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Easter 6 Series C 2017

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Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21

Easter is still chugging along. Most of the world has forgotten about any Easter glow. Easter for most of our neighbors, even many who worship in Christian bodies but who do not follow a liturgical calendar, has long since composted Easter sermons with the shells from their Easter eggs by now. But God's people are still rejoicing in Easter joy and contemplating the fact that the Lord of heaven and earth has risen from the grave to do some very important things.

Today we hear that Jesus has risen from the grave so that he may personally oversee and bless the Church and especially that is heard in context of the evangelistic mission of the Church. Paul preaches an edgy sermon in Athens. Peter exhorts us to be always ready to explain the strange hope that we have. Jesus promises the comforter/helper to his disciples. Disciples are never alone, they are never without His help, even when they are talking to that "tough nut" neighbor who steadfastly refused to listen to anything about God and whom we find difficult to love.

But while we are still celebrating the resurrection, these last Sundays of Easter have us looking ahead as well. We still bask in the glow of Easter but we are increasingly anticipating the outpouring of the Spirit, the other pillar of the Salvation story. Jesus' words on the Spirit in John 14 are worthy of an annual re-read by any Pastor in this season. They are familiar and there is nothing shocking here, but the idea that Jesus has given us the greatest gifts in his cross and Pentecost cannot be forgotten and cannot be separated. The Pentecostal movement arose because Christians forgot to talk about the Holy Spirit very well.

I don't know exactly why we have stopped talking much about the Spirit. The result is that we have pretty well ceded the Holy Spirit discussion to the Charismatics and Pentecostals and arguably our silence has enabled and even caused those movements. I believe our silence on the Spirit is a critical mistake. It leaves our people vulnerable to the nonsense which passes as theology peddled by the Charismatic and Pentecostal and it impoverishes the lives of our parishioners. The amazing growth of the church in the developing nations of Africa and Asia and South America is often a Christianity that is infused with a robust pneumatology. Could that happen in post-enlightenment America? I don't know.

Good pastoral care, however, means that we cannot really remain silent on the Spirit issues. Our people are susceptible to the snake oil salesmen because they come and offer miracles and "genuine Christianity" as opposed to what they perceive to be our dry and lifeless and incomplete Lutheranism. But too often our people are not taught or prepared to remember that their faith is the greatest gift of the Spirit, far more valuable than any speaking in tongues or prophecy or gift of healing. By not seeing the miracles which fill their lives, they are inclined to jump into the miraculous world of glossolalia and ecstatic laughter and barking. But this is like trading a diamond for loose change. The greatest gifts of the Spirit are faith, hope, and love, and of these Love is the greatest of all. If that is missing from our lives, then we do indeed have a serious problem with our Christianity. But where we experience that genuine love, no one should be able to tell us that we have a Spirit deficit.

This leads me to suggest that a Christian who does not get the Spirit talk often leads an impoverished life. They miss the first part of the collect below. All the good things of life, whether it be the food on their table or the love of their spouse or the faith which trusts in God, these are all occasions for joyful thanksgiving and heartfelt praise to God. They assume the impoverished posture of a man possessed by his possessions, hunched over his “stuff” and warily watching his neighbor lest that neighbor take some of it. The Christian, on the other hand, has received all as a gift, rejoices in the gift and lives the generous life of the truly wealthy.

Collect of the Day

O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is the giver of all that is good. That is a pretty bold statement to make to the average North American. He would like to think that most of his good things are the result of his hard work and his good decisions. His investment broker compliments him on his decisions to invest through that same broker. His alma mater assures him that he made a good choice and by giving a gift he can secure such good things for another generation. Madison Avenue would tell him that his money is his to spend how he sees and feels fit, and then goes on to tell him that he can feel better and look better if he just buys this or that product. As was pointed out to me, Americans say ‘have a good day.’ And the usual response is “I will.” The man who pointed this out is from Ethiopia and he was flabbergasted at this. He considered that a good day is a gift from God, I have no part in that! I can no more achieve a good day on my own than I can cause the sun to shine.

God is the source of all good things, not me, not my skills, not my mind, not my hard work, not my intelligence, not my will, not my luck. God gives this to me.

