

***“Called to Be His Workmanship”***

***“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ...the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”***

(Genesis 1:1, 2:7 [NRSV])

In those two verses from Genesis we learn two vital pieces of information: God (Yahweh) is the Author of all that exists. The Author of all that exists took special care to create the creature called “human.”

The special creation of humans is notable in several dimensions: God brought all else into being by a word . . . God said, ***“Let there be . . . and it was so”*** [Genesis 1:2,6,14]. But God brought His human creature into being by an act: He ***“formed man from the dust of the ground . . .”*** Then the human creature was provided something given to no other creature — divine breath: He . . . ***breathed into his nostrils the breath of life . . .”***

It is not for nothing that humans are regarded as the height of God’s creation. Many today would call that anthropocentrism — kind of an ego trip by humans that elevates them above the rest of the planet, the solar system, and the universe. It is true that in the past, frequently, humans have used this “height of creation” notion to wreak a fair amount of mischief on the rest of creation. It is egoistic to see oneself as better than all else, but the theological position that humans are the height of creation is to be matched by the theological position that this should instill in us great humility and great responsibility.

We know all too well how that “height of creation” has come crashing down. The pinnacle of God’s creative design was dissatisfied with that status, Genesis shows us. There was a calculated choice made to strive for the status, no longer of creature, but of creator. What God had designed became a tangled wreck — a shambles of the Creator’s intent.

Humans were brought into being by an act . . . Creation was ruptured by an act. It is reasonable, therefore, to infer that any restoration of the

created design would have to be accomplished by an act. But whose act? The act of the One who originally fashioned it? OR The act of the one who brought about its destruction?

It was from this question that was conceived (although nobody seems to want to take credit for its origination) the notion of what we must call “works righteousness.” At its heart, works righteousness argues that, since humans did the deed that did us in, then humans must do the deed that gets us out of the mess we’re in. It is a rational and, in many ways compelling, concept. It sounds fair, responsible, and, above all, attainable. *“We broke it; it’s up to us to fix it.”*

Thus, in fairness, with responsibility dripping from our every pore, and with a rosy optimism about our success, we set out to fashion for ourselves some kind of life that can make us presentable to God. We look with some disdain at those who seem not to make the investment in this pursuit, but we eventually shrug that off with the attitude, *“That’s their problem!”* And when we began to recognize that our best efforts do not seem to bring us very close to the original mold so shattered in the Fall, we adopt a new standard: *“As long as I’m doing the best I can, that’s what matters.”* Some of us devolve into using cosmic score cards — we chalk up points, both good and bad, with the understanding that everything will be alright just as long as I come out one point to the good at the end of the game. That sounds just, right, rational, compelling . . . and it is so wrong!

It is, first of all, an insult to God. Hidden under this notion is the more foundational notion that we’re going to slide something past God’s attention. Then there is that notion that trying to doing one’s best would be sufficient, in effect saying, *“I know it ain’t much, God, but it’s all I got and it’s plenty good enough for you.”* But this notion that we can somehow right the wrong by our behaviors is fundamentally flawed.

St. Paul tells us, ***“by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”*** No act by us could restore what had been

destroyed; this can be done only in Christ. Only the original architect can bring about the original design.

So we do a flip-flop: “*Whirr, buzz, click!*” we move into the alternate mode — *Zappo!* “*Okay, so since it’s all God’s doing, I’m home free!*” “*There’s no need to busy myself with anything.*” “*My admission ticket has been punched. I’m in!*” Then we hear the words to the familiar hymn, which we sing with absolute seriousness, and no one cracks so much as a wry smile:

*“Let none hear you idly saying, ‘There is nothing I can do,’*

*While the souls of men are dying, And the Master calls for you.”*

We are inclined to think, “*Why bother? Everything’s been done that needs to be done. ‘There IS nothing I can do!’*”

It appears that we have so attached ourselves to the words of St. Paul, “***by grace you have been saved . . .***” that we stopped listening for the rest of the passage “***. . . we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.***”

“***We are what he has made us . . .***” the Greek more literally says, “We are by him a ποιημα (poiema).” It comes from the Greek verb ποιεω (poieo), in classical Greek often translated as “to make” but in the New Testament used expressly to indicate God’s creative actions.

