

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost • October 19, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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1 Thessalonians 1; Augsburg Confession, Article VI

“Back to Basics – How do I share my faith?”

In a sermon several months ago, I'd asked you in jest if you'd heard that there'd be an election coming up in November. If you've *still* not heard about this election, please let me know how you've managed that, because I think many of us would probably welcome a break from all the campaigning that's been going on in the world around us! Campaigning, both the good and the bad (and all too often, the even worse) just seems to be part of American life, especially when a presidential election draws near. Both major parties are trying to secure – “earn” just doesn't seem like the right word – your vote for their candidate. But in order for any candidate to get to this point, so close to being elected, they've had to have been examined: investigated by their party, the opposing parties, the media, and probably more than a few advocacy or special-interest groups. As people living in the national capital area, many of us are familiar with the concept of a “background check,” something that's often required to work either for or with governmental or military organizations. In a background check, an investigator would speak with their subject's coworkers and associates, scan both their public and private records, and look into their personal and professional activities in order to present a thorough report to the group that requested the investigation.

I don't know that any of you are running for elected office, but if someone performed a background check on you, **how hard would they have to look to learn about your faith?** How deeply would they have to investigate to learn that you're a Christian? If they talked with your friends from school, your coworkers, or your family, what would those people have to say about what you believe? Would the investigator learn that you gossip about other people or cut them down behind their back? Does what you believe affect how you perform your profession? What if investigators reviewed your date book, looking at how you choose to use your time? Would they determine that time spent in sports is more important to you than time spent with God in worship and Bible study, or that serving yourself is more important to you than serving others? If the investigation looked into what you do for recreation, what might be learned from which movies you watch, which games you play, or which websites you surf? If someone gained access to your financial records, what could they determine to be the most significant parts of your life, based on where your money goes? Should the background check turn to your family life and your interaction with your parents, children, or siblings, would the investigator find evidence of an active, Christian household? What do *you* think a detailed background check would reveal about your faith? Would you want the investigator's report to be stamped “burn after reading” – or better yet, “burn *before* reading?”

We might like to think that our background check might start by saying, “The subject tries to be a good person.” But being a “good person” isn't enough. Lutherans, Buddhists, secular humanists, and atheists can all do good things and be “good people.” But you can't win God's vote by being “good people”: your good works don't earn forgiveness; they don't merit being made right with God.

In the days ahead, you'll probably see more and more of another factor in the presidential election: endorsements. The editorial staff of newspapers all over the country will weigh in with their recommendation of one candidate above the others – in fact, the Washington Post did just that this past Friday. Endorsements can sway the outcome of an election, presidential or otherwise, especially when they come from trusted sources. The endorsement puts the force of the newspaper's support and credentials behind a candidate. Sometimes, endorsements can even overcome the effects of otherwise damning reports that turned up in a background check. **Jesus has endorsed you.** When it comes time for you to stand before God on the Last Day, there won't be any need for a background check, because He already knows everything about your life – *everything*, even more than you will, more than enough to kick you out of the race and into exile. But the Son of God put His support and credentials behind you

when He suffered and He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. And because of Jesus' endorsement, because of God's grace, you are elected.

As God's elect, we don't have term limits. We don't get a first-hundred days to prove ourselves, and we will never have to be lame ducks. The Holy Spirit installs us into office and prepares us for a life of service. In Article VI of the Augsburg Confession, the Reformers called this life the "new obedience." Our text today from 1 Thessalonians gives witness to it. We call it "sanctification." But what does that mean? **What is sanctification?** Simply put, it's what the Holy Spirit does in us. In the specific sense, we're *already* sanctified, that is, "made holy before God," something that happens when we're installed into new life in Christ in baptism by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the general sense, sanctification is the continuing process by which the Holy Spirit is *still* at work in us, calling us to be more holy in our life of faith. Sanctification in this sense is something that keeps going on inside us Christians until God calls us to rest at the end of our earthly life.

But what does sanctification have to do with sharing faith? After all, that's the focus of our *Back to Basics* series today. Let's look to our reading from 1 Thessalonians 1 for an answer. In the very opening verses of this letter to the elect in Christ of Thessalonica, Paul uses three particular phrases to describe *how* the Christians there have been serving as an example to all the believers in the region. In verse three, Paul points to their "work of faith" and "labor of selfless love" and "steadfastness of hope." **Those Christians shared their faith by living their faith.** They received God's Word in joy, striving to become more Christ-like, thanks to the sanctifying ("making holy") work of the Holy Spirit. Or, to put it another way, they didn't just talk the talk, they walked the walk. Their lives gave witness to the transformation that God does in those whom He elects. Now, good works don't save us any more than the works of the Thessalonians saved them. But as Christians, we *are* called to do good works. That's part of the transformed life that comes to us when we are elected into Christ. God's people aren't only supposed to share faith by gathering for worship one day a week, or by going out door to door to tell people about Jesus: you have been called to share your faith **in how you live!** Where do you spend the majority of your week? You can share your faith at home, at school, and in the workplace in living out a life that's being made more holy day by day. As it did with the Thessalonians, God's Word comes to us in times of hardship to build us up and give us hope in Jesus. It sets our minds on the goal of our race and the object of our office as Christians. God has elected you for service and good works, as Jesus said, "so that [others] may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

It is indeed an election year. As a Christian citizen of the United States of America, one of the ways in which you may live out your faith is by participating in the electoral process: go out and vote. That's part of the responsibility and privilege that comes with being an American and a Christian. I will not tell you for whom you should vote, be they a Democrat, Independent, Republican, etc. – that's not part of my calling. As a Christian, though, follow Jesus' direction in today's Gospel reading as the faithful Thessalonians would have: live out your faith in Christ by being a faithful citizen. Take the time to consider the issues being discussed. See where each candidate stands. Scripture teaches us to value the sanctity of all life, both in the womb and in the hospice bed. God's Word also teaches us to be vigilant for social justice, caring for those in need. No one candidate is going to be perfect: they won't be able to solve every problem. And despite what their opposing campaigns and supporters might have you believe, neither the of the major party candidates is evil incarnate! But candidates will make mistakes, for they all struggle with sin like you and me. Because of that, we must never abandon our responsibility to address the issues of our society even if a particular candidate wins an election. So pray for discernment, then go out and cast your vote as your conscience best dictates. In the meantime, if you favor one candidate above others, share your faith by supporting them in a holy manner. Avoid slander and falsehood, put the best construction on everything, and pray for them all. And regardless of who wins this election, God is still has authority over this – and every – nation.

Amen.