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Epiphany 6 Series C 2019

Phillip L. Brandt
Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Collect of the Day

O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequences of our sin may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“We who suffer justly the consequences of our sin.” You might just want to pause before we move on from those words in this prayer. Like many of these prayers it assumes a posture that doesn’t come naturally to a modern person. Our culture of outrage and victimhood tells us that suffering of course is unjust. We must fight it, protest, and assert our rights in the face of the wrong. Suffering is not the consequence of my problems. It must be someone else’s fault!

How will our people assume the posture of this prayer? If they don’t, the prayer’s petition that we be delivered by God’s goodness becomes an appeal to my righteousness. “Of course God loves me; why wouldn’t he?” I am the poor victim here and God’s help is something akin to the A-Team or some superhero who only saves the innocent victims and smashes the criminal mastermind or evil-doer.

But this is not the God who is revealed to us in the Bible. Read the prophets and the narrative of the years prior to and including the Babylonian exile. The prophets are clear. The Babylonians are the instrument of God’s judgment and the horrors visited upon the Israelites are the just consequences of the sins of the people. The prophets and the history will not let the reader wriggle off that barb. The OT lesson today is written by a man living through that horror unfolding before his very eyes, Jeremiah.

This sounds like it is grim. But the preacher will have to keep this in balance. The prayer is that we be delivered and despite who we are God does hear our prayers graciously and he does deliver. Jesus speaks of blessings. Jeremiah speaks of another sort of man or woman, the one who trusts in God. This one is like a mighty tree planted by a stream. The drought (suffering) does not really concern him. His roots are fed by the sweet waters of another source. Blessed is that man or woman.

Perhaps the place we need to go is to the very first part of this prayers. We simply ask God to hear our prayers. I have told this story before, but it bears repetition. I hope you don’t use this in a sermon because you have a better story of God answering your prayers. At my second parish we were building a new school with Laborers for Christ. Monday morning, very early, just after I arrived, our project foreman caught me and asked me to pray. Willie was a great and pious man. I came to have great respect for him. We were on a tight schedule to get this done before school started. He pointed to a power pole on the edge of our property and said that by Friday he needed the pole moved to another place on the property. If that did not happen, work would stop and we would not make the opening day of school. The power company was backed up and their schedule was more than two weeks out. So we prayed.

I had a bible study on Monday mornings. It was a pericope study, in fact, the very beginnings of these notes. It was mostly little old ladies. You know the sort who come to Monday morning studies. They sort of live at church. I explained it to them and we prayed.

After the study I went to the other side of the building where the children in our summer program were being dismissed so I could greet a few parents. A woman whose son was in the program but whom I had never met asked me how the new building was going. I told her we were amazed by the Laborer's for Christ but that we were facing this challenge with the power company. She looked at me and said, "My husband's desk is right next to the man who schedules all the crews for the power company. Let me talk to him." The power pole was in the right place on Thursday.

I have never since doubted that God, despite our failings and sins, graciously hears the prayers of his people and delivers them.

Readings

Jeremiah 17:5-8

¹ *"The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, ² while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree and on the high hills, ³ on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. ⁴ You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever."*

⁵ Thus says the LORD:

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man
and makes flesh his strength,
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

⁶ He is like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see any good come.
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit."

⁹ *The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?*

¹⁰ *“I the LORD search the heart
and test the mind,
to give every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his deeds.”*

I get why the editors of the readings have made the decisions they have made on this pericope, but at the same time I am convinced that the preacher has to have the context here. In the verses immediately before the reading God describes the problem – the hearts and altars of Israel have been inscribed with an iron pen with a diamond tip. Idolatry has been inscribed there. God will, in the words of the Collect of the Day bring upon them the just consequences of their sins. He will loosen their grasp on their inheritance. The Babylonians will pluck the city, the land, and the nation from their grasp. God had promised Abraham and his children a place but now because of their stubborn disbelief he would take it away.

This theme is picked up again after the brief poem which Jeremiah recites and which serves as our text. In fact, the poem does not break but continues into the following verses. The heart is deceitful above all things. The comparison which Jeremiah makes in the reading today between the one who trusts in God and the one who trusts in man has to be heard in the context of these verses or we will get this dreadfully wrong.

The problem for the preacher today is that we are primed to get this wrong. I teach at a university so I get to hear these things all the time. “Be what you want to be!” “Pursue your passion!” “Follow your heart.” “Do what you want.” Recently our student services folks, attentive to the zeitgeist, launched a new initiative addressed to increase our retention at CU. They wanted the student to pursue their desired future at a school which was meeting what they wanted. It sounds great until you realize that lurking in the depths of every human being is a real, live, heart. That heart is not a pure and good place filled with holy desires and beautiful impulses. As Jeremiah notes, the heart is deceitful above all things. Don’t even imagine that a good look in the cardiac mirror will reveal the truth to you.

