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Easter 7 Series A 2017

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Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 28 (Memorial Day Weekend)

By the time we come to worship with the congregations we serve this Sunday, the Feast of Ascension will have passed, unnoticed by most folks, but still an important milestone for anyone who takes seriously the liturgical year in which we encounter God. Because it always occurs on the fortieth day after Easter, Ascension invariably falls on Thursday, which has pretty well doomed it to obscurity in America where the Sunday worship pattern has become so ingrained as to overwhelm all others.

This is not so in much of the world. Indeed, for Roman Catholics this was for some time a day of obligation. For almost all Christians Sunday pattern is important, yes, but there is also a sense of a liturgical year which has festivals and feast days which do not fall on Sunday. In Roseburg, where I used to serve, the Sunday tradition was so overwhelming that many of the generically protestant congregations had no Christmas services unless Christmas happened to fall on Sunday. That situation would be unthinkable in Europe; and within the Lutheran tradition too.

This is important for us because the readings for this seventh Sunday of Easter assume the feast of Ascension. If you are not observing the day (like most congregations) you may want to include an ascension hymn as your opening and certainly some sort of an explanation of the calendar in your bulletin/announcements. Something happens on Thursday, and the readings reflect those events.

These readings will place us into a position somewhat similar to Advent today. We are waiting. For ten long days the disciples waited for Jesus' promise to be fulfilled. He had sent them back to Jerusalem to await the arrival of a promised Holy Spirit. That will be celebrated next Sunday as we gather for Pentecost. Today we will wait with those disciples.

Waiting is not something we are particularly good at in North America, but the people of God have gotten pretty good at it. Our Jewish forebears in the faith waited thousands of years for the promises made to Abraham and earlier to Noah and Adam to be fulfilled. We have ourselves waited two thousand years for the promise of Jesus' reappearing to be fulfilled. I have always liked that Lewis' explanation of that waiting: To God, all times are soon. (*Voyage of the Dawn Treader*)

We are asked to wait today. Waiting for the Church is usually a time of penitence and there is a sense of that here too, but we are not so much confessing our sins as we are confessing our weakness and our incapacity as spiritual beings. Thomas Aquinas described humans as being "horizon creatures" who lived at the mixing point of the created and the heavenly realms. We walk and move in this created world, and yet, we exist in that heavenly realm of angels and God himself. Our incapacities in terms of the creation, most starkly shown up in our death, pale when compared to the failings we evidence in the realm of the heavenly or spiritual. Like ants on the sidewalk of the cosmos Satan can stomp us to oblivion. Unless God takes mercy upon us we are utterly lost.

Jesus has told us to wait for the arrival of this Spirit who will teach us all things and bring the presence of our beloved Jesus. So we wait. What else can we do? We are helpless without Him. Today we confess that helplessness and rejoice that Christ has filled our need.

Collect of the Day

O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens, leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

O King of Glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted high in triumph. This is of course Jesus we address here. The Ascension marks the day he assumes his rightful place at the right hand of God, wielding all of heaven's power. There is no higher place. Of course this is all assuming the Ascension. This is why I think it is good to start the service with at least a little recognition of that point and what it means for this day. There is a very important point to be made here in the position of Jesus. He is at the right hand of God, this is not a place, but a statement of his power. There is no power that does not flow through his pierced hands. As the folks for whom he has died, this is exceptionally good news, but it is also sometimes really disconcerting and can lead to some very tough questions. I would simply urge you to remember that this all mediated through his incomparable love for us. Sometimes you have to grit your teeth and say that. "Jesus loves me, I know it, I am baptized" because sometimes it doesn't feel that way. I only say this because you need to be aware that occasionally statements about the power of Jesus lead folks to ask the very difficult "why" questions. Best to mingle this power talk with love, which of course this next line does. Don't fall into the occasional trap of the Reformed and just sing about the power and might of God and neglect the love.

