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Epiphany 5 Series A 2017

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Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Feb 5

One of the things I like about preaching from the pericope system is that it forces me to wrestle with texts which I would not normally choose to preach upon. Epiphany is a classic example of that for Epiphany sets an ambitious task before us. It would reveal Christ. At first we get to see the miracles and the mighty works of God. John points him out to us and declares him the Lamb of God. In his baptism, a dove descends and a voice from heaven declares. All this is fine and good, and nicely distant and third person for us. I can read those passages, scratch my chin, and talk about God's revelation of Jesus to this world in the distant past and faraway places, in acts and words which are recorded for me to believe, but which rather stand there as assertions made, facts recorded.

Today this takes a strong shift to the present. Christ is still revealed for me to see and the world too. But now he is revealed in me. The Old Testament will express some pretty serious moral injunctions regarding the way that I treat my neighbor. It will couch them as real worship. Paul will speak of a community which knows the very mind of Christ and presumably acts accordingly. Jesus will urge us to let our light shine before men so that they give thanks to our Father in heaven. The Collect of the day will pick up on that theme and speak of God as our Father and urge him to keep us in the real worship and the real faith which Paul and Isaiah and Jesus speak of.

Jesus is revealed to this world in the face which is reflected in my mirror every morning when I shave.

I was baptized into the name of Jesus. I have that name now. In the same way I have my earthly father's name on my driver's license and every legal document that I sign. I also have God's name, for good or for ill. When people see me, they see something of him, or else I obscure him and taint his name with my own sinfulness.

America was founded on the idea that we left a great deal of this sort of thinking behind us in Europe. The whole idea of nobility and "blood" seemed outdated and "medieval." We would establish a meritocracy in which a man would be judged by his competency and character. At least that was the way it was supposed to be. We still bristle at the thought of folks getting into the exclusive universities for no other reason than their parents are wealthy alumni. We have always reveled in the idea of a man who rose up from humble beginnings and achieved something great by dint of perseverance and hard work.

Truly, there is nothing wrong with that, but the old saw that the apple does not fall far from the tree is more along the lines of what we hear today. We are God's children, his family, and as the head of this house, he imparts a certain stamp to us and to our lives and it shows up. It should show up and it does show up. God has solved this world's greatest problem by the gift of his Son and the unstinting sacrifice he made on the cross. We too solve problems with gifts and sacrifice. Jesus exemplified God's kingdom when he healed the sick, comforted the grieving, fed the

hungry, and more. As citizens of that kingdom we are still about his work even now when we do the same things and care for the same helpless folk today. God is a forgiver of sins more than he is the One who metes out justice. At least that is how he would have us glorify his name. We too, are a Gospel people who forgive and reconcile with sinners, even the ones who hurt us.

We look a little like our Father in heaven, we resemble his Son.

The next several weeks of Epiphany will deliver hard messages from Jesus from Matthew 5. It will culminate in him telling us that we must be perfect. He tells us that hate is murder, lust is adultery. Our righteousness has to exceed the holiest people we know. What shall we do with this as preachers? It seems like these readings are laying an impossible burden on us.

1. Begging for mercy is a good place to start.
2. We will let the full weight of this Law fall upon our people and ourselves. But we will do so because we have a greater Good News to proclaim. The pointed, heavy Law will be met with an equally pointed and weighty Gospel.
3. This will likely mean we are importing narrative and example from other parts of Scripture – remember that actions often speak louder than words. Jesus speaks terrible law, but he does beautiful Gospel. Immediately after he speaks the hard words of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus descends the hill and touches a leper, healing this broken man.
4. We will proclaim the Law which describes Christ perfectly and which in Christ now describes us. We will proclaim the saint whom this law describes – the one who has the perfection which Christ calls for. Christ has given us his perfect right-ness.
5. We will remember *Lex semper accusat* (The Law always accuses!). In proclaiming the Law which describes the saint, we will remember that no one is free from the sinner who simultaneously stands condemned before that same Law. I cannot preach so well that the old man will not find a way to turn any mention of the law against me as a judgment.

What should we not do with this hard word from God? What would be bad strategy?

1. We will not soften the Law – giving people a way to weasel out of their guilt and the consequences of sin. To do so is to cut the legs out from under the Gospel.
2. We will not play small ball with this – we could find some little nicety in the text and not preach the whole law, but deal with some minor and manageable aspect, but ignore the thundering Law of God which is actually in the text.
3. The Gospel will not become a segue to discuss behavior which is simply more closely aligned with the Law. This law was not given to be a moralizing sermon. It might all be true, but it would not be Gospel.
4. We will not preach Law alone and leave the people bereft of God's Good News.

