



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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January 18, 2009

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 67

Second Lesson: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Gospel: John 1:43-51

Called By the Gospel So You Can Stand Firm So You Can Live Faithfully

In your time as a child, did you ever play games where you had to pick teams? Did you ever stand there nervously waiting for your name to be called? When those other names were called, did you think to yourself, "Why did they pick them? I'm better than they are." Did you ever get upset? It's kind of a difficult time if you're standing there waiting for your name to be heard, for your name to be called, to hear your name. They might or might not be pleasant memories for us.

We might think a little bit along the same lines today as we hear Samuel have this direct call from God and as we hear about Philip and Nathanael looking Jesus in the eye as he says to them "Follow me" and "Come be with me and see incredible things." We might feel like we got gyped, like we are the last ones called, that they got a better deal than we did. Why did God come to them directly and not to us?

Then along comes the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul in these words that we just read from 2 Thessalonians and says, "Get over yourselves. Here's my plan. From before eternity I called you. I knew who you were going to be. Before eternity I said you were going to be my own. Before there was time in which to get called I called you. I called you to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, to the forgiveness of sins in eternal life. I made you perfect, even though you are a filthy rotten sinner, even before time began." That's what we talk about as predestination, right? We had a class on that this year. One of the questions that is often asked is, "Why would God choose me and not others?"

I think one of the things God wants us to see is that we should quit looking at ourselves. Quit looking at our belly buttons. Quit focusing on ourselves and focus on him for a minute. Isn't it amazing to see his love? Before there was time he knew us and he called us, just as certainly as he called Samuel, just as certainly as he called Philip and Nathanael. He has called you by the Gospel to be a partaker of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. I don't know if it gets any better than that.

Now because you are a partaker of the Lord Jesus Christ, he tells you that you still live in a world that has a lot of tough stuff, a lot of things that are going to try to knock you off your feet. Because you live in a sinful world, there are going to be all kinds of things

the devil is going to use to try to knock you off of this call that you have received to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Satan is going to be there just like when you were playing King of the Hill. He's that kid trying to sneak up on you from behind and knock you head over tea kettle down the other side of the hill. Satan is doing that constantly through the things we face in our lives, through the hardship we face in our lives, through the difficulties we face in our lives. That's why our God comes to us and says, "I've called you by the Gospel, so stand firm and hold tight to these teachings I have given you." That's an interesting concept. Stand firm—use these teachings to brace yourself against the attacks of Satan who is trying to knock you off these teachings.

So how do you stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter, whether through the Word or through the Sacraments? I suppose it's a simple answer, isn't it? You know them. You study them. You immerse yourself in them. Whenever you come to the Lord's Supper, you faithfully prepare yourself and remember his death and consider who you are and what you are about to receive. Every time we begin a service in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, you flee back to your own baptism and recognize those are the words that were spoken over you. Satan can't knock you off because you are in the Triune God because he came to you first. Hold on tightly to the teachings that are in the Word of God.

Here is where it maybe gets a little tricky, right? In order to hold on to it tightly, you have to see it, right? You have to know it. The question I'd have for you is at times in our lives, are there things that we really know a lot better than we know the Word of God? Are we more familiar with grade school basketball substitution patterns than we are with Zachariah? Are we much more familiar with our 401(k) accounts than we are with Thessalonians? Are we much more familiar with the things of this world than we are with the Book of Nahum?

I once did this in a Sermon. I said, "Do you know what's in the Book of Nahum?" The people didn't answer me. I took the pages of Nahum and ripped them out and let them flutter from the pulpit. What was the reaction I got? "How dare you rip God's Word!" For Pete's sake, if you don't know Nahum, who is doing something worse; me ripping out the pages of a Bible, or you not knowing the Word of God? Which do you think upsets God more? He says to hold on to it tight so you don't get moved off it. If we don't know it, how can we hold on to it tight? I can't hold on to my knowledge of the Chinese language very tight. Why? I don't know it. If we only have a superficial knowledge of the Word of God, Satan is going to be knocking us around a little more often, isn't he? He is going to be landing a lot more body blows. He's going to be landing a lot more head punches. And the chances that he is going to knock us out are a lot more certain if you and I don't know the Word of God.

I guarantee you there is not a single one of us here that knows the Word of God as well as we could. So what are we going to do? Beat ourselves up over the fact that we've despised God's Word; that we've chased after other things? I suppose we could say, "Lord, forgive me for that." But to beat ourselves up over it isn't what the Lord has

called us to do, is it? He's called us to say, "Lord forgive me," and then go forward by being in that Word instead of saying, "I'm terrible. I can't do this. I can't understand this." He wants us to do it.

You and I as a generation have more opportunities to be in the Word of God than any other generation that has ever lived, and yet we have been described by many as the most biblically illiterate. We have the Word in so many different ways, and yet we don't always make use of it.