Leave us not without consolation. That is where we are without the Spirit. The Pentecostals insist that he is found in the glossalalia and acts of miraculous power, but we see the miracle in the faith of the little widow who walks out the door after church and can smile and greet us despite all the heart ache that we know has visited her life. She has been consoled by the fact that this Holy Spirit has brought her the faith which trusts in Jesus and the forgiveness and resurrection which he has won on the cross. She rejoices. Even though her house seems quiet and lonely without her husband, she is never really alone, Jesus has promised and she believes that promise. He is with her where ever she goes, even on that day when she goes to the hospital for the last time. And so, her wrinkled face breaks into a smile when she greets the man who preached the good news to her this morning. She has comfort amid her sorrow. They do not define her life, but Jesus does, and she believes his beautiful promises, and she has much joy as a result. This is a far sturdier sign of God's consoling Spirit than unintelligible tongues.

*The consolation we need is found in the Spirit of Truth who brings us the one who is the Way, the **Truth** and the Life. He does this through the gift of Scripture, preaching, Baptism, Supper, the community of faith and all the good things which strengthen our faith and trust in Christ. As you develop the sermon, you will want to focus on at least one of those.*

Readings

Acts 1:12-26 *I have included the first verses of chapter 1 for you. I think it is important to see this context. This italicized portion is also the reading for the Revised Common Lectionary for this day.*

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

*““May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;*

and

“‘Let another take his office.’

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” ²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Years ago when we came to this text it sparked a lively discussion. We were fascinated by the character of these two men put forward. Where did they come from? The Gospels never mention either of them. We were reminded of the ten virgins and their lamps. Justus and Matthias were called upon to serve – they had to be ready. They had been following, suddenly they are numbered with the apostles. What is more they were called upon to be a witness.

This is a most marvelous text which never ceases to amaze me. Of course you can see why we get it today. This is the only story we have of the time between the Ascension and the events of Pentecost recorded in chapter 2. But this has some really interesting things in here.

First of all, Peter gives us the church’s take on the whole Judas tragedy. He received what he deserved. He had guided those who arrested Jesus. He was a betrayer of trust. But all this was fulfillment of Scripture. There is a terrible tension inside this. Judas did a terrible thing, and yet God foresaw, and it was even a fulfillment of what God had said. Here is one of the essential conundrums of Christianity. God has saved the world through a terrible injustice. The greatest breach of justice is when that system of law and courts is corrupted and an innocent man is given to die for the sins of another, but that is exactly what we celebrate! Judas was instrument in all this, we deplore what he did and yet we also rejoice in the outcome of the events which he betrayal set in motion. After all, we call that Friday on which Jesus died “Good.” Don’t feel too compelled to explain this. This is what Scripture and Theologians wisely call a mystery. There is no single part of this that doesn’t make sense but when you take the whole it boggles the mind. That is alright, it is supposed to do that and you won’t ever really get your head around this. If you do, you are either in heaven or self-deluded. We are here running up against the limits of our understanding and intellect. It bothers systematians and academics of all stripes and so they have written any number of books which have afflicted the faithful for hundreds of years. Don’t let them bother you too much.

Peter proposes a solution to a problem we likely would not have considered. The number needs to be filled out. We might just wonder why he thinks that 12 disciples are somehow more important than 11. Ancient Jewish law, however, helps us out here. 12 witnesses established a fact beyond legal challenge. It seems that if one had 12 witnesses to a crime there was no need for a trial and one went immediately to the sentencing phase. The number 12 of course has come

down to us in trial by jury in which a full jury is always 12 people. The prosecutor has to convince 12 folks that the accused committed the crime.

In this case, the 12 are witnesses to both a crime and an act of God at the same moment. When you hear Peter's sermons in Acts, remember he is always accusing those to whom he preaches. He is witness against them as much as he is witnessing to Christ. His first sermons are always an accusation that they killed the Christ and he has 11 men standing behind him when he says it. That meant something to the folks in the Jewish community.

What absolutely astounds me in this is that Peter sets up rather difficult criteria for the replacement. They have to have been a companion since the baptism of Christ and a witness to the miracles, ministry and resurrection of Christ. What is shocking to me is that he finds two! Joseph Barsabbas who is also called Justus, and Matthais. Where did these guys come from? They are never mentioned in the Gospel accounts.

