

Sermon for Jan. 24, 2021

Grace mercy and peace to you from God the Father of us and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the third Sunday in Epiphany and the reading appointed for the day would be Jonah preaches in Nineveh and Jesus calling a third of his disciples from the fishing industry to become “fishers of men.” Together they build the theme for the day which, once again, is God calling his disciples into service. As I read it, it seemed to lead me down the same theme as last week’s lesson and so rather than repeat the topic, I thought I would break from the lectionary this week and preach from the catechism.

The first pastor I remember growing up was a man by the name of Dornbos. (A good Dutch name there.) And for some reason I can still remember that he used to preach from the Catechism. So let’s give it a try, shall we? I want us to look at the fourth commandment, as we number them in the Lutheran church, which is the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers.

St. Paul says this about the commandment when he writes to the Ephesians...

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Following immediately on this St. Paul also writes this...

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord

will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

There is difficulty in this text because the word “slave” here can refer to someone who is serving willingly, as well as someone who is NOT serving willingly. In other words, it could be translated as servant as in an employer/employee relationship. The question is whether or not THAT meaning is intended here. We will leave that discussion for another day, but I do want to play with the idea of ownership in the commandment to honor our parents and others in authority over us.

In the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us the story of the unfaithful steward. In it he says to the first two servants... “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (By the way, that’s the same word that is translated in Ephesians as “slave” but here it is being translated as “servant.” Go figure.) “You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

Each year, I’m asked to write a stewardship letter to the congregation, in order to encourage congregational giving to the support of Christ’s church and his congregation here in Merrillville. It is “meet, right and salutary” that we do this. As our Lord has spoken, “A man’s heart will be upon what he treasures most.” (Matthew 6:21) And after almost a year of COVID restrictions and mandates which have devastated many congregations across the country, I’m happy to report that our congregation has managed to maintain financial support for our ministry here to the point where we are not in terrible shape financially. *Well done, good and faithful stewards.* I encourage you to keep up the good work.

And I thought I would offer you some food for thought concerning what it means to be a “good steward.” This thought came about while teaching the fourth commandment: “Honor your Father and Mother.” *What does this*

mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents or others in authority over us, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. This is most certainly true.

I then ask the students what I hope is an intriguing and thought-provoking question: “Do your parents OWN you?”

Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever asked yourself, just WHAT IS your relationship between you and your parents, and is it one of OWNERSHIP? IF NOT then what IS IT?

And if they OWN YOU, is there ever a point in which they *stop* owning you?

Certainly, YOU belong to them. They are yours and you are theirs as a gift from God; you are certainly responsible for your children and they are accountable to you. But is responsibility tied to OWNERSHIP? But then what does it mean to belong to someone?

I can push this further into other relationships. “Does a Husband OWN his wife? Or she her husband?” They make a claim on one another, and the public recognizes this claim; that’s partly what the rite of marriage is.

Or let me push it a little further; since the commandment recognizes others in authority.... “Does a government OWN its citizens?” That brings into question what it means to be a free people. Then what becomes of responsibility? Certainly, there have been governments throughout the world who conclude they do OWN their citizens. But I would argue that the terms “Motherland” or “Fatherland” would imply a familial relationship. OWNERSHIP implies “masters” and “slaves,” I should think. So if these relationships are not defined by OWNERSHIP, then what is it that defines them?

We say of our children that they belong to us. We say the same of our spouses. “You belong to me. I belong to you.” But what is the nature of

such “BELONGING”? If it’s not OWNERSHIP then what is it? What is the word we would use instead?

We receive our children as a gift from God. In this sense God is the OWNER and we are merely stewards of His gifts. As in the parable of the “unfaithful steward” each talent was given to an individual to manage. One received five, another received two and another received one. The talent they received was given to that individual to manage. In a sense, those talents “belonged” to them, even though they did not OWN them, and still; they were RESPONSIBLE for them.

I think the closest word we have is stewardship. We are stewards of the gifts that God gives to us. And how are we to respond and steward these gifts of God? We are to serve and obey God, and honor the gifts He has given and LOVE and cherish them.

Jesus' command is that we LOVE the Lord our God with all our heart, strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. We are to LOVE. That is the nature of our calling. Let us now replace the word OWN with the word LOVE in those intriguing and thought-provoking questions I asked at the beginning and see if they change the way you receive them?

“Do your parents LOVE you?”

“Is there ever a point in which they stop LOVING you?”

“Does a husband LOVE his wife? Or she her husband?”

“Does a government LOVE its citizens?”

In a more perfect world, the answer would be YES. Love is the nature of our God and love is the motive for being responsible for those things He has entrusted to our care.