the glorious resurrection!