

**Sunday January 30, 2022**

**Our Vocation and Our Call**

by Jory Mickelson

Good morning! Good morning! It is good to be among you. Your prayer and encouragement fill me up and sustain me. So don't stop praying, I never stop needing it. At seminary, I work to get the best grades I can. I was raised by teachers, and went to school where my parents taught, so you can imagine the kind of grades I had to get. Perfect grades. Anything less was unacceptable. I thought that God might be like this too. Thankfully for me, this isn't the truth about the Loving One. But it might take me my whole life to unlearn my need to be perfect. To earn those grades all by myself—that God expects me never to make a mistake. Maybe some of you thought God was like this too. Perfect God. Perfect church. Perfect little Christian. Ick!

The truth is God doesn't love you more if you do good things, or if you believe certain things. This is shocking to hear out loud, isn't it! Your good behavior won't get you a gold star. God offers us grace regardless of who we are and regardless of what we do. Despite our pasts and what we have done. Or as Oscar Wilde said, "Every saint has a past and every sinner a future."

This is how you know that the Loving One is loving! This is how we know that the Merciful One is indeed merciful. Because it isn't up to us. There is nothing we can do to earn that love and mercy. This is solid Lutheran theology too. There is no good deed, perfect prayer, or big enough check you write, to make you more worthy of God's grace. You can't volunteer your way into heaven.

The point is, God does the work through us. Not us. We aren't God, though we sometime think we are. Sometimes we think it is all up to us. That we need to be perfect. That we must be in control. But our expansive, magnanimous God isn't about our control.

God is powerful. The Almighty One can change the whole world, but the revolution of living and dying, of becoming a new creature in Christ, of entering into the *kin-dom* of God that Jesus says has already arrived usually starts with us. Within us.

God does the work, but we must also respond and participate in the work the Holy One is doing in us. We might call that willingness. You can add all the yeast you want to flour, but unless you give that yeast some food, it isn't going to rise. It just stays yeast and flower. If you bake it, it will taste like dust.

Sometimes churches are filled with dusty little Christians who are in control and tell God not to worry because they are handling it. There is no reason for God to part the Red Sea if things aren't a little messy. A little out of our control. Go around, the perfect little Christians say. God, we don't need you, we went around the sea! We'll check in soon.

But the truth is, we need God. Even if that path is running from some big problems in our life. Sure, we call it liberation from bondage in Egypt today, but at the time Pharaoh's army was on the people's tails, hungry for blood. God will be, and is, always God. But we do have a part. We need willingness. We need to invite God into the picture. Even if that picture contains our failing, our defects. This isn't about perfection or performance though; this is about willingness, the willingness to let God in, to let God, work in us and on us and through us.

We can complain to God all we want about our conditions, but if we are unwilling to do anything, God's hands are often tied. But our God is humble. The Merciful One won't enter unless invited in.

Most of the time, the Holy One needs us to cooperate, even if our cooperation is just admitting defeat. Surrender. Saying in the depths, "God I can't, I just can't anymore, but maybe you can?" This is why I love the prayer, "God make me willing to be willing." You can't

set the bar much lower than that. I'm not willing God, but can you open the door the tiniest crack and let the smallest amount of fresh air in? God, I am not budging but can you help me want to budge soon?

I am making my own imperfect, often flawed efforts to cooperate with the call that God has put within me. Often, I blow it. Some days it seems like I have never even heard of God at all. Maybe you have days like that too? Days when it seems like you are starting from scratch? Where you get to the end of the day and just want to hide your head?

In 12-Step spirituality, there is no chance for change until people realize that they are unable to change on their own. They've tried. They've failed. Again, and again, and again. Most often disastrously. But you don't have to drive your car onto your neighbor's lawn and take out a fence and have the police show up and maybe the local reporter for it to be failure. Sometimes we fail in small ways. But if we pay attention, we will begin to see it. I promise.

Despite what you might think about spirituality, it isn't a self-help movement. Our spiritual life isn't a DIY (do it yourself) home repair project. It isn't just about getting closer to God. Our baptism entered us into a radical covenant with an untamable God. If you were looking to feel a little inspired or to get a "nice spiritual feeling," at church then you may be missing the point.

Our readings today tell us that the Merciful One's love is so total, that the Loving One's care is so radical, God declares through the prophet Jerimiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." Before your parents held you in their hands, God knew you. Before your parents ever met, God knew you and cherished you. Can you imagine that? The Loving One had you in mind before your parents ever met? Does that kind of love seem impossible to you?

This is why we say in the words of the psalm today, "I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength." And in our baptism, we both affirm and claim this truth. We enter into the new life that Jesus has promised us. The life of the church. The new life just on the other side of the water.

In our baptism, we are given our call as a Christian. We are told how we are to live in the world. Luther tells us that God's love is so great it overflowed into the Son. And Jesus' love was so great, it overflowed from the cross, from his death and resurrection to all people. All people. Into you. Into me. Into the jerk who cut us off in traffic. Into the person we aren't speaking to in our family right now. And just as the Loving One was so large and so uncontainable, so too that all-consuming love fills us up and overflows into the world.

Our good deeds don't earn us anything. Our good deeds and prayers are an expression of the overflowing love of God. A reflection of the love and mercy, the kindness and courage, that God has placed in us. Sometimes my spigot of love and mercy can seem pretty small, maybe even entirely shut off. Maybe you have days like this too. This is where surrender, praying for willingness, and getting out of God's way come in.

This is what Luther calls being a Servant to All, that we express the love of the Loving One within us in love and service to our neighbor and to all of creation. This is how God sends us into the world. This is our vocation and our call to God. The Holy One is revealed to others by our hands. The Loving One embraces with our arms. The grace and power of the Mighty One is expressed in the water of our baptism, the word of scripture, the bread and wine at the table, and in us being sent into the world.

This is why as we are told in Corinthians, “Love never ends” because the Loving One is inexhaustible. Mercy never ends because it doesn’t come from our own limited efforts but from the very heart of the Merciful One. Forgiveness never ends because it isn’t up to us. And it is. Because we are called, sent forth to share the love of Jesus with others. Imperfectly to be sure but called none the less. Not because we are great. Not because we are especially good or holy people. But because this is who our baptism made us to be.

This is exactly why in the 12-Steps, step 12 is about working with others. Recovery programs emphasize people are unable to keep the gift of recovery, to stay clean and sober, unless they give it away. Not because they are worthy, not because they are holy, not because they are fixed forever, but because they too are called to share the good news. That we only get to keep the gifts we are willing to give away.

The good news is that love and mercy abound. That forgiveness and healing is in the world. That liberation and hope are possible, but only if we give away what we have been so freely given.

Only if we give it away to others without counting the cost. Only if we are willing to give it away without anticipating the results. A person practicing the 12 Steps works with other addicts and alcoholics without the expectation they will get the other person sober. They do the work because in order to remain centered in God’s love, in the gift of recovery, it must be given away. Working with others happens because there is still work to be done.

This is our vocation. This is our call—there is still work to be done in the world, by you, by me, by us!—to be of love and service in the world as an expression of God’s overflowing love. To meet the Risen Christ in the stranger. To give away God’s wild, untamable and radical love. Allowing it to flow from before our first breath until our very last. Flooding from generation to generation. Washing

the whole world from the spark at the beginning until the very end. And maybe us too, just for today.