5. We will not hold up repentance as some God-mollifying action on our part, as if God were reacting to our penitence or faith and exchanging eternal life for our proper level of remorse.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

We pray this day that God would keep his family, the Church, continually in the true faith. There are a couple of things in that prayer which really strike me. First the image of the church as God's family. There is an odd thing about families. You really are stuck with them. They always include some rather interesting characters who make reunions dicey. But you cannot trade them in on a new group. You can stop going to the reunions, you can avoid Thanksgiving dinners and not attend the weddings, but you won't get another family, not really. You can marry into another family, I suppose, but that almost always involves trading one set of quirky relatives for another. God's church is his family. He has committed himself to us that way. He is stuck with us.

We noticed that often we may fight with one another at home, but when we went to school, if someone picked on that sibling we immediately came to their defense.

As the head of the family he guides it and we ask him to guide and keep us in the true faith all the time. That also is an interesting prayer. First of all it assumes that there is a not-true faith. It also presumes that we have a hard time sticking close to that true faith and need his help.

What is that false faith? Is it the false piety which gives the appearance of faith, but is not the actual thing, or is it a misplaced trust. We can trust faith, but that is a false faith, it trusts the wrong thing. Real faith will have eyes fixed on Jesus and trust him. Faith is the relationship with Jesus in which he saves us.

The true faith gets a little definition for us here which is helpful. It involves relying upon the hope of His grace. In more traditional words, it is trust or the Latin: Fiducia. The little girl who flings herself off the edge of the pool into her father's arms trusts that he will catch her. Perhaps today I will not pick up my children from school, but I trust that my wife will do so because she said she would. I don't even have to think about it. I trust. For many of us, hope has become a very weak word, but for Paul and other Biblical writers it was much stronger than the English "hope." It involved expectation. We don't wanly hope that God will come through for us, we trust it; we expect it. He said he would be there, he will show up in his given hour.

Anyone in a position of church leadership needs to take this "true" faith seriously. Too often we are not enough like the Bereans who evaluated what Paul said by what the Scriptures said.

The true-ness of the faith might also need to be reconsidered. It is too easy to say that my faith is the true one and all the others are not, especially those who are in fellowships with which we are not in altar and pulpit fellowship. But that is not what this is asserting at all. The true faith will likely need to wait for heaven for the right language to describe it. Here and now we see through the glass darkly and must muck about with broken words. My words are broken as are those of the Baptist or Catholic fellow down the street. That is not to say that there are not better ways to express it, surely there are, and I am glad that I am Lutheran, but that does not mean I have a lock on the truth of faith. A proper dose of humility in this regard is really important.

That is pretty important for the person who prays this prayer, depending on God to show up means depending on his mighty power to defend us. This isn't just picking up the kids after school. If one of us screws up that schedule the afterschool program will scoop them up and we will pay a few hours of child care. Only God's mighty power can save me from the evil one who means my harm, my death, my eternal woe.

Readings

Isaiah 58:3-9a

*“Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
² Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.*

³ *‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.*

⁴ *Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.*

⁵ *Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?*

Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’

*If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

¹⁰*if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.*

¹¹*And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.*

Isaiah seems to disabuse the modern worshipper of two things. First of all God does not need their worship. He is not patting them on the head because he has noticed that they are in church while the slacker down the street is out on the golf course. God is not reacting to my worship. Secondly Isaiah disabuses us of the notion that somehow our worship is virtuous. It is not even entirely good. While we pray our minds are often occupied in very dark places. So what are we doing in worship? Why go?

I go to Church not because God needs it, but because I need it. Here God forgives my sins, restores me into relationship with him and others. In this place God feeds, loves and cares for

me. That is why I am here today. I am lost without him. Even here, my old stinker Adam would poison it, but God is stronger than he is, so his love prevails.

Here is one of those places when I think the pericope system does us a bit of a disservice. Just consider the opening words of the text we will read on Sunday. It poses a question. If you don't have the context of the two verses which immediately precede verse 3 you would not know that these words are actually God repeating the miserable accusations of Isaiah's audience.

This selection from Isaiah, taken out of context, really gives one impression, but that is somewhat altered when you read the verses on either side, which I have included. With these verses it becomes much clearer that this is a word addressed to the faithful, the worshiping community, the folks who are not sleeping in on Sunday mornings. God is not happy here and enjoins his prophet to speak hard words to them.

This is a shock to many of our people. They are quite willing to admit that God is unhappy with them when they sin. They after all are not happy with themselves when they do what is clearly wrong and morally reprehensible. They may feel acutely the sordid and greedy thoughts, the angry words, the lies and other sins which they have committed. But worship, prayer, singing those proper Lutheran hymns, that is clearly pleasing and delightful to God. Isn't it?!

Isaiah says that the hypocrisy of their lives betrays their prayers. They come to church in shoes made by slave laborers in China, in clothes put together in a sweatshop in Vietnam. They seek their own pleasure in their fasting – we thought of folks who use Lent to lose weight or who give their time teach Sundays School just so someone will notice. Is this the person who is angling for a job by volunteering? Is this the person who goes to Church because it gives them good contacts to sell insurance in the community?