This has given me occasion in the past to preach a good sermon too. God has disciples hidden in the wings. What resources does he have for our church and our mission which we are not using nor even recognizing? What Joseph's and Matthais' are sitting out in the pews, witnesses to great things but who have not been tapped yet? What resources of time, treasure, and talent are lying untapped in the lives of the people that God has gathered here? What folks are perhaps believers in Christ and I don't even recognize it.

What does it mean that Matthias is never mentioned again? Is it just time to let go of a need for all the answers? Here is something that happened – Jesus has unknowns out there for us, but it really is not important for us to know more. These men answered the call, testified to what they had seen. They got no kudos for their ministry, they just did it. Like the other apostles, they witnessed, but only the big guns, Peter, James, John, and Paul, get individual attention. The rest of the apostles are hardly mentioned in the Biblical record. What, after all, did Simon the Zealot do after the resurrection? There is an ancient tale that he was martyred, but the various accounts place the location of that martyrdom everywhere from Samaria, to Persia, to England. We really know nothing about him. Hence, it is not surprising really that we know nothing about Matthias either.

Of course, this also gives me an occasion to address a valid intellectual point, and it allows me to respect the intelligence of those who sit in the pews on Sunday. They are not stupid and can ask some pretty penetrating questions once in a while. What else did Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John leave out? There were apparently more followers of Jesus than their sparse accounts let us know. Of course, this should give any reader of the Gospels pause. First of all, there is a bunch of stuff we don't know about what went on. It is also pretty clear that the Gospel writers did not set out to tell us everything, like a historian would be obligated to tell us everything. In John's own words, he left a bunch of stuff out but this stuff is what we need to believe in Jesus and have life in his name. That is rather targeted writing. I think that a great deal of the squabbling about the historicity of the Gospels is rather misplaced. These are clearly portraits of Jesus which are shaped theologically and pastorally by the authors. They are not lying to us, but they are also

not giving us a photographic image of Christ and the events surrounding him. I think of the healing of the demoniac in Mark 5:1-20. When Matthew tells the story, there are two demoniacs. Does Mark make a mistake? No, but he doesn't talk about the other one because it doesn't seem to serve his theological purpose. He is not writing a history, but a theological portrait of Christ.

Another interesting point has been raised in relation to this text. Did Peter make a mistake when he did this? Some have suggested that Peter jumped the gun with this selection of Matthias. We never hear of Matthias again. He drops out of the record of the NT entirely, but then again so do most of the disciples. Did God have another man in mind for this job? Did God have his eye on a young man from Tarsus who was right now studying at the feet of Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin which had condemned Jesus a few weeks before they draw lots for Matthias? Some have suggested it, I don't know what to make of it, but it is an intriguing thought which we will never really be able to answer this side of heaven.

The other issue which sometimes comes up is the whole idea of lots. Why do they introduce the idea of a random selection process? Notice, only qualified candidates are able to stand. This was not uncommon in the OT, Joshua and the Israelites drew lots to determine who had disobeyed the ban at Jericho and finally landed on Achan and his family who were all slain as a result. This just seems to have been a way to let God into the decision making process. The idea that random rolls of the die were not so random, but that God was guiding the process seems to be at the root of it, but many find it strange. I do not endorse the idea that you should use this method to select the officers of the congregation.

If you want to read a really fun treatment of what happened to Matthias, you might just pick up Philip Jose Farmer's "Jesus on Mars." I am not sure it is still in print, but my recollection is that it was published in the late seventies. The story is set in the year 2012, when a robotic rover discovers something really interesting on Mars. The whole story is an exploration of faith, but I warn you, it is an exploration of faith by an agnostic who is fascinated by it. He admits in the end, he really doesn't understand it.

Psalm 68:1-10

- God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;
and those who hate him shall flee before him!
² As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;
as wax melts before fire,
so the wicked shall perish before God!
³ But the righteous shall be glad;
they shall exult before God;
they shall be jubilant with joy!
⁴ Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;

his name is the LORD;
exult before him!

⁵ Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.