Today we ask him for inspiration to think right things, and more than that, we want God’s guidance so we can actually accomplish them. Notice that both of these actions are things that we attribute to the Holy Spirit. Inspiration is a Spirit action. Sanctification which is the accomplishment of genuine good in our lived life is also a Spirit act.

The adjectives are also very important here. It is a “holy” inspiration that matters here. This implies that there is another sort of inspiration. Christians are fooling themselves if they believe they have an innate ability to discern this. This is time to trust one’s baptism and the act of God in our life. The guidance of God is also described here as merciful, as in we have not earned this. Mercy is only show to the person in need, never to the innocent or the powerful.

Both of these adjectives highlight the fact that in the Spiritual realm human beings are given to participate but we also have to acknowledge that we are out of our league, like helpless children wandering the streets of a large city, we are just too easy of a target, easily deceived and easily put at a disadvantage. We need God’s help for which we pray in this collect.

Readings

Acts 17:16-31

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.”

²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

This is a marvelously edgy sermon by Paul which should inspire preachers everywhere to creativity and hope. Paul had been invited into one of the most important intellectual forums of

his day, the Areopagus of Athens. By this point the Areopagus had been somewhat eclipsed by Rome and Alexandria and other centers of learning, but even so just about a century before a young Julius Caesar had been sent to Athens to study under the minds who gathered in this square. (Interestingly, Caesar was captured by pirates on the way and held for ransom. They asked for an amount which he considered insultingly small. His response upon being ransomed was to raise a fleet and destroy the pirates who clearly did not understand the magnitude of the man whom they had kidnapped. His hatred of piracy and that of his immediate successor, Augustus, would effectively clear the Mediterranean Sea of piracy for a very brief window of time, exactly the window which enabled Paul and his fellow Apostles to spread Christianity throughout the whole Mediterranean basin.)

Where are we given the opportunity to put our message out there? When we do so, do we approach it with anything like the creativity of Paul in this situation or do we simply rehearse the tired tropes of the 16th century reformation, the hackneyed phrases of Walther and 19th century Lutherans or the Brief Statement of the 1930's? Here's an example of what I mean: The Walther League was a great thing fifty years ago, but the young people of today do not need the stimulation it provided to young people, today they need to learn to filter the stimuli which are assaulting their senses. Yet most of our DCE training gears workers to stimulating young people not equipping their families to help these young people handle all the things they must face. We might just need to do a little Areopagus sort of thinking on this.

Paul looks at the people who are gathered there and notices that their world is filled with gods. They don't need another one, but he also notices that they are concerned about missing out on any god, hence their altar to "an unknown." Therein lies the great spiritual hunger of that generation. Surrounded by idols and deities, they were still afraid that they had neglected one of the gods. They feared that they were inadvertently missing out on one god, perhaps a crucial god for them. Paul addresses that need. He does not say that their worship of all the false gods is evil; although, Luke tells us that he was distressed by all the idolatry. Paul does rebuke them for their immorality, but Greek culture was filled with some pretty unsavory sorts of things at the time. Parents frequently had to send a slave with their sons to school to fend off the homosexual predators who roamed the streets. Paul zeros in on the hunger which they are expressing and he proclaims that Jesus Christ, the carpenter's son from Nazareth and God's Son from heaven satisfies their hunger. Would we really be able to get past the fact that these are all idolaters?

Would our sermon ever see past the shouted "Heathens!" which comes so naturally to our hearts? Do we see the young couple who are living together outside of marriage and notice that in fact they hunger for the communion and intimacy which God actually wants to give them in marriage? Or do we simply shout "sinner!" and deny them the sacrament?

Effective evangelism relies on the power of God to both slay the sinner and resurrect the saint. Yes, preaching the law is important and must be done, but if our proclamation of the Law shuts

the ears of our hearer, what good then is our Gospel, especially if our Gospel is solving a problem these guys don't know they have? Paul brilliantly preaches toward their need.

The other great comfort that I take from this is that not everyone bought it. Paul, even the great Apostle Paul, did not have a 100% success rate. Some believed; others did not. That is the way of preaching. If we only preach what everyone can assent to, we are not really where we want to be. I am not looking for controversy and being a preacher to a congregation of believers is a different thing than being in a situation in which Paul found himself on this day, but if we hang our success on the approval of our hearers we have a problem, a God problem. Paul is very creatively and edgily proclaiming the Gospel. For a first century Jew whose faith was built on the pillar of monotheism, this was a stretch.