Another possibility is that they sit behind the person with whom they disagreed at the last voter's meeting and think their evil thoughts and never imagine that this ought to be rectified before they kneel at the altar. They hit with the wicked fist and curse with the twisted tongue.

We imagine that somehow the fact that we have come to church, that we have endured another sermon, or put an offering into a plate somehow this means God is happier with us than he is with the fellow down the street who slept in and watched ESPN today instead of coming to worship. But is that so? Does God's economy of friendship and love really work that way? Do I want it to?

In the past as we considered this text, we struggled with the moral imperatives and the promises attached to them within this text and that struggle really needs to continue. It could be read as if the Israelites have simply chosen to do the wrong things and if they would only do the right things, then God's favor would be with them (vss. 8-9). But we did not see it that way. The larger context of the Bible demands that we see this another way. Is it not Jesus who looses the yoke and brings the homeless poor into the house? Yes, we do so as well, but not to earn the favor of God, but because Christ has brought this homeless waif into his house in the waters of the

baptism which flowed over my head. I do so because he has caused his glory to shine over me, he has made the promise “I am with you always” to me. Now, he is doing this through me.

Here is the true faith of the collect above, the true faith which we need God to keep us within.

The true worship of God, the worship which delights God, is not found in singing the right songs or chanting the right prayers; although, he likes it when you sing and when you pray too. But the worship of God which really gets him going is first when you walk humbly before him. The highest worship we bring on Sunday morning is the confession of our sins, not the songs we sing. God is not responding to our praise and he is not missing out when we are absent. He has come to forgive us, declare his love once more, and embrace us. The fool who thinks he has heard this all before is akin to the fool who tells his wife he loves her and figures he has that taken care of and never needs to say it again. That does not work in marriage, God knows it, and he is there to tell us he loves and forgives us because we need to hear it.

That declaration of God that we have his love is truly amazing and effective. We really do have it and it keeps popping up in our lives. The real “worship” of God is found in the life which is shaped by Christ’s abundant love, the care for the poor man, the comfort for the grieving woman, the consideration for the lowly and meek, breaking of a yoke and the care for our own families (our own “flesh” as it states above).

This is the life which God has honored with his presence and help. Not to say that God has ever abandoned his people or that he is ever absent, but the life which is filled with his mercy is a life which practices the presence of Christ. This life manifests the God of help and rescue, not only for our neighbor but for us too. God is not manipulated into helping us, nor can he be stopped by our sins. He will find other ways to help if we refuse. Jesus has taken care of that for us. But just as the blessings of a baptism don’t happen if we don’t splash the water and say the words over a sinner, likewise the life which is lived in the firm conviction and trust that God is absent can hardly expect the blessings of his presence to manifest themselves.

Please don’t get me wrong, I am not suggesting that somehow our deeds are more than they are, but at the same time, just as water is but water, but when God makes a promise it becomes something more, likewise our lives, by the promise of God, when we live them in him, become much more than they appear. They become the very presence of Christ. Indeed, when I am walking in that trust before God, I am the very presence of Christ to the folks around me. God is that close! He says, “Here am I” or in Hebrew “heneni” which is what school children say when their name is called by the teacher. They are there, present. God is here, present. Not because I get the deeds right, but because he does.

Psalm 112:1-9

Praise the LORD!

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,

- who greatly delights in his commandments!
- ² His offspring will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
- ³ Wealth and riches are in his house,
and his righteousness endures forever.
- ⁴ Light dawns in the darkness for the upright;
he is gracious, merciful, and righteous.
- ⁵ It is well with the man who deals generously and lends;
who conducts his affairs with justice.
- ⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
he will be remembered forever.
- ⁷ He is not afraid of bad news;
his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.
- ⁸ His heart is steady; he will not be afraid,
until he looks in triumph on his adversaries.
- ⁹ He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever;
his horn is exalted in honor.
- ¹⁰ *The wicked man sees it and is angry;
he gnashes his teeth and melts away;
the desire of the wicked will perish!*

Again, this psalm really encapsulates the faithful words you would want for your parishioners to utter when they leave church this day and it describes the life you want them to lead. The whole prayer really reflects upon the blessing which comes to the one who “fears the LORD.” That fear is pretty much synonymous with faith, I believe.

The catalogue of blessings is considerable. This man who is blessed has many descendants, he is wealthy, light dawns upon him, he is not afraid of bad news and, perhaps most importantly, his is a righteousness which endures forever (surely the righteousness of God!). But it also describes the condition of his life. He deals justly and fairly in his business dealings, he is merciful and kind, and he gives to the poor freely. The excised verse ten give us the only dark shadow of the psalm. I suppose it is why it was cut out, but it goes so well with Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount right before our text today, the words about persecution. The world is watching us. Some will see the righteousness of Christ shining in our words and deeds and, because they love darkness, they will hate us for it. But he melts away and the desire of the wicked will perish! The man who fears the Lord lives in hope.