⁶ God settles the solitary in a home;
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

⁷ O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness, Selah

⁸ the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,
before God, the One of Sinai,
before God, the God of Israel.

⁹ Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad;
you restored your inheritance as it languished;

¹⁰ your flock found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.

I Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11 *We have been reading Peter's amazing letter to the persecuted folk of Asia minor. I have included the material which is omitted from these two chapters in italics for you.*

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. ³ For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. ⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings,

that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹² By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. ¹³ She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴ Greet one another with the kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

I have included a great deal of material which is not in this text before us because I think it is really important to situation Peter's words in their context. Particularly I would have you notice that Peter places all this material under the governing idea which opens chapter 4 – Christ has suffered in the flesh and that changes our suffering.

In the past as we considered these words we were wondering if any of our people experience persecution. Do we really have an experience of someone who hates us, hurts us, and does something nasty to us because we are Christian? In other places around the world, this is

happening. Does Peter's first verse which suggests that this is the normal state of affairs actually speak a terrible indictment of us? If persecution is normal and we are not persecuted, does that mean we are ignored because we are failing as witnesses? The devil hates to hear what we have to say, but if we are quiet, he is quite content to leave us alone. Is our lack of persecution really a sign that we are too quiet, too accommodating of a culture which has relegated Christ to a small backroom with backward people who don't belong in polite company?

In the second verse of our reading, Peter once more says that our suffering is a participation in the sufferings of Christ and there is a great reward for us. If we are not persecuted, if we are not suffering with Christ, does that indicate a serious problem?

Yet the fear of the persecution is often greater than the persecution itself. And that fear often silences us. We may have preached about fear on the first Sunday of Easter this year. Is it time to bookend the season with this treatment of persecution? Peter tells them that their persecution will end. The time of trial will be an occasion for God to do some really good things in their lives, see verse 10.

This text speaks to us about suffering. Do we really want to hear this message? Peter will not let us wallow in some self-pity or victimhood. The "Oprah" answer to our suffering won't fly with Peter. On Oprah the suffering were made into victims, but Peter won't let us have that. First of all, suffering is not unusual or unexpected for the Christian, so don't whine like you are being singled out or at some disadvantage because you are being picked on. Baptism is not the ticket to a life of ease and leisure, but an invitation to take up a cross and follow Jesus. Those who carry crosses sometimes suffer terribly. Our leader did not lead us to a suffering free zone, at least not yet.

The logic of the next part is tough too. Suffering somehow connects us intimately with Christ. Suffering with Him who suffered for the sins of the world enables joy and peace on the day in which he is revealed in glory. That peace and joy is somehow tied to suffering. The life that opts out of the suffering here is opting out of the joy as well. Jesus does lead eventually to a suffering-free zone, on the day of his revelation. (Please exercise care here. Peter does not say that Jesus is 'coming' as though he is not here. He says that Jesus is 'revealed' for eyes to see. But the implication is that he is here all along. This is really important.)

There are a variety of reasons folks suffer. Sometimes they suffer for doing something wrong. Our suffering should not be like that. Our suffering should be for being a Christian, doing the Christ-like thing. The judgment starts with the household of God. What does he mean there? How do we suffer for just being a Christian? For the most part the world of North America simply ignores us. They don't particularly make us suffer or persecute us, they have simply declared that we are irrelevant, or at least we have permitted the culture to say that. The real solutions to the world are to be found with science. Even vices like anger, lust, or gluttony are just a cascade of chemicals in the brain, soon we will have an anger pill that controls that and we won't have to talk about guilt or sin anymore.

Peter is talking to folks who are targets of deliberate persecution, either verbal or physical. How does that translate into our age? The preacher in India has a somewhat easier time of this. His people really are being persecuted actively for their faith. Many of those who sit before him on Sunday have made tremendous sacrifices to be baptized. What have we given up? What has happened to us because we are Christian? Perhaps we can point to an isolated event like the Columbine shooting or someone whose integrity lost them a job, but that will be hard to convince and bring to the level of the lived lives of our parishioners.