Paul seems to have a more specific interpretation in mind here. The noun, ποιημα, is used rarely in the New Testament, and when it is used, it applies to the work of an artisan. ποιημα describes the difference between the rugged ashtray you made in Vacation Bible School out of flour and water “clay” — you know, the one that kind of rocked as it sat on the table, and was painted with water colors in an kind of mung shade of (what art students call) “hoonough”, and it was in a kind of amorphous shape so that people had to ask was it an ashtray or a cup holder — the difference between that and the product of a Wedgwood master.

ποιημα would likely not be used to describe the line drawing you

produced in Kindergarten that purported to depict your family, the one that everyone (including, alas, your mother) assumed was a drawing of bears in hibernation. ποιημα would be used to describe the considerable output of Michelangelo and Salvador Dali. When you sing in the shower, the right word is likely not ποιημα . When you break out a CD by Pavarotti, ποιημα is just the right word.

The noun, ποιημα, is where we get the word in English, “poem” — a ποιημα is, therefore, a “work of art.” In other words, St. Paul affirms that God has acted to restore the creation — in His Son, Jesus Christ. And in that action you and I are reshaped. As God did with Adam, He does with us — He takes the dust of our sin and shapes us anew into the image of His Son. And again as He did with Adam — He inspires us in the waters of Holy Baptism with His Holy Spirit.

And now here is the key . . . . . SO THAT!!

SO THAT what? The whole idea of our works somehow producing righteousness? No, that’s gone! But equally gone is the notion that we can have an idle faith? Forget it! Who prepares a sumptuous feast just so people can sit and look at it until it gets cold? Who paints a masterpiece landscape just to have it shoved into some closet to gather dust and never see the light of day? Who slaves for months over a symphony with the intent that it would be placed in the bottom drawer of some dresser? No one! The meal was prepared to be eaten . . . the painting was fashioned for visual enjoyment . . . the symphony was composed to be played and heard.

We are God’s works of art! We are purposefully and intentionally created. St. Paul completes the thought: “. . . ***created in Christ Jesus for good works*** . . .” But not just any “good works,” specific “good works — the ones ***“God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”*** So . . . what works are those? Paul is showing us that just doing nice things may not be part of God’s design.

Our sinfulness, ever on the lookout for some easy way to score points, is

always capable of twisting God’s design. One of the first ways we do that is by the path of least resistance: *“Let’s take a good look at what I have not done: I did not shoot anyone today. I did not kick any puppies. I certainly did not club any baby seals.”* We sometimes get so caught up in pointing to the things we managed to avoid doing, that we just don’t have any time for the things we should be doing. God did not fashion us in Christ for a life of avoidance.

If you want to know “What works?” look to Jesus. See how His compassion led Him to the sick for healing. See how He embraced the outcast and rejected. Pay attention to how He drew near to those who were demonized, and rid them of demonic oppression. See, too, how He dealt with the likes of the Pharisees — when He encountered hypocrisy or self-righteousness, He would provide the equivalent of a “dope slap.” Above all, see how He brought to those who were devastated by the sin that overwhelmed their lives, and ushered them into grace and absolute forgiveness. Those are the ***“good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”***

On one level, the title of this sermon is wrong — but it is wrong as are all the sermon titles in this series have been wrong. In Christ Jesus, God has already accomplished the remarkable. We are made righteous, we are more than conquerors, we are reconciled, we are fools for Christ’s sake, and we are most assuredly God’s works of art. In Baptism, by God decree, through faith in Christ, we are all these things.

But, at the same time, we are called to become what we are. So we need to learn to grow in righteousness. We must see ourselves more and more as victors over the Devil, the world, and our own sorry selves. We must bring our reconciled status to bear with each other and all those whom God places into our lives, so that they too can be reconciled to God. Our foolishness is to turn aside from worldly wisdom to what God wants of our lives. And now we are hearing that we are, and are yet to become: priceless works of art.

Priceless . . . priceless.

This is what the father in Jesus' parable saw in both his sons, the younger son who by some would have been a total reject, and the older son who by some would be regarded as an officious snit. The father's love pierced through the self-centered facades and saw the ποιημα in each, even when each of them could not, or would not, see it in themselves or in each other.

Would you please turn to look around at your neighbors here in worship and just glory in the beauty of God's holiness in them?

Priceless!

Amen.