I Corinthians 2:1-12

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him

crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ *And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*

Paul talks a great deal about a secret knowledge, but what is that secret? What is the hidden thing revealed? The Spirit is the medium, the means to reveal the secret, but what is the secret? It is in verse 8. If the rulers of this age, the enemies, the forces of Satan, had known what they were doing, they would never have crucified Christ. For his crucifixion was the rupture of their power over humanity. The secret is the cross. The secret is that by losing, dying, and giving up, God has won the victory that power and success did not, could not win. The secret is that Christianity is not founded upon success and strength, but upon weakness and apparent failure.

The Corinthians are sliding into a Roman ethos of power politics in their congregation. Paul is appealing to them to remember who they are in Christ. He was a loser, like Paul's miserable attempts at speaking above were no eloquent. But through weakness and humility God wins the day.

Focus! Paul reminds the Corinthians and us of the unifying focus of our faith. Some years ago while serving the parish in southern Oregon, our neighbor, who owned some office buildings next door, proposed a land swap. He would trade us a piece of land for the ownership of part of our parking lot.

The congregation was not entirely sure what to do. Many simply did not trust this guy. In the words of one fellow, “He's so crooked he screws his socks on in the morning.” I really did not care. It was their property, I could see benefits to either way. I took upon myself to be the focus agent for the group. I told them that they could make either decision and that God did not have a right or wrong way for them, indeed he had a blessing for them either way. But I also made them

repeat this phrase after me, and I stood up several times during the course of the conversation and made them repeat it again when things got heated, "It's only a parking lot!" No one was going to heaven or hell for the decision we made. It simply did not rise to that level.

They took my rather silly suggestion with a great deal of good humor, actually. I stopped the discussion several times, and just before the vote we did it again and everyone laughed. It was, after all, only a parking lot and never something we ought to be angry about. We declined the offer, by the way.

Paul tells the folks in Corinth who are fighting that they need to get their eyes back on Jesus. He is the one who called them and he has made them into one body. Paul did not create this church; it was not their doing either. It was God's doing, the creation of Christ.

In the second part of the text, after he has their attention on this, he reminds them that God has given them a great gift, indeed several gifts. While the world does not get it, they do, they have access to the very hidden things of God.

But, frustratingly, he does not actually in this text relate what are the hidden things of God which we understand. In fact, as you keep reading, he doesn't really come out and say it. Was it because Paul did not think that it should be put on paper? Remember that the first Christians did not pray the Lord's Prayer publicly. That was reserved for assemblies of the baptized. Is this one of the "secret" mysteries which they did not even mention in sermons if the unbaptized were present? (Augustine is still doing this into the fifth century. When the sermon text included some of the mysteries of the Eucharist or something like that he would simply say, I cannot talk more about this here, because some of you are not catechized. I imagine that was a pretty strong inducement to enroll in catechism.)

Who knows why Paul does it this way, I don't. But the preacher who comes to this text will likely need to address what are these secrets which Christians know and the world considers folly. Considering he was talking to a group of folks who were in open conflict, I would guess it has something to do with forgiveness and reconciliation. The world thinks that the only answer to hurting me is to hurt back, or if that is impossible to bear a grudge, hurt someone else, or in some way to balance scales. When it comes to forgiveness, the world is just dense about this. It thinks forgiveness is folly, it is being a doormat, and it is the absolute wrong way to go.

But the Christian knows something else about it, or at least, he or she should. I am not sure, however, from my experience in Lutheran congregations that we actually believe it. Hence we might want to preach about this once in a while. Forgiveness unleashes the power of God's love in a community of people. That love binds us together and makes us a much better and more joyful community. Sins are sometimes the occasion for us to become much better!

Forgiveness is one of those words which we use all the time but don't really understand very well if we actually push the issue. The term is a metaphor which comes from the realm of

banking. Forgive is what bankers almost never do to loans. When they forgive a debt, it is gone, it simply ceases to exist. It is not that someone else has paid it off, the debt simply goes away.

In the Christian practice of forgiveness, we do a number of things which when taken together form forgiveness.