The second section of our text again speaks of a devil who is like a roaring lion, prowling about seeking whom he may devour. Most of our people probably would have to strain their ears pretty hard to hear that lion's roar. C. S. Lewis said that the Devil has two basic methods. He either fills your life with the demonic, surrounds you with devils and demons so that you make more of him than he really merits, or he hides himself so that you can delude yourself into thinking that there is no devil. Clearly, the modern North American is in the latter situation. The devil has at most become a laughable character who shows up in his red suit, horns and pitchfork on Halloween to be put away for another year in the attic. For most of us, he is not a real threat, a malignant presence who seeks our death and who delights in our suffering.

If you have occasion to speak to someone from one of the burgeoning churches of Africa or India or Latin America, ask them about the Devil and be prepared for a response which many on this side of the enlightenment find quite disturbing. These people actually believe this stuff. In fact, they are pretty sure that the world is filled with spirits, and many of them are malevolent. When Jesus casts out the demons or as Peter says here that we have a demonic enemy, people are not talking in a theoretical realm, but in a realm of reality for them.

God will restore us. My fear is that most of us are thinking we are pretty well restored right now. One gets restored only when one has been cast down, stepped upon, beaten down, or otherwise humiliated. We stand on top of our technology and survey the landscape of what we have conquered and feel pretty good about ourselves.

Has the devil won when we do this, just as much as he has captured the demoniac? Does he not manifest himself among us because he doesn't need to? Has he managed to ensnare us in our own lusts, desires, and things? Why expend the effort to possess someone when you can have them just as surely through their television and computer screen?

This middle section, the part that the pericope omits is most interesting I think, because this sounds much more like our situation too, doesn't it. The shepherds are warned to be faithful and to care for the flock. The younger are exhorted to give honor and respect to the elder.

The proper defense against the evil one is indeed the humble act of Christ, lived out in our lives. He who gave his life for us on a cross defeated our enemy that day. Our defense lies not in our armor or fortifications but in losing our lives in Christ. Once we have been connected through baptism to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, what can Satan take from us? We are already dead, our treasure is secure, and our end is in Christ's strong hands. Herein lies the real

defense against the prowling lion. The simple act of pastoral care and respect shown, the community in which the love of Christ prevails is so loathsome to the evil one, he cannot bear it.

This text presents interesting challenges to the preacher. The situation is very different from that which our hearers will face when they go out of our church and into this mission field where we live. For the most part we are off the radar screen of everyone else. How do we get on there? Are we prepared to be on that radar screen and targeted by our enemy? He has not had to do very much to ensnare this generation. He will not be happy about any increased work load. His teeth are sharp and his claws fearsome. If we start to live this way, we should expect to suffer for it; we should expect that we will not always be comfortable. Christ makes a great promise to us here. He knows how the story turns out, and he sees all that happens to us. Heavenly joy and peace await those who suffer with Christ. Shall we opt for the comfort of this world or that world?

John 17:1-11

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

⁶ “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

Consider the things that God is giving/telling us in this prayer:

- 1. Christ has the authority over all flesh, including the authority to give life*
- 2. Christ has manifested the Father and the Father’s name to the people*
- 3. They were God’s people to begin with.*
- 4. The Father gave them to Jesus*
- 5. He has given them the Fatherly word.*
- 6. They have kept God’s word*
- 7. Now they know that everything is from the Father through the Son.*

8. *I have given them the words the Father gave*
9. ***Jesus is glorified in us.***
10. *Jesus prays for our unity – it is really important to him.*

Christ prays for us. There is a great comfort in that simple truth. Jesus gives us here a preview of what that prayer sounds like today. Do we really need to say much more than that? Jesus prays for me. I am lousy at praying, but Jesus has that covered too. Even in my best moments, I need Jesus helping me. Even when I pray, I am not getting this right.

Connection to the I Peter reading: We are occasionally called to be persecuted, to bear witness to the resurrection with my own blood. How do we actually persevere through that time of fiery trial except that Jesus prays for us?

What does it mean to be glorified? The Hebrew word for “glory” is actually the word for heavy/fat which came to mean significant. From the fact that only wealthy people could afford the extra calories required to become fat and that they also could afford the finery associated with wealth, it came to mean glorious as we usually use the word.