How are we stretching? Should we be stretching more? What are the limits to our homiletical stretching? Should our congregations in our outreach be stretching? What opportunities do we have to stretch the boundaries or get creative in our outreach?

Just a bizarre historical aside so you can impress your members in Bible study with your erudition. The Dionysius the Areopagite who is mentioned at the text will play an outsized role in subsequent history. We actually have no idea what became of this man. But several centuries later a philosophically minded Christian of the region we call Syria wrote a number of books and treatises on Christian philosophy and used the name "Dionysius the Areopagite." This ascription was uncritically read and believed in the west, where another Dionysius had been martyred in the first generation of Christians in Paris, France. The two were conflated and the idea arose that Paris had been founded by this Dionysius, the friend of Paul and the author of these books. A monastery was founded there and the relics of this "Denis," as the French called him, were immensely important.

In the 1100's a provocative monk at the monastery named Peter Abelard suggested that there were actually two men named Denis, and was run out of the monastery by his brother monks and eventually was tried for heresy. (There were other reasons for his heresy trial, but the monks of St. Denis did not exactly stand in his defense.) For many years, however, throughout the medieval period, it was believed that we had the writings of this Dionysius the Areopagite and these writings were immensely influential. As a philosopher who had spoken to an Apostle, these writings took on an outsized importance as the medieval world sought to reconcile philosophy and revelation. Pseudo-Dionysius, as the later philosopher has come to be known, invented the word "hierarchy" if you need to know just how important he was. It would not be until the 19th century that it was conclusively proved that the man who authored the books was not the same fellow recorded in Acts.

Psalm 66:8-20 Not sure why the editors dropped the first four verses here.

Shout for joy to God, all the earth;

² sing the glory of his name;

give to him glorious praise!
³ *Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.*
⁴ *All the earth worships you
and sings praises to you;
they sing praises to your name." Selah*
⁵ Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.
⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There did we rejoice in him,
⁷ who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah
⁸ Bless our God, O peoples;
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹ who has kept our soul among the living
and has not let our feet slip.
¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;
¹² you let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.
¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will perform my vows to you,
¹⁴ that which my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah
¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for my soul.
¹⁷ I cried to him with my mouth,
and high praise was on my tongue.
¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has attended to the voice of my prayer.

²⁰ Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me!

I Peter 3:13-22

¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Peter suggests that we should have an answer at the ready all the time. We should do this in gentleness and respect, just like Paul in the Acts reading addressed his idolatrous Athenian hosts. It is the opening words of verse 16 which give us great trouble here. Too often we think that we do not have a good or clean conscience, it accuses us. And so we remain quiet, but look at verse 21. A good conscience is not found in our obedience but in our inclusion in Christ's death through baptism and his resurrection. This suggests to us that a great sermon could be preached on the basis on being a witness washed in the waters of baptism. I have a good conscience because Christ has made me clean. My sins are gone, really gone. It is no sham, I have a place to stand and make my proclamation, Christ himself.

There is a danger in this text. We could find in its words an excuse for a passive sort of evangelism, but I think that is a misreading of this text and the whole letter of Peter. His people are being persecuted, they are being ridiculed, slandered and perhaps worse. He doesn't really go into too many details, which allows us in subsequent generations to apply this even more broadly. He wants their lives to be shining with hope. They will face unjust persecution cheerfully and without complaint. They will give no offence and they will not strike back, but the

slaves among them will obey their masters even when the master is not watching, the husbands will honor their wives, the wives will respect their husbands, even when that relationship is fraught with tension. Peter understands this behavior, this lifestyle, to be an evangelistic tool, a means whereby people notice that we solve our problems differently, we deal with our disappointment differently, and we see our whole life differently. The point is that this Christian way of life is very obvious.

Persecution has a way of making the Christian stand out, it is true, but I am not so sure that our situation is all that different from that which Peter's people faced. He never says they were being thrown in jail or martyred here. In fact, the first century Roman empire for the most part ignored the Christians. They were simply not on their radar screen. The first active persecutions of the Church which were not motivated by the insanity of the persecutors were in the third century. It is more likely that Peter's audience were being ridiculed for their belief and that there were vicious rumors running around the community that they were some sort of a weird cult. We know that in the 150's Justin Martyr had to deal with the persistent rumor that Christians were killing and eating children at their communion services. (Remember that for the first several centuries Christian worship was considered so holy that only the baptized were allowed in.)