- 1. We acknowledge that what the other person did was wrong. This is not being a doormat in this regard. We are not simply rolling over and playing dead. We are standing up to say that something is wrong. You cannot forgive what is not wrong. This is where most of us in fact mess up at forgiveness. We don't actually forgive the other person, we understand what they have done. Indeed, most apologies are not appeals for forgiveness, they are appeals for understanding. "Sorry I called you a nitwit, I was not feeling well..." That is an appeal for you to understand why I did that, not to forgive it even though the "sorry" word is used. Christian forgiveness means that I don't listen to the excuses. We have to stop listening to the reasons for sins, as if they made a difference. I am not against understanding, indeed the world would be better with more understanding, but it is always a poor substitute for forgiveness. We need to simply stop the apology at "I'm sorry." If you put a comma and a "but" after that and include an explanation, then you are asking not for forgiveness but for me to understand it.*
- 2. We deliberately turn from vengeance, grudge bearing, or any other sort of scale balancing behavior. I am not going to solve the problem this way. This is a conscious decision on the part of the forgiver. It is turning away from the solutions of the world.*
- 3. We say that this sin, and this sinner, is one of the reasons Jesus died. The scales are balanced on Calvary, the penalty is paid in Jesus blood. That authorizes me to tell you that your sin is in one very real sense, simply gone and the sinner no longer bears the burden/debt of guilt.*
- 4. We pledge to "remember it red." It is Shakespeare who enjoins us to "forgive and forget" not God. While God pledges to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west, he never asks us to forget the sins of another. Indeed, I would not want you to. If someone has stolen, be kind to them, don't leave your cash lying around where they are tempted. Remember their weakness. You can forgive someone who has abused a child, you don't hire them as a baby sitter! But in forgiveness, we pledge to remember that past sin always is covered by the blood of Christ, hence red. I won't ever cast it back into your teeth and try to extract some payment from you for it. When we have a fight next week about something else, I won't drag this into the conversation. If I do, the problem is mine, not yours. I am then acting in bad faith.*

This ties to both the OT and Gospel lesson rather interestingly. The OT speaks of God present in his serving people. Jesus speaks of being salt and light for the world. The forgiving community is a bright light which calls to people, is intensely attractive to them. It is only viable as the

presence of God in our midst. It only works because it is the crucified who speaks my words of forgiveness with me, giving them the authority and power to effect what they would claim to do.

While I am not entirely sure what exactly Paul has in mind when he speaks of the secret things of Christianity, the Spirit taught mind of Christ, which the world scorns, I think this can qualify for many of our hearers today, and it could well be a message which they desperately need to hear. I don't think this is at all contrary to that mind either. When you read the rest of the story of the Corinthian correspondence, and here I am thinking of the first chapters of II Corinthians, it seems to be lived out by Paul himself. In II Corinthians the conflict which drives I Corinthians, the subsequent painful visit, and harsh letter has been resolved. Paul is almost bubbly as he writes the opening chapters. He speaks of seeing them as a new creation in Christ and as an ambassador of reconciliation, etc. To hearken back to the first chapter, he puts his arms around the Sosthenes character and embraces them there.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

I have never quite understood why so many people love the Sermon on the Mount. (My grammar editor in MSWord even knows to capitalize it!) It is not that I have a problem with the content, but the purpose of what Jesus says here. It seems designed to crush me. Just take a look at the last verses of our reading for today. If my righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, I won't enter heaven. These guys gave new meaning to religious zeal. They tithed from the mint plants in their gardens and had Bible studies that lasted all day. If my righteousness does not exceed theirs, I won't get in. Even they are not good enough.

The earlier verses don't do much to build me up either. I am salt, and if it don't do the salty thing, I might just get used as gravel. I am light, and the whole world is supposed to see me and give glory to God. Yet, whenever I got cut off by a car in traffic in Salt Lake City, it always

seemed they had a fish emblem on their bumper. (This was how the Christians identified themselves in that culture.)

Jesus has not come to abolish the Law and Prophets, yet, as soon as I raise this issue, the Seventh Day Adventist is in my face with his claim that I have done just that by not observing a Saturday Sabbath.

Do I really want to preach this text?

Yes, I do, and so do you. This is where it is really good to be a Lutheran. That old Law and Gospel dynamic is a blessing when you come to a text like this. Because it categorizes this work of Christ as his necessary and loving work of breaking my pride and crushing my sin, it allows my eyes to be opened to the powerful Gospel contained in this passage. Jesus has not come to overthrow and abolish the Law and Prophets, far from it, he has come himself to keep them, himself to fulfill them. God's righteous demand, the horror of my own failure in this regard, has been met by his loving gift in Christ.

Jesus can speak this hard word to me, he can make this a terror to anyone, because the answer is also right here in front of us. He has not come give me some new rules that I can keep this time. He is not interested in my obedience just for that obedience's sake. The one speaking these words is also the one who has kept this law, perfectly, without blemish or stain. He has not abolished it, he has fulfilled it. One might play with the idea of "fulfill" here – full and then filled? Jesus is not merely the keeper of the Law, but the one who has brought it to completion and perfection. There simply is not more law to be kept once he has done it.

The careful interpreter of the text will also notice something here. The Bible is more than an owner's manual of life, it is much more than a regular maintenance schedule and a list of things we should do. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's great love and promise, made to the first parents in the garden so long ago. This is God restoring that which was lost. Mankind fell into sin, and a man, a perfect man, is the way out of that morass. This isn't about us getting it right, it is all about God getting it right.

