

Surplus

Titus 3:1-8 ~ February 12 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Today, I'm going to tell you about my favorite store in the whole world. I hope nobody will be offended by my failure to choose their favorite business. But, you've got to understand that my love for this store started at a very early age. Way back in the days when my Dad was giving a nickel for gophers trapped, almost every penny was destined for purchases at this incredible locally owned store. The Store's name was "The White Elephant." Or more specifically, it was called The White Elephant Surplus and Toys. For children growing up in rural North Idaho, it was a little piece of heaven located on North Division in Spokane, Washington. However it's attraction might take a little explanation.

The White Elephant Store started in 1946 as the brain child of a man named John Conley who was 19 years old at the time. Just after World War II, The White Elephant existed primarily as an outlet for Military Surplus. Some of my earliest purchases at The White Elephant were military surplus Items that still inhabited the back aisles of the store in the early 1960's. Museum pieces today, they were affordable for kids like me who had emptied their piggy banks for a big shopping trip to Spokane.

Over time the White Elephant made a great business out of all different kinds of surplus goods. They bought things from all over the country that other people wanted to get rid of. They were surplus things. They were things that didn't fit into inventories any more. They were things with minor defects, or odd colors, and out of date styles. In fact they still have a reasonably well rounded stock of leftover Expo '74 World's Fair souvenirs, in case you had given up hope of acquiring one of them.

So over the years The White Elephant made a great business out of selling surplus items at fantastically low prices. This made a trip to the White Elephant more of a treasure hunt than a shopping trip. We literally spent hours sifting through the boxes of obscure merchandise crowded into the warren of aisles that made up the store. I can distinctly remember counting and recounting my money, begging for a short term loan from my parents, in order to squeeze out one more irresistible purchase of treasure unexpectedly discovered from some poorly lit corner of the White Elephant Surplus Store.

So surplus is our theme for this message. Surplus is what made The White Elephant the wonderful place that it was. Surplus also has a great deal to do with how we live our Christian lives. Or rather it has more to do with why we live our lives as Christians. But

to understand this we need to see the bigger picture that St. Paul is teaching when he writes to Titus in today's sermon text:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

So what is the connection between a surplus store and the marvelous Gospel message St. Paul preaches to Titus. To understand this we need to comprehend the nature of the spiritual economy God has built into life. As we look at Scripture we become aware that God has given life to human beings for a special purpose. That purpose was for each of us to live our lives according to the Covenant God established through Adam, Abraham, and Moses. Through those covenants God gives us life so that we have the opportunity to live in a way that pleases God. Our understanding was that this righteousness, this pleasing God, comes because we are living our lives according to his covenant. What Paul calls, works of the Law.

But when we truly look at our lives, and the lives of all human beings, we find that there is a fatal flaw at the foundation of all human life. With a very brief look at ourselves and our fellow human beings we find that we are by nature sinful and unclean. Instead of being our way to please God, Works of the Law become acts of our sin. Because we aspire to know both good and evil, just like our first parents, our best efforts actually become our greatest failures. We are suspicious of the power and glory of God and would rather claim that our salvation lies in our own free will. Most of us know about our problem with God in our bones, but we continuously pretend that we can somehow curry favor with him by doing good works.

But such thoughts are utter foolishness and only underscore the depravity of our fallen nature. When the truth of God's wrath is revealed in the cross of Christ, our doom is certain. We cannot, as Paul clearly teaches, be saved by "Works of the Law." Nothing we can do offers the least opportunity for salvation. We are sinners through and through, without any hope what so ever in our own effort or understanding. But this predicament is not God's final word.

No God's final word is Grace. It is my very pleasant duty as your pastor and your preacher to tell you a wonderful truth. You are saved. You have peace with God. You are reconciled to God. Your Sin is covered. You will stand before Judgment made

perfect by the Blood of Jesus Christ. Your life is destined to eternity with God. That's what it means when St Paul writes:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The big death, the punishment for your sins and mine is over. That is what our baptisms were all about. We have died with Christ on his Cross. It is finished! And we have his promise that we are his forever. You can count on that. We still await the little death. That is the death of our bodies which is a natural part of the process that moves us toward resurrection. But the outcome is sure. You are God's children, each one of you. You are adopted into his kingdom. Your future is secure.

This is good news, huh! It is news that is splendid, powerful and encouraging in every way. But why is there this kind of awkwardness for Christians at this point in the Gospel. Let me try to explain. The awkwardness in the Gospel is that as joyful as it is to know that Jesus Christ has completely secured our salvation we find ourselves standing around with the rest of our lives on our hands. Isn't that true? Here we have the whole rest of our lives to perform Good Works and the Gospel tells us it is not needed. Christ saved us by means of his mercy and grace, so what are we going to do with the rest of our lives?

Now we come to the central point of this message. The human life of a Christian is surplus. If Christ saves us by grace, giving us salvation by virtue of his mercy and love, what shall we do with the rest of our lives? It is not needed for salvation. It is by the very definition of the word, surplus. No amount of effort spent in good works, righteous living, or devotional activities can add anything to the complete salvation we have in Jesus. So the whole of a Christian's life is surplus from the perspective of salvation. Christ is everything. Jesus life is the only life that we need. So what are we to do with this surplus life we have?

This is why I started out this sermon talking about the White Elephant Store in Spokane. Most people think that when something becomes surplus, then it becomes useless. The White Elephant store proves how silly that thought is. What is thought to be surplus by one person is a true treasure to someone else. There just needs to be a change in understanding of who the surplus is for.

Who is our surplus life for then? The life we have, made surplus by the grace of Christ is no longer for us. Rather this surplus life is for our neighbor. Yes we are called upon to do good works! The Bible is very clear about that. But those good works are not for God. We are called into good works for our neighbor. Our surplus life is God's gift to our neighbors. Christ says, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Christ has purchased your life with his grace. It is surplus to the enterprise of salvation. But it is his to do with as he pleases. So he gives it to your neighbor.

We call this giving of your surplus life to your neighbor, "Vocation." It is what God has called you to do in this world. Are you a husband or a wife? Your surplus life is a gift from God to your spouse. It is a treasure that God wants them to have. Are you a parent? Then your surplus life is a gift to your children. Every hour you spend sleepless with small children, frantic with the demands of a growing family, and in earnest prayerful concern for maturing children is a gift to them from your surplus life. It is given to them by God himself. The services you perform in your work, the volunteer efforts you make in your community, all of these things are gifts of God out of your surplus life for your neighbor. Since you are saved by Christ's righteousness any righteousness you manage can be given away as surplus to your neighbors. This is why you live and breathe. It is to following the leading of God's Holy Spirit to serve your neighbor.

Here we come at last to a fuller understanding of the Renewal of the Holy Spirit. God grants you everything by grace to free you from bondage to the Law. In this you are completely free. There is no further requirement for Salvation. You are indeed called to rule with Christ as God's own sons and daughters. This makes the life you now live completely surplus and unnecessary for your salvation. But the renewal of the Holy Spirit calls you to turn this surplus life over to your neighbors in dutiful service. God can put it to good use in his kingdom. Even though it is surplus to your salvation, it is a treasure in the kingdom of God. So now you live free in Christ and you also live dutifully serving any neighbor you encounter with the surplus life you have been given to share. We are completely free in Christ. We are fully committed in service to our neighbor. What a great joy we share in the true nature of the kingdom of God.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.