Peter says that the best response to such slander is not to get defensive and angry but to get loving and serving. Silence the critics with the good works that you are doing, with the respectable behavior which impresses them. It is much harder to impress someone with good than with scandal. Peter's world was no different. You can feed a thousand people and not make the headlines, but if your congregation is wracked by some sexual scandal, it will be page one in the local paper. But this inequity does not dissuade Peter and should not dissuade us.

Our good deeds are driven by the amazing hope which we have. And I think this is where we, if anywhere, really lack sometimes. God has promised that in our words He acts. He has promised that in our deeds, He acts. Do we feed the hungry looking for a miracle? Do we forgive the sinner expecting that the God who took a Saul and turned him into Paul is still active and working the same miracles today? Ananias had to have an expectation of God's great work to go to the house of Justus on Straight Street in Damascus and baptize Saul that day. It takes hope, an expectation in God to look at the teeming needs of this world and try to do something about it. You have to believe that God is working beside you or you will give up and withdraw into your little safe community and shut your doors to the outside world.

Too often our congregations have shut our doors, set up walls, and forgotten that Christ has called us to be lights to our community. We cannot hear this evangelism text honestly unless the world can reasonably see our hope in action. That we are out there caring for the needy, forgiving one another and our neighbors, serving as the priests for our whole town, this stuff will give our neighbor occasion to ask about the hope that is in us. If we put a sign out on the street and gather on Sundays hoping a visitor will walk through our doors, I think it is a copout to

appeal to this text. Of course we are ready to give an explanation of the hope we have, we are just pretty sure that no one will ask because they can't see it.

The preacher of this text will need to ask a challenging question of himself and his congregation today. Are we really living out the hope that is in us or are we burying it inside this building? Have we so avoided the ridicule and the censure of this 21st century community that we have literally become invisible to them and irrelevant to their lives? If the answers are troubling, this sermon is too. The Gospel is then to be found in the fact that Jesus established this congregation in order to be a light to your community and he stands ready and willing to help you become just such a congregation.

If you can honestly say that you are out there in this town and engaged in ministry which is impacting the spectrum of the community, not just the members of your congregation, then you have a different sermon to preach. In this sermon you get to point your people to these actions and to place them into an evangelistic context. The whole mission and purpose of your church is subjected to this hope and you can empower everything you do as a congregation with that hope. This sermon is a sermon of encouragement, pointing to the fruit, the people who have come to know Christ's love through your ministry and encouraging continued service.

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

This passage is really important for our pneumatology and the whole of our theology. Notice the many connections which Jesus makes here. Love and obedience are connected. This is not obedience from some fear but the doing of the will of God because we love God. In confessional terms, he is talking about the New Obedience which is referenced throughout the confessions. What else would we want to do? Jesus loves us, giving us the most precious gift of his presence. This presence is contained in the Holy Spirit. Contrary to the way that most modern Christians

think about this, we are not orphans since the ascension of Christ. We do not proclaim a real absence but a real presence of Christ. The world does not perceive Christ in this way, but we do. Our eyes, opened by God's Spirit, see Jesus. A beautiful and evident unity will exist with God through Jesus in the Spirit. This unity is expressed in an obedience.

Americans in general and LCMS Lutherans, to our shame, are not used to talking about obedience and as a result you may want to spend some time in your sermon on the term itself. We tend to hear obedience only in the negative sense of a duty imposed, a drudgery. But think about the times we obey and it may be more clear. There is no tyrant more demanding than a newborn infant. As parents we obey that child's demands, yet do we consider such a thing drudgery? It may weary us, it may at times give us to complain, but has anyone who has held a comforted infant in the middle of the night really regretted it or remembered it as only a burden?