I imagine this is pretty obvious to you, but you might be surprised at just how surprising this is to so many folks. I remember sitting in a seminar with a Presbyterian oriented guy in St. Andrews a few years ago. We were in a good theological conversation but we were simply talking past one another. I could not figure it out until I realized that he was using the word "authority" very differently from me. He used the word to mean God's authority to tell me how to live my life. I did not disagree that God had such authority, but that is a small part of God's authority. The much more significant authority possessed by God is the authority to define my life, to call it into being, to create it. He could only see God as the authority to make the rules. I was talking about the authority to make the life itself. We never did quite see eye to eye.

Law and Gospel

1. Jesus words of comparison are cruel and crushing. My righteousness must exceed even saintly people. Isaiah suggests that even my best moments, those church going, praying, hymn-singing, pious moments are contaminated. What is a human being to do? There is only one human whose doing makes any difference in the face of this. That human deed was done by a certain Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son, God's Son.
2. My sins, and now, thanks to Isaiah and Jesus, even my virtues all conspire against me. They are all telling me that I am a scoundrel and should be cut off from God, prayers unheard. But interestingly, God is not telling me that, at least not with his loudest voice. His actions speak so much louder than any words and he spoke loudest when he died on that cross for my sins. I call and find that he is right there. He promises me that he is always right there.
3. Though even my virtues are worthless of themselves, God's forgiveness now turns them also into something different. The worship which if offered in the economy of buying and selling God's favor would be rejected, in the new economy of God's grace bestowed upon me have become the thankful and joyfully received words of a dear child to his father. It is not the intrinsic value of the sacrifice, worship, or service that makes it precious to God. Its value is found in the relationship which he established in Christ.
4. And that relationship connects me to the very heart of His kingdom. The sins which I commit and my neighbors against me, these things should be the end of friendships and relationships with each other. At this rate I will die alone in some nursing home, abandoned long ago by my family and friends. But God has another thing in mind. He has introduced me to the very mind of Christ. He has given me the authority to forgive sins, and the belief that when another forgives me, that is spoken with heavenly authority. Sins can be forgiven, they have already been forgiven, and that makes a tremendous difference as broken folks like me deal with broken folks like you.

Sermon Themes

1. A Righteousness Which Exceeds That of the Scribes and Pharisees (OT and Gospel Lessons: That God would comfort and empower the hearers – he has given them the demanded righteousness in Christ which now empowers a life which truly worships and bears beautiful testimony to Christ.)

This sermon has a twofold goal, really, perhaps too ambitious, but I think the first part can be taken care of quite easily. The question which the preacher wants to ask in this case is whether he wants to get through it easily. If you remove this tension too quickly, you might wonder if there is any energy for the second part. But I believe that it can still be done, and the tension can move from destructive to healthy.

The first part of this really hangs on the words of Jesus and Isaiah to their communities. Jesus speaks of a righteousness which exceeds the holiest people of his day. Isaiah notices that the church going folk of his time are repulsive to God in their worship. *They go to church and expect God to notice this. But their eyes are cast upward and not outward to the needs of the people around them.* Both of them set up a terrible scenario for the religiously motivated person. *Jesus raises the bar impossibly high. The Scribes and Pharisees are hyper-religious. They tithed their spices that grew in the garden. Jesus says that is not enough.* There is no way to please God. Please note that this will not be a problem for the atheist. He doesn't think there is a God to please. But for the person who is certain of God's existence, this presents a terrible quandary. *But the preacher needs to let that settle in a little bit. Our culture does not really feel that quandary, does not really allow us to quail under God's frown. We imagine he is an affable fellow who will punch us in the arm and say, "Gee, you really shouldn't have done that." but that is about as far as it goes. Jesus explicitly says that we do not keep the Law by lowering the bar. The preacher cannot be lowering that bar.*

So far, this sermon is a rant. It is a good and honest rant. The truth is that we do not live up to the calling we have received. Anyone who looks at Christians will find them to be hypocrites. Isaiah and Jesus make that very clear. But a rant on our hypocrisy will change nothing. The Law, for all that it does to us, doesn't really change us into another sort of people. It is like the fellow who tells me I have a disease, but offers no cure. It exhorts me to do better, but it cannot make me better.

The answer is easy, but as I said the preacher may not want it to be. The righteousness which exceeds the scribal and pharisaical righteousness is given in Christ. *Notice that Isaiah says that our righteousness goes before us. Isn't that Jesus?* He fulfills the law as even they do not. He gives us that righteousness in his death and resurrection, in the baptism by which he touches us and the Sacrament by which he feeds us. God is our help; he has heard our cry and answered "here I am."

But for too many of us this has become an excuse for why I don't need to do much instead of an empowerment to do more. Such a reaction to the gift of God is nothing less than faithless and we need to examine that reality. It was the church goers that Isaiah scolded, and he really is suggesting that they are not the people of God. Jesus is destroying the hope of the people who are already pretty sure that they have been confirmed, know the catechism, and are surely on the roster of heaven's invited guests.