When Jesus is glorified on the cross, he becomes “heavy” or “significant” for the world. You almost have to think like you are in the 60’s here – Jesus is “heavy.” But that works when Jesus is glorified in us, he becomes significant/heavy/important to the world.

Which of course lets us enter into a wonderful place to be a Lutheran: Theology of the Cross vs Theology of Glory

Have we left the word “glory” out in an effort to preserve the theology of the Cross? That would be a serious mistake. To say that God is glorified in us is a wonderful statement of the theology of the cross. Have we lost sight of the truth that God has indeed brought us into a glorious light. The ancient Christians were often forbidden to kneel in prayer during Easter. They were so focused on the penitential that their bishops would demand that they reflect the reality that they are the children of God and do not need to kneel in his presence. Have we gotten so used to saying that we are worthless worms that we have forgotten how to rejoice in the amazing sonship that God has bestowed upon us?

The key here is that the intrinsic value that we have is passive, it is completely gift. The tight rope needs to be walked, the value is not in our selves, but it is in the gift which Christ has bestowed and so it truly is in us.

Name – in Mediterranean World this meant much more reputation. Jesus has made the great I Am visible to the world. The Ents in book II of the Lord of the Rings cannot recount their Name because it takes three weeks to say. It is the summation of everything they are and have done. Jesus has revealed the very nature of God and has done so by living, the miracles and the great signs which have pointed to the Father.

This is often called Jesus high priestly prayer. I used to have a parishioner who expressed great appreciation and devotion to this prayer, and yet profoundly misunderstood it. It is not an easy thing, I am not sure that I have all of this either, there are some really deep things in this.

For the last three chapters John has had Jesus talking to his disciples. This exceedingly long discourse is often called the love book because Jesus has exhorted them to love one another, a new command. This is where the word “Maundy” as in Maundy Thursday comes from. Jesus gives us a new “mandate” to love one another.

Now, at the end of the discourse, Jesus prays. John has set these words immediately before the betrayal by Judas, but John has clearly rearranged earlier material in his book. Many have wondered if this was not part of the discourses that Jesus had with his disciples after the resurrection. Clearly the editors of the lectionary system are open to the idea. That is why we get so much John after Easter. If this is the case, the glorification may take on a dual significance. This word is used most interestingly in John. We tend to hear the word and think of light and majesty and power, etc. But when John uses the word earlier in the text he is clearly referring to the crucifixion of Jesus – see chapter 3 and the discussion of the bronze serpent. And yet the lifting up of Christ on the cross is also prelude to Christ being lifted up in glory at the ascension. John is like that, he tends to make your mind bend in new ways.

Jesus has the authority to give life. We are used to authority to put people in jail or levy a fine. We are used to authority exercised negatively in our lives. But Jesus’ authority is a life giving authority, not the life taking authority of the state. Jesus exercises this authority every time we forgive, every time we baptize, every time we commune someone, every time his kingdom breaks into this world healing, comforting, preaching, teaching, and the rest.

Now Jesus has accomplished that for which he came, the great cosmic deed is done. The holy blood of God’s only Son has redeemed the world and His resurrection from death has demonstrated his victory over death. But there is still something to pray for. He looks forward to his resumption of his heavenly place, but these disciples, this church, these who have believed in him, they will remain here on earth. He prays for them. (That’s us!)

His prayer is that we would be included in the perfect unity of the Father and the Son, the union of the Trinity. How will this happen, when the third member of that Trinity is poured out upon us, takes up residence in our lives and through His indwelling incorporates us into the very essence of God. (Do you see why we go immediately to Pentecost Sunday and then to Trinity Sunday after this?)

The unity for which Jesus prays is often misunderstood to be the unity which was fractured by the reformation or the great schism between east and west. Indeed the fractious nature of Christians has done much to impede the Gospel proclamation and given occasion for scandal in the world. I am not certain, however, that this is what Jesus is praying for, except perhaps this longing for unity is an expression of it. The unity for which Jesus prays seems to be the unity of the believer with God, this is accomplished through baptism and the indwelling of the Spirit,

regardless of the denominational boundaries which divide us from one another. Indeed, we can call anyone who is gathered under that cross and filled with that Spirit a fellow Christian and find that we are in truth united with them.