Even in the Old Testament we tend to hear things this way. Moses commands the people of God to obey the commandments, statutes and ordinances of God. We roll our eyes and like petulant teens chafe against the very idea. But look at the rules, statutes, ordinances and commandments of God in the OT. Most of them are not about the things we have to do for God, but most of them are the system he created for establishing and re-establishing relationship with him. Whole sections of Leviticus are dedicated to what we should do with our burdens of sin. We bring these burdens to God so he can bear them! It is rather like calling it a rule that when you are hungry you must eat. This is true, we even have whole advertising campaigns which tell us to obey our thirst or serve our hunger. We probably don't really think of hunger as a rule and eating as obedience, but it is. One does not have to eat when one is hungry and starvation is certainly an option. We don't chafe at this rule because it is an obedience which we love, but it still technically is an act of obedience.

What does Jesus command us to obey? Love one another, forgive one another, be a community in which our deepest needs and most profound problems are carefully and blessedly served and dealt with? Is this really a burden? I am commanded to bring the sweet news to my neighbor that the sin which has come between us is no longer between us but has been removed by Christ and his death upon a cross. Can we really call this a burden? If you love me, you will obey me? The clues are all there, this is not some odious thing, but much more like the service a parent renders to his or her child, the service a spouse in a loving marriage performs for the beloved. Have you ever had really good news to tell someone and just could not wait to do so? It was a service you were providing them, but did it feel like a service?

But this hurdle of our perceptions is just part of the story here. This life lived, lived in the joyful hope that Peter also talks about, is but the clue that this life is far more than the worldly eyes can see. This life which is defined by this joyful and loving obedience to this really good "way" is nothing less than the presence of the resurrected Christ, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in this world today. Our words of forgiveness are not simply play acting by deluded adults, but in the

forgiveness which I speak to my neighbor God is acting, the Spirit is empowering, Jesus is present to the one to whom I speak through my face, through my words, through my gift.

This text proclaims the presence of Christ in the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are not orphans, abandoned by God who sits up in heaven and looks down at us, but we are constantly in the presence of Christ, strong in Him, joyful in Him, peaceful in Him, alive in Him. It is this very empowerment of the life which the world considers mundane and ordinary that makes Christianity such a potent force. Christianity is not found in the fireworks of miracles, but in the much more potent miracles of simple people sharing their bread, loving their neighbors, forgiving and living.

It is the world which demands miracles, not the Church. We have miracles aplenty. If I believe what Christ has said to me, I have touched God himself in my baptism, he has entered me in his supper, his creative words flow through my lips and cosmically significant things happen when I say, "for the sake of Christ, I forgive you."

As the sermons develop, I am giving you multiple sermon themes below. They are really cognizant of the two poles which one experiences in Christian congregations. Your situation will not fit either of them perfectly. My guess is that you are somewhere in between. Your sermon may want to incorporate elements of both themes. The balance you strike is a matter of pastoral discretion. You are there, I am not, and you must make this call, but pray about it and preach it well.

Law and Gospel

1. I sometimes feel rather orphaned by God. He calls me a child but so often when I go out of these doors and into the wide world I feel alone. Like Paul on Mars Hill I am surrounded by a culture which revels in idolatry. Like Peter's audience, I feel picked on and persecuted. Like Jesus' disciples contemplating his absence, I feel like an orphan. But Jesus has not left us alone, he has poured out the Spirit upon us and we need him. Paul got new eyes for a Jewish fellow to see the many gods of the Athenians. Peter saw a whole new way of life built on that Jesus, Jesus simply tells us that it is better for us that we have him now through the work/ministry of the Spirit.
2. This sense of orphan-hood often silences my witness. Confronted by the gross immorality of the world, I am outraged and can do nothing but rant and be disgusted. But no one has ever been saved by my disgust. A pious Jew like Paul had been raised his whole life to view the idolatry of the gentiles as abhorrent. Standing on a hill dedicated to the god of war in Athens, he was able to see past the wrong and to the blessings that God wanted to give his hearers. He pointed them, using one of their own idolatrous altars toward the living and true God. He was not silenced.
3. This sense of orphan-hood also gives me occasion to lose sight of the marvelous deeds of Christ which he is accomplishing right now. My humble gifts, my mundane life, my

marriage, my job, my family, my school, and much more, are all places for Christ to work because I am there, a baptized child of God. The work of the humblest slave, the parent of an infant rocking that child to sleep, the daughter who cares for her elderly mother, they are all places where Christ works today.