That said, look at the lives of the people who believed what Jesus said here and held that he was indeed the very righteousness and salvation of God. The disciples to a man would spend their lives in his service and shed their blood on his account. This was not of their doing, it was Christ living and dying in them and through them. He empowered them to be these people because he was right there, present.

The gift of Jesus does not release us to lives of sloth and indolence, grousing about getting up on Sunday and begrudging every moment of service to our fellow human being. The gift of Jesus empowers our worship. We have the promise that God hears us. He is here to forgive us and loves us. He unites himself to us and walks out those doors with us into the world in which we live. His presence empowers our service, now every moment of every day is lived for him, for he has purchased them all and filled every moment with his overflowing goodness.

2. Knowing and Living the Mind of Christ (The Epistle lesson: That the God would move the hearer to become a forgiver of sins, thus knowing and living the mind of Christ, the secret thing of God.)

Paul's words in the Epistle might intimidate us. He speaks of hidden things and the power of God, but this is not hard for the one who has the Spirit. He says as much. God is revealing this in simple words and through powerful actions. The potent action is Paul's own embrace of Sosthenes at the beginning of this letter. The simple words are simply the truth that Jesus died for the sin and the sinner and now I don't need to get even anymore.

The preacher may want to use Isaiah 55 for this sermon – the passage in which God asserts that his ways are above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts. This is related to the steadfast love that he showed to David, (adulterous David?). One can argue that the human way is vengeance, God's way is forgiveness. Of course one could also simply go to the passage earlier in I Corinthians in which Paul speaks of the foolishness of God being wiser than the wisdom of men.

You may want to revisit the notes above under the Epistle lesson for this sermon. There I outlined one way to talk about forgiveness. I find that at the root of much of our conflict is a failure to forgive, really forgive. We use the words but mean something else, I think most folks actually substitute understanding for forgiveness. But the best that understanding can give us is the uneasy sense that we all understand that we are all screwed up and no one is immune from that. Understanding, for all its benefits, is really toxic to forgiveness. It is a good thing, but it is not forgiveness, it is conditional. Instead of creating a condition in you, the sinner, it creates a conditional requirement in me. I need to understand the sin/sinner in order to forgive.

Forgiveness, real forgiveness unleashes the very floodgates of love to create much stronger relationships. This is another secret wisdom of God which the world does not get. People who forgive one another are never quite the same again, they are better. Their relationships grow closer, their love for one another invigorates their conversation and

their compassion for one another. The preacher has to believe that before he preaches this sermon. Better, he should have experienced that before he preaches this sermon. [This really demands some illustration. Marriage might provide something. Every marriage has grounds for divorce somewhere in there. But forgiveness makes this possible – two people can become one flesh, united in life.](#)

This is the thing which the world simply does not understand. There is another way than vengeance, grudge bearing, scale balancing.

But be aware this is dangerous. The workers in the vineyard who spent the day in the hot sun and found that they were paid the same as the guys who only worked one hour were angry with the owner of the vineyard. Our human nature wants scales to balance. Our world works much better when the scales balance. There is no such thing as a free lunch! Debts cannot be forgiven without creating an incentive to default. Or so the reason of the world goes. This is not merely strange to the world, it will perceive this as dangerous, and our human nature will agree.

This is why the preacher needs to have an example or two ready to talk about this. And as is always true, don't tell stories someone else knows, tell your stories, or at least something that is not about strange people who live other lives in other places.

The sermon not only proclaims the power and strangeness of forgiveness, it would also seek to teach the very mechanism of forgiveness. I believe that too often we have forgotten this. We imagine that we have forgiven when we understand something. But understanding does not unleash the floodgates of love which forgiveness opens up in our hearts and the hearts of the person we are forgiving.

I believe that too often we have let our fears dictate our response here. We come to conflict and can only imagine the worst case scenario. But in Christ we can come to a conflicted situation with great hope. There is no sin bigger than his forgiveness, there is no sinner for whom he has not died. Sins, while they hurt and wreak havoc on the lives of folks, are also opportunities for us. Jesus does his best work in this sort of a situation and we need to come to them in hope.

It is critical that this forgiveness be exercised in our daily lives, with little things, the sort of things that we can understand, but it is better to forgive. Not only does forgiving these things make them better, but it also prepares us to forgive the big sins, the whoppers that we will never understand. We start with the folks we see at breakfast, the neighbors, the people who are all around us all the time.

This sermon really cries out for a personal illustration. I remember a couple of old duffers who did this and it changed them. The preacher wants to proclaim hope to situations which congregations often find hopeless. They have struggled with individuals and conflict for years and they have forgotten that there is another way. Often they can see no

way out of the conflict. They feel trapped in the conflict. They cannot see Jesus in that moment. You will want to instill that hope of a way out, and a story about people forgiving one another would be a powerful way to do that. But you will have to find that story, best if it is something that you have personally experienced. Those are always the best stories.