We have this unity. I think in this Eastertide to take this as occasion to beat people up about the fact of denominations is missing the larger point. God creates this unity, he has done so by pouring out his Spirit on all flesh. He heard Jesus' prayer and answered it on Pentecost and on your baptismal day. He continues to hear it and unites people in forgiveness, love, and service.

Law

1. Jesus has left at the ascension. We cannot see him anymore, at least not like the disciples could see him.
2. We sometimes have to feel our way without clear guidance – perhaps we screw things up.
3. Meanwhile we have an adversary who is like a roaring lion, looking for lunch. Before him we are helpless and weak.
4. Our own fellowship is often a source of our deepest problems. Judas has many names today, we can probably list a few ourselves.
5. Division and fractiousness not only afflict us in our human relationships, most tragically they also are found in our relationship with God. Sin and our enemy would cut us off from the very life giver. Like a pot of coffee unplugged, we slowly grow cold and die. And there is nothing we can do about it.

Gospel

1. Jesus has prayed for us and God has heard that prayer. None of us is alone, we are always with Jesus as he has promised us. The Holy Spirit has been given and though we cannot always see Him the way we would like, Christ has assured us that we are one with Him and the Father.
2. Our blind groping and stumbling along is not really the problem it feels like to us. God has ways of making our mistakes into his blessings. Matthias would become a witness. Even Joseph who was not chosen would become a witness of God's great mercy, just as the more well-known Apostle Paul would be.
3. Our adversary might think we are weak and helpless, but he is also blind to the reality of what we are in Christ. No mere human, we are filled with the very Spirit of God. He might destroy our body, but our names are written in heaven, our salvation is in God's hands where no one can snatch it from Him. The devil has been defeated and roars in pain and frustration.
4. Jesus died for Judas too, indeed for the sins of the whole world. There is not one sin, not all sins put together, which are greater than the blood of Jesus Christ. The hurts we have

endured, the suffering which has come to us will not be worth comparing to the glory which is revealed in us on the day of Jesus.

5. God has united us with himself. Jesus prayer has been answered, we are not orphaned or alone. Jesus has come and watches over everything in our life, not as some stern judge or in order to mete out punishment, but so that he may exercise his beautiful authority, so he may give us life. He does that today in this absolution, in this sermon, in this baptism, in this supper, in this fellowship, in this love. You are one with God.

Sermon Themes

1. God's Treasure Trove (First Lesson: That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to hope in God for unexpected blessings.)

This sermon targets our lack of faith which in turn often leads to a timorous and fearful life of cowering in activity. The law will be evident. We gather to take care of ourselves, but the larger world out there hardly knows that this body of Christians is even in this place. If a meteor fell from heaven and landed squarely upon us, would the community really notice except that there was a hole in the ground here?

I of course speak facetiously and there are many ways in which a parish is present which the world simply does not see. A group of folks who pray for their neighbors is a powerful thing. But the law here has a bite for all of us.

This sermon wants to notice that the Lord had people ready to step into Judas' shoes that we just did not know about. What resources are we blind to and which are going untapped because we are not willing to step out and actually take God at his word? I am well aware that this could be an occasion to preach irresponsibility. A tiny parish taking out a huge loan and just having faith that God will provide is not what I am talking about.

I think too often, however, we set our sights so low because we look to ourselves and our resources and we don't see enough to get the job done and so we quit before we even start. But we have Jesus with us. He has united himself to us. He loves every sinner in this town and has put us here to be a witness and light to them. He is going to help us.

In truth, he likely has resources in this very congregation which we are unaware of. I once was part of starting a new ministry, a food pantry. I knew that one of my parishioners was a good guy who knew lots of folks in this town, but this idea really grabbed him by the heart and he used all those connections to get people all of the community behind this little pantry. We soon were serving ten times as many people as we thought we could. Jesus had a resource which we really did not recognize, but which he was ready to put to the good which we began.

