Years ago, I was in the market for a new bicycle. I kind of figured out what I wanted but there were two different bikes that seemed to meet my criteria. So, to help with my decision I enlisted the help of a friend who was something of a bicycle expert – he had ridden collegiately and stayed up to date with any market innovations. I took him to the bike store and showed him the bikes I was looking at and sat back waiting for him to coolly and rationally explain to me which bicycle was scientifically verifiably the bike that I should get. After a few moments he looked at me and said, “I would get whichever one you think looks cooler.” That was it – there were no spreadsheets, no analysis of the material used in the frames or the types of components used; it ultimately came down to a feeling. And I don’t tell this story to make fun of my friend because there are plenty of better things to make fun of him for like the fact that he used to have a mullet. Rather, I bring up this story to show that our lives are not so neatly compartmentalized. That is, I asked for my friend to calculatingly discern what I kind of bike I needed and ultimately his reasoning and knowledge only went so far and we had to move into the realm of feelings to make the decision. The decision ended up being a mishmash of feeling and reason and probably a few other things that we could throw into the pot. With my decision on what bike to purchase, when all was said and done, I could not say it was purely reasonable nor could I say that it was purely emotional. Things bleed from one to another and this is part of what it means to be human. And I promise I will eventually get to our reading from today and will make a Biblical point but in order to get there, we are going to have to get a little Lutheran first, but don’t worry it won’t involve Norwegian cooking.

Martin Luther once said, “Ich habe heute viel zu tun, darum muss ich heute viel beten.” And he said it like this because he was German but since we are not let’s get to the translation. We often hear this translated as, “I have so much to do today that I’m going to need to spend three hours in prayer in order to be able to get it all done.” But it is probably better translated as, “I have so much to do today that I must pray a lot.” It can sound strange because we often think of prayer and action as different things. If we pray we are sitting by the river pondering the fact that it is ever changing yet ever the same, whereas if we are involved in action we are moving about and most likely producing a tangible result. We tend to think that if we are doing something, we are definitely not praying and if we are praying, we are definitely not doing something. But here in Luther’s understanding are faith and action linked. In fact, they might not just be linked but they might be inseparable. Like picking out my bicycle with reason and feeling it is hard to say where one ends and the other begins.

So, with that out of the way we finally get to the part where I get to tell you which scripture reading reminded me of all of this and it comes from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. The snippet we have is in many ways a prayer. It starts by saying, “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.” However, near the end we read this: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” The text starts in an act of worship – bowing before God, but it ends with accomplishment or at least the idea of accomplishment. And partly what I think this tells us is that worship or prayer or whatever you want to call it can’t be neatly separated from doing stuff.

Let me give you an example and see if this helps clear things up. People will sometimes ask me how long it takes to write a sermon. I don’t know if this is a polite way of telling me that maybe I should have spent a little more time writing my most recent sermon but whatever the motivation my answer is always – it depends. Sometimes writing sermons goes pretty fast and other times it is painfully slow like moving sand with tweezers – it eventually happens but it is a long slog. However, there is one thing that I do notice and that is if I read the scriptures ahead of time and then go for a walk where I think and pray about what I have read the writing goes a lot faster and it is generally a lot more coherent. In one sense you could say that walking around does not accomplish anything if your definition of accomplishment is measured in terms of actual words fed into a computer, but in another sense, it most definitely accomplishes something. It creates the circumstances by which a sermon can be written. I think that like Luther understood accomplishing tasks requires things that are beyond the actual act. As Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel, “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?”

But it does not just flow one way. In other words, prayer is not the handmaiden of action. We don’t pray just so we can accomplish more. Prayer is how we grow closer to God. And in many ways our life should be a prayer. Since we are on a little bit of a Martin Luther kick this Sunday, I am going to give you one more thought from him. During the Reformation one of the ideas that Luther pushed back on was that there were tiers in Christianity; that there were spiritual people like priests and monks who were at the top and then down near the bottom were people who made stuff like coopers and blacksmiths. Luther argued that this was not the case and that anyone could live their lives to the glory of God. The blacksmith could glorify God in his work just as the monk could glorify God with his prayer. What this points out is that in some ways our actions can be a prayer. You see it is not either or but rather circular. We pray and through the prayer we accomplish the things of which Luther spoke and yet in our work we offer our labor to God and God hallows it. We do not cordon off our lives into neat little pieces partly because it really can’t be done but partly because they strengthen each other. In the General Thanksgiving we say the following line: “We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.” Our tasks are part of our life in God.

God should be a part of everything we do. Certainly, there may be more intense times of experiencing God like going to church or reading the Bible but we should not lock God away in the other times. When Luther said he could not accomplish his tasks without prayer he was acknowledging the strength that comes only from God. God gives us tasks and through those tasks our faith in God is strengthened. It is kind of like marriage – we are not just married sometimes and we are not just Christian sometimes. Being a Christian certainly involves prayer but that is not the only time we are Christian. I traditionally end sermons by saying now and forevermore and that is what our life in God is supposed to be now and forevermore. Not just sometimes, not when we feel like it but, in all things, and in all places now and forevermore.