



Those who are the last in the eyes of man, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered, the farthest from God and the last before him, they also are just the opposite, in that they are the nearest and the first before God.

*- Martin Luther-
Sermon on Matthew 20*

PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

Isaiah 55:6-9

There is a sense of urgency in the prophet's words: "Seek the Lord while he may be found ..." It's as if the grace and mercy of God are just a limited-time offer. Perhaps they are, in a sense. We all have but a finite time on this earth, and as all our lessons today show, there will be a time when the day draws to a close. We are called to forsake any ways of ours that don't coincide with God's ways. The Word of the Lord came to Isaiah describing the lofty ways of God which are far from human understanding.

- *How do we get our ways mixed up with God's ways? Do we ever have this "faith business" fully figured out?*
- *What does it mean to "return to the Lord?" In what way does this assume there is already a relationship between us and God to return to?*

Psalms 27:1-9

The Lord is our shelter and protection. There is no need to be afraid, declares the psalmist, for the Lord will care for his people in times of trouble. The only thing the psalmist asks for is to dwell in the Lord's house and to gaze upon His beauty. For us, as Christians, to consider these things is to bring to mind heavenly dwellings and the future time when we shall see God face to face (1 John 3:2). But for the original psalmist, this was a reference to the earthly Temple in Jerusalem.

- *In what sense is our worship here on earth a foreshadowing of our future in the life to come? When do we get to be with God here and now?*

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

Paul begins this letter by making reference to his arrest and imprisonment which has advanced the Good News of Christ. In an unlikely place and unpleasant experience, Paul proclaims that his hardship has given him the opportunity to witness to the whole imperial guard. Paul felt increased boldness in his witness about Christ because of his difficult situation.

- *When you have been in the midst of trying times, have you ever thought of it as an opportunity to bear witness to your faith in a special way? Has it given you greater boldness to proclaim Christ and him crucified?*
- *Like Paul, how might we use our own negative experiences to "advance the gospel"? In what way does speaking from our pain make our witness more honest?*

Paul says he is "hard pressed" to decide whether it would be better for him to live or die. He trusts in the promise of the resurrection in Christ and knows that death is not the end of his relationship with the Lord. And yet, he also knows that the Lord still has work for him to do.

- *What does Paul mean when he says in verse 21, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain?" In what sense is Paul already "with" Christ? Can you say the same?*
- *Speaking as one who knew he was drawing nearer to the end of his life, does Paul sound dejected? Or does he sound enthusiastic? What is it that drives him on?*

Matthew 20:1-16

Once again, keep in mind that when Jesus speaks of the "kingdom," he is talking about what faith is like in real life, — both now and in the life to come. In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom to workers hired at various times in the day, though all receive the same pay in the end. Faith is not a matter of "how long" or "how much" we have, as if any of that can be measured or compared.

- *Do all people come to faith at the same point in their lives and under identical circumstances? If we know that, why are we tempted to measure and compare the faith of others with our own?*

Some of the laborers acted as if the master did something unjust in the way he paid the workers. In verse 15, he speaks of his right to give what belongs to him, saying, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Literally, the Greek phrase reads: "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

- *In what sense does the reality of God's grace and mercy expose our sinfulness?*
- *Do we think ourselves worthy of God's blessings because we are Christians? Or is it the blessing of God that has made us Christians to begin with?*

Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and live a godly life now and in eternity." God's gift to us is the gift of faith. It is not something we can conjure up on our own, rather it is something that the Holy Spirit works within us.

- *In what way, as people of faith, are we already workers for hire in God's kingdom? What is our pay? Is it something we earn on our own, based on how well we do our job?*
- *How is the "reward" of faith always a matter of grace, rather than payment we deserve?*