4. This sense of orphan-hood poisons my relationship even with God. His commandments and direction, lovingly given, become the odious rules of a tyrant meted out to a slave. I grumble and complain about worship, about serving, about strictures of morality upon my libido and greed and passions. But God does not give the rules before he gives the love. Jesus is the love of God to us, our obedience is not the obedience of a slave, but the obedience of a son – filled with the Holy Spirit of God. He loves and seeks your willing obedience. It is a good and beautiful thing to obey the loving commands of God – how odious is it to bring your sins to him so he can forgive them?

Sermon Themes *Some years ago when these texts came around, we developed a trio of texts aimed at different congregational situations. I have retained them as sermons 2-4 and added a new one.*

1. Ready (Epistle That the Spirit of God would equip and encourage the hearer to give the reason for the hope that he/she has.)

Peter suggests that we should have an answer at the ready all the time. We should do this in gentleness and respect, just like Paul in the Acts reading addressed his idolatrous Athenian hosts. This sermon will develop the law as a misbelief or even a failure of belief. Jesus has told us that in his cross all the sins are really dealt with. We are holy and pure. Look at the Gospel reading today. He says it there again. But do we really believe it? Do we take him at this word of promise? In our baptism we were declared the holy and beautiful children of God. That is not some future reality which we must await, but it is a right now sort of thing.

Peter exhorts us to act from the basis of a good or clean conscience. Too often we think that we do not have a good or clean conscience, it accuses us. That accusation silences us. We are terribly afraid of the charge of hypocrisy, and so we remain quiet. But look at verse 21. A good conscience is not found in our obedience but in our inclusion in Christ's death through baptism and his resurrection. In saying we are the children of God we are not suggesting that we are right now perfect in this life. We are marveling that God would ever love stinkers like us. But we have this wonderful word that he does.

I have a good, clean conscience because Christ has made me clean. My sins are gone, really gone. It is no sham, I have a place to stand and make my proclamation, Christ himself.

On this basis, the sermon then will want to unpack the words of Peter to strategize and prepare the hearer for making that defense of his/her hope. First it is gentle and

respectful. This is just not how Christians are perceived today. My wife and I spoke on the way home with a young man who had elected to pull up stakes and move to Portland. My wife is ever an evangelist for the Northwest and loves to help young people, so she was telling him about all the things he needed to do while he was here. We asked about his religion, and while his family had once been catholic, he did not think that religion was a good thing. People fought too much about it. We have to hear this young man and believe him in what he says. We can be terribly right, and lovelessly upright and all our rectitude is a stench in God's nostrils. The rectitude is not for itself but for the sake of love and if we lose sight of that, we have lost it all. Peter exhorts us to gentle and respectful witness.

But the sermon will also need to connect this witness to its source and its energy: Jesus. Peter does so for us. Peter's audience were being persecuted for their faith. Peter reminds them that in this they look like Jesus and are connected to him. Here you might want to import the Gospel lesson a little, for Jesus is speaking of this very thing.

This sermon needs to keep its focus. The goal is that the hearer is ready to defend the hope we have. The hope will need to be explicated as well and how that is seen today. Our lives reflect a completely different operating principle. We are solving our problems differently, we are enduring our suffering differently, and we are interacting with all people differently because we are connected to Jesus. Therein lies the hopefulness that people see and will question. If they are not seeing that, we have to preach to that, but keep in mind the ultimate goal: readiness to make the defense of the hope.

2. Christ is Here – This is His Church: (Gospel and Epistle Lesson – That the Spirit of God would lead the hearer to confess in word and deed that Jesus Christ has established this congregation and he gets to define it, to set its course and its parameters.)

For congregation which has circled the wagons and closed its doors to the world outside: Jesus sets us on a course of life and life-giving service and love. While Jesus delights to comfort you in all your sorrows and forgive you all your sins, he has established this congregation to be a light to this community. His love is for all people. Paul preached to the pagan philosophers of Athens. Peter called his people to lives of service and love to those who persecuted them. Jesus poured out his Spirit on disciples because he loves this world. The presence of Christ among us, defines and empowers us. The forgiveness with which he has blessed us, the love with which he has filled us, is a forgiveness and love for every person in this neighborhood, this town, this community, this city, this whole world. He calls us to an obedience which takes seriously his gifts and his Spirit and his presence. It will not always be easy, it will take great faith, but we will never serve alone, nor will we serve without the gifts we need.