What about one sided forgiveness? We might include something about that. Sometimes the forgiver is ignored, sometimes the person who hurt us is dead. Bearing a grudge only hurts us. We can forgive the person who has hurt us long ago. We can say about that sin that Jesus has died for it. Perhaps they cannot hear us or will not hear us, but we can be unyoked from the burden of that sin, the economy of vengeance which sees our life as incomplete until the scales are balanced. Jesus balanced this in the cross. (Isaiah 58)

3. Here I Am (OT – That the hearer, moved by the Spirit of God, would cry out to God as the answer to all his/her problems, fully confident of God’s loving answer.)

Note: The preacher may want to see the notes in the One Year reading which accompany this about the Exodus 3:1-14 text. This is accidental, but I found the crossover most interesting.

This sermon wants to bring the hearer to the same place as the end of the OT lesson, the confident expectation that God, who has all the power, who created us, whose loves us, whose laws we have transgressed, but who has also forgiven us our sins in Christ, that God is listening to us, he loves us, and he works for our Good.

To get to that place, however, we have to contend with a number of misbeliefs, misunderstandings, and misconceptions which often produce and then are reinforced by a number of unhealthy and problematic practices within our lives.

- a. Since the Enlightenment it is considered gauche to be public in one’s faith. This has privatized our religion, often isolating the Christians. We cannot pray in public together, so we pray silently at our work place, or not at all. We might go the whole day and never realize that the guy in the cubicle next to me is doing the same thing.
- b. The radical atheist’s voice is increasingly heard as a voice of reason by a segment of the society. Strident and unduly sure of themselves, these fellows sneer at anyone who would call upon God, insisting that this is a form of weakness and even suggesting it is a mental deficiency. We often react to this ridicule by ducking and thereby further hiding our prayers, making our religion private.
- c. Most of us, however, don’t encounter a strident atheism in our lives, but we do encounter and embody what is perhaps a functional atheism. We just don’t imagine that God has anything to do with anything we actually encounter. My illness is a virus which has invaded my body and the solution is most likely my own immune system gearing up and expelling the invaders. The doctor doesn’t tell us that God is part of

the equation, and we just don't imagine that he is there either. It is an event that has a purely natural explanation. In the same way, God has largely been expelled from our everyday world. He is expected to show up when our car is spinning out of control on an icy road or when the doctor tells us that the natural processes will result in our death (heart disease or cancer or the like) but my job, my health, my car, my house, indeed almost everything in my life is pretty much a naturally God-free zone. Thus we do not bring these sorts of things to God, nor do we thank him for good things. He is not part of our speech in those regards and He is largely absent from our thought processes.

- d. The imagined departure of God from our lives has resulted in a particularly virulent form of nihilism and hopelessness. The optimism of the post-war generation has largely evaporated in financial crises, persistent unemployment, dysfunctional government, and interminable wars. We consider all the problems around us and we look to the reasonable and naturally derived potential solutions and we realize they are never going to work. Even Jesus tells us that we will always have the poor among us, after all. Because we do not envision God, with his loving and mysterious power, to be at work in anything around us, we are left to our own devices to solve these problems and we are overwhelmed by them. We have not hope embedded in our actions so we roll our window up when the guy stands at the top of the exit ramp with his cardboard sign. We do nothing. The hungry are not fed, the suffering of the poor is not alleviated, and we hope that the government will get its act together and do something for these folks. Forgetting that God cares deeply about these people and he has taken up residency in me and my life.
- e. Thus we find ourselves in church uttering prayers through lips which are unaccustomed to praying. We ramble off a list of family and friends who are suffering from cancer and various other ailments, and we leave worship with a bit of malaise. The phone call will likely be from the funeral home for most of those folks. Our prayers feel like they have fallen on indifferent ears.

So much for Law development! But that Law is necessary. My guess, however, is that you will want to pare that down by the group you have in front of you. Don't proclaim a Law that that applies to someone else!

But the Gospel is really what we are here to preach. We proclaim the active and involved presence of God. Of course the viruses are dealt with by the immune system of our body, but that hardly precludes God's activity there. Indeed, looking at this whole process one might ask how it could be imagined that this is not divine and governed by God.

But more importantly we proclaim the love of God in all this. He has created us and, in Christ redeemed us. He has come into this creation because he loves it. He is not disengaged from this world and its affairs, but he has intimately connected himself to this

world in Jesus. Its problems are his problems and his solutions are often effected through us.

This empowers the Christian life in healthy and good ways. I don't have the answers to all the issues that face us, but I know that the love of God will be required, and I have that. I can live with that, embody that, and do so with joyful expectation. I don't have to know what God has in mind for all this, but I can open my eyes and watch for it. It might be a great deal of fun and excitement! You don't have to invite every homeless guy into your home, in truth, I don't recommend it, but we can love the needy in so many ways.

I speak to God, he listens to me, and he cares about my problems great and small. He makes time for me, literally, he makes time. I am never a bother to him or an unwelcome voice, but he promises always to hear me with his loving, fatherly heart.