The thing to do is make a clean break and say, "God forgive me that I don't stand firm in the teachings that were passed on to me. Help me so I stand firm in them. Help me so I grow in the knowledge of them. Help me so that I find my joy and my delight in knowing you better. There isn't really anything I can do that is going to be much more important for eternity than to know you better." It doesn't mean it's the only thing we do. He's going to show us that in a minute. But he does say that this is important for you.

You've been called by the Gospel so you can stand firm on the Gospel, which means that you and I need to work at getting better at getting in it and know that Christ lived and died and took away the sins for the times that you and I have not done this in the past. So we move forward, not because we have to, but because we want to. We want to get to know the God who loved us enough to forgive us in spite of who we are.

God called us by the Gospel so that we can do that. But he also calls us by the Gospel, not only so that we can brace ourselves against the attacks of Satan, but also so that we can live our faith so that we can be strengthened in every good deed and word and actually be on the offensive against Satan. That's what he says here. "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." He wants us to grow in our living for him. The more we live for him, the more we take the Gospel out to others. The more we go on the attack against Satan. The more we use the offensive weapon that God has given us, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. As we do that, we are strengthened so that we live for God because we want to.

Notice he says strengthened in "every good deed and word." That means even the ones we don't want to, right? There may be some ways that we live for God that we enjoy. Maybe we love our kids and raising our kids and we see that as a way that we serve God, which is what it is. Maybe we have the spiritual gift of encouraging others, so we enjoy encouraging other people and bringing the Word of God to them when they are down and pointing them to God's love in Christ. Maybe that's what we really enjoy doing. Maybe we enjoy teaching.

The joys of my ministry are teaching classes and preaching. But God has called me to be strengthened in every good deed and word, not just the ones I really enjoy. So what's the one that probably as a whole most Christians don't enjoy as much? You're probably sitting on it if you're a man. What's the last thing that people say is

converted?—peoples' pocketbooks. The good work of living to serve God and giving to God in our offerings. God wants us to be strengthened so that we do that in joy, in cheerfulness. And not because we have to, not because the church is behind, not because there is debt, not because we have to pay the bills or any of these things, but because this is a way we say to God, "I love you. Here's what you are worth to me." It's a form of worship. The word "worship" itself comes from "worth-ship." We say this is what God is worthy of.

I asked the Confirmation Class last week when looking at the 7th Commandment, talking about our possessions and how we are to use them. We are to use them for our families, for the poor and needy, and to support the work of the Gospel. I asked them about tipping waiters. At McDonald's you don't have to tip, so I'm not all that experienced on this. So I asked them what the common percentage is to tip a waiter. After hemming and hawing a little bit, I think we got the answer of about 15%. Does that sound about right? To a waiter who brought your water on time and brought you your food while it was hot and gave you this good service, you give them 15% or so of your check.

Then I asked, "What did God ask the Old Testament people to give to him?" It's 10%. It's kind of interesting that someone giving us cold water and hot food is worth 15% and yet God only asked of us 10% in the Old Testament. God hasn't put that demand on us in the New Testament. He has said, "Give in keeping with your income," which is proportionate or percentage giving. It's always fascinated me when I asked that question in different Bible studies the number of people that don't even know what percentage they give. They just give because this is how they give, but they don't know the percentage, and God has said to give a percentage.

God has never asked us to do anything that would hurt us. He loves us. If he thought that the people in the Old Testament could give 10% and still thrive and be blessed by him, I would certainly think that you and I can be strengthened in every good deed and word so that we can at least know what percentage we are giving and find joy in giving. Do you ever think about what our offerings look like?

Some of you met my dad. My dad was never cursed with subtlety I guess you would say. He was pretty blunt and pretty straight forward at times. I remember once when we were on vacation, I don't know where we were and I don't remember how old I was, but I remember it clearly. We had a waiter or waitress; that I don't remember, someone taking care of us at a restaurant. The service was terrible. The water was warm and the food was cold. The waiter/waitress just had everything backwards. You could see the waiter/waitress standing over talking with friends while our food was getting cold and we couldn't ever get their attention. My dad was pretty irritated. So he cleared the table. I think we were against the wall, so he pushed everything over to the wall. All the silverware, all the plates, all the water glasses, all the condiments, all that kind of stuff so that the table was pretty much bare except for what was piled up against the wall. Then he took a penny out and put it right in the middle of the table. He wanted

everyone that walked by to know that our waiter/waitress stunk to high heaven and that they were only worthy of a penny. He wasn't real subtle.

The question I ask to you is how often do the offerings that you and I give to the Lord look like a penny in the middle of the table to God? How often do they fail to express our love and our trust for God?

Again, the answer moving forward is not to get irate or get upset at the messenger or the message but to say, "Lord forgive me and help me. Strengthen me through your Word so that I grow in every good deed and word, even the good deeds and words that I maybe am not so inclined to do, but that I grow in my faith and in living my faith so that I serve you Lord."

Our God forgives us. Our God moves us forward. Our God strengthens us so that we can do more than we could ever think. That much I know to be certain. God has promised it to us in his Word, and I have seen that promise kept over and over. That promise comes through the power of the Gospel.