This sermon remembers Jesus sure promise. He gives the *Paraclete* the “Helper” in this text but that really doesn’t do justice to this word. That Spirit presence takes us right out of the center of the picture and puts Jesus in there. It is our old and sinful self that wants to reassert our own primacy in the picture. Listen to the objections to ministry and the justification for “doing nothing” and you will always find the self-centered human being at the bottom of it.

That Helper, however, changes what we see and who lives at the center of our world. It is Jesus who occupies our vision and it is Jesus who stands at the center of our solar system. We orbit him. It is a good place to be. Jesus has given us sweet tasks – we get to announce the kingdom of God, engage in his ministry of feeding, healing, and helping people.

3. Christ is Here – This is His Church: (That the hearer would be empowered by the Spirit of God to do amazing things in this world with confidence, joy, and hope.)

For the congregation engaged in ministry to its community and struggles to serve with Christ

This sermon would that your people trust that God is at work in our lives, not just us. We are out there in the community with the love of Christ (you will want to point to all these things) the world sees us as fools for wasting our money on others or accuses us of some ulterior motive. But this sermon wants your congregation to see their sacrifices as not the work of fools or scoundrels, but the genuine love of God for this world and this community in practice.

Jesus makes a solemn promise to us today. He works through us. He is today present in His Church, this congregation, doing powerful and good things. We have seen lives changed, we have seen the hungry fed, the lonely befriended, the helpless helped. (Again, have somethings your congregation is doing ready to point out – concrete examples.) Sins have been forgiven in heaven because of the words you have spoken, God has acted in our midst. He loves to do that. This is why Jesus ascended into heaven in the first place, so he could be present this way in your life. He did not leave you, but came to you in a far more intimate and powerful way. You have touched him in your baptism, he has come into you in this supper, and now he is present in your life to this community.

It is too easy to get discouraged and that often comes when we think this is our ministry and our work, but in truth it is Jesus good work in us. That gives our service new meaning and new energy.

In a week it is Memorial Day, we might illustrate that. A lot of times we don’t see what the folks who served this country really went through. I bet we have all had the experience of sitting down with some old saintly guy and having him tell us what he did in the war. I remember Ted, an old fellow in my parish, talking about the horrific drive he

made across Iwo Jima when he and his companion were ambushed by three Japanese guys and they got into hand to hand combat. Everyone at church simply knew the nice old guy who brought honey to share from his bee hives.

4. Christ is here – This is His Church (That the hearer would encounter the presence of Christ in this word, be moved to trust Him, and rejoice in his presence.)

For the congregation not described by the above or for a parish with a number of visitors.

This sermon sees the orphan-hood of the person who really is an orphan of sorts – but an orphan much like the folks in Athens. They pray to an unknown God. They are probably struggling with the church and the Christians they have encountered. They are wondering if the God whom these folks proclaim is really the God they are looking for. They have a number of preconceptions already in mind. They like the image of Jesus whom they have constructed, but they don't really like the Christians. Probably they have a track record of folks who have not treated them very well. Lutherans have a great advantage here. The Metho-bapto-costalism they have experienced has been all about keeping rules. They have heard that the bible is a rule book, the owner's manual of life. Lutherans have always been much more comfortable with understanding the Bible as a love letter from God, his profound communication to us in which he tells us that he loves us. Best not to hit the rules hard, but hit the relationship.

You might want to shock them with the obedience word – but then define it differently. They probably think the Christian faith is all about obedience, or at least they have heard that it is, but then completely redefine obedience – turn it to the obedience of bringing your sins to a gracious father who forgives you. You might use David in the Psalm

The collect of the day might be a good place to work with here. God is simply the source of the good, he inspires us to think it, and he guides us to do it.

This group of folks will not simply listen to an assertion of authority. They will need you to establish your right to tell them anything. You will need to point to a very tangible and visible place where the Spirit of God is working. They will not be satisfied with platitudes which feed the faithful. They will want to see it, they will want to experience it.

They will also need to see relationship established and it will be impressive to them if you can be consistent and patient and loving despite them. Forgiveness will need to be delivered.