Jesus has good things in mind for this place too. This last Sunday of Easter suggests to us that Jesus has risen to give us gifts to fulfill his mandate to be the agents of his love to

this community. We don't need to look to our resources first, but we need to ask what he has said. These disciples had been called witnesses, so they asked how they would do that and looked around and saw that Jesus had given them gifts. He is risen from the dead to do that today!

2. Jesus prays for us (Gospel lesson: That the Spirit of God would comfort his waiting people with the promise of Christ's perpetual prayer and care.)

This is a sermon for a congregation of folks who struggle with confidence and hope. This is a sermon for a parish that is not sure about itself. It has great messages for the individuals, but also for the corporate body of Christ. He founded this congregation, he loves it, it is on his mind every day.

God has responded to the prayer of Jesus and addressed our critical helplessness and need. This sermon wants to address the feelings our parishioners may have that God has forgotten about them or that they are somehow not a concern of his. The widow, the child who is bullied at school, the man who has lost his job and wonders if he will ever get another one, or the housewife who is simply frustrated with a life which seems to consist in an endless cycle of laundry might each be an example of what we mean here. Our lives often seem so trivial to our own point of view, how can they not seem that way to God. I have not done some amazing mission, I am not the hero of some Christian story. I am just another of billions of Christians who are alive today.

Not only has Jesus prayed for us, but he has given the gift which fulfills those deepest needs, and even some we don't know about. Satan would lull us into the notion that he does not exist. And many times we completely forget that our enemy would devour us, squash us like bugs.

Today this word assures us that we are the very vessels of the Holy Spirit, caught up into the perfect relationship which is the very center of heaven itself. God has made room for us in the very relationship of the Trinity. Of course Jesus and the Father are one, but in this prayer Jesus literally makes room for us in that relationship between Father and Son. Jesus' prayer was answered, so of course our prayers are answered too, for we pray with his voice. As we wait to celebrate that day called the Last Day, we rejoice that Jesus continues to pray for us, continues to pour out that Spirit, and continues to be our Good Shepherd and our Vine, and our Savior from Sin, Death and Devil!

3. Christ is glorified in us (Gospel lesson and Epistle Lesson: That the Spirit of God would sanctify every part of the hearer's life, making himself "heavy" (real) and present throughout all our deeds.)

Christ has pronounced us to be within the very relationship of the Trinity. Augustine would describe this relationship of the Father and the Son and the Spirit in terms of love. By his Incarnational presence in the world, we have become participants in the very economy (mechanism) of salvation. Jesus was glorified long ago when he died for the sins

of the world, he is glorified in heaven's throne today as he prays for us, and he is still glorified in the saving of people from all their enemies through his people today – as they are rescued from sin, death, darkness, and the devil himself. We have the distinct privilege to be the revelation of Christ to the broken and sinful people who surround us. This is a great time to speak about vocation. Most Christians do not credit the Bible as the avenue through which the Spirit led them to faith, but they point to the people who live out the faith and speak the word, and love with the love of Christ. We are like little mosaic tiles, each of us different, but we form the face of Christ to this world. (I am probably a nose hair)

You might want to develop the idea behind Paul's discussion of being a broken vessel with a treasure inside (II Corinthians 4). A perfect messenger is almost too distant to be creditable or even heard. The cracked pots that we are make us perfect as the instruments for that perfect message to be spoken. It is best heard as a forgiveness that I can share with you because I am in such need of it myself. Evangelism is always one beggar telling another where to find a hot meal. Consider the humility discussion in Peter's letter.

The Epistle lesson is critical here because it really is the description of what it looks like when Jesus' prayer gets answered. We participate in the sufferings, the glory of Christ. Our whole lives, even our sufferings, have become an occasion for others to see the glory of God. But Peter also points us to the hope, the end of this story which is so critical to our perseverance and joy even amid our sufferings. I have seen so often a dying Christian who has shown me how to trust in God when she goes through the throes of cancer or something like that. I learned a great deal about God's love from Kay Gray in Bountiful Utah that way.

This could also be a great occasion to unpack the witness motif from the first reading.