So now we hear the words of Jeremiah’s text for today. The man who trusts in other men and his own flesh will be like a shrub in the desert, scorched by the sun and wind. He lives in scorched places, a salt land. No good will come of this. On the other hand the man who trusts in God is like a tree planted by a stream. He draws his nourishment and life from a source which does not fail. The heat and the drought do not wither his leaves. He still bears his fruit.

But where does that trust and the heart of which Jeremiah writes come from? If you come with the idea that your heart is still basically ok, perhaps a little warped, but still useable, like the trash can lid I ran over a while ago. It wasn’t pretty but when I bent it back into a circle and smashed back on the can, it could still work.

Remember our hearts are deceitful. My own heart is trying to deceive me into believing that this is the case. It doesn't need God's radical treatment. It is still able to do its thing, granted not quite as well as it once did. But it still is a heart and it good to be a heart.

Jeremiah does not think so. The heart is deceitful. On the hearts of Israel someone has carved in the litany of idolatry with a diamond tipped stylus. This is not a superficial pencil. This is not even a permanent sharpie marker which might come out with the right chemicals. This is in the grain, deep.

So how will we be that second sort of person, that man whose roots are in the stream and whose fruit does not fail? How will we be that man who trusts in the LORD? My heart has idolatry inscribed deeply into it. I worry far more about my 401K than I do about my offering check. I am more concerned with my doctor's lab report than the nagging guilt about my dishonesty at work or at home. I have charted out my life and it looks unsurprisingly like the comfortable goals which I have set for myself. My plans don't ask what God has in mind for me, but what I have in mind for me. Do I really think that I have a heart any different from the ancient Israelite who bowed before Baal and Asherah's altars? Take a step back and read the advertisements which solicit our spending (offerings) and which demand our time (worship). The names have changed but idolatry might lie at the bottom of all of it. Can we really change this? No. God must change this.

Which leads to the second reading: Psalm 1

Psalm 1

¹ Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

I use this psalm when I teach Old Testament to give my students a little exercise in reading Hebrew parallels. Hebrew loves to set two things side by side. Sometimes they are opposites such as the content of vss. 3 and 4 above. The wicked man and the righteous man.

Sometimes, however, the comparisons are synthetic or building. The first verse is an example of this. The man who walks, stands, and sits, is getting more and more passive in his wickedness. The Psalmist seems to be going somewhere with this.

Sometimes the comparison is between two like things and I find these to be the most interesting. In verse two the man delights in the Law of the LORD. And on his Law he meditates day and night. It looks like they are exactly the same, but they are not. It is one thing to delight in the Law when it confronts me, to rejoice in the active doing of it. But the second half of the verse has the fellow pondering the law, meditating upon it, day and night, all the time.

If you have been reading this in sequence, you know that Jeremiah has written a poem which is very similar. The comparison between the righteous and wicked man. One is a shrub/chaff in the desert wind. The other is a tree planted by the stream which never lacks for water.

But look very carefully at verse six of this psalm. It contrasts two things but also compares them. It is critical that the reader pay attention to exactly what is compared and contrasted. It is not the righteous man and the wicked man who are compared/contrasted here. It is their way. The LORD knows the way of the righteous man. It is in his field of vision. He sees it and knows it. But the way of the wicked perishes, but not the wicked man himself.

I am not proposing some sort of universalism here. I do believe that people go to hell and that the only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ. That is why I believe in him. But if my heart is wicked and there is nothing I can do about it, this psalm seems to be telling me that this path of wickedness I find myself on so often is destined for destruction. But it does not say I am. Why not? Is it because God gives a new heart of flesh to replace this heart of stone inscribed with idolatrous foolishness?

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem and the religious leaders urged him to quiet his exuberant Galilean devotees, he said that if they were silent even the stones would cry out. Was he pointing at the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees when he said that? I sometimes think so.

It is God who plants that tree beside the waters. It is God who gives that heart which believes and trusts in God. It is not an act of the human will or the decision of a man.

I Corinthians 15:(1-11) 12-20

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in

accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Praise God, we get this reading on Easter as well and not only on the seldom read latter Sundays of Epiphany. The fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians is perhaps one of the most important chapters in the whole Bible. It is key to making sense of this letter. The reason the Corinthians, in Paul's estimation, were so messed up was because they had a fundamentally messed up theology of resurrection in play. Fix this and most of the rest of the problems in the congregation would eventually straighten out. Because this is not Easter Sunday, perhaps we will get the chance to reflect on the Resurrection with our people in a way which is more contemplative and thorough than an Easter morning sermon allows.

The gospel I preached, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved.

That line is worthy of a sermon right there. The people of Corinth and our parish have received this Gospel and in it they stand and by it they are saved. Paul speaks to three important things here. First of all, this Gospel is a thing believed or not believed. It is a word, a promise, a claim which one can either hold or reject, accept or deny. It is not a proclamation of Good News, a new and righteous reign utterly other than that of the world which normally enslaves us. It is the good news. Christ has risen from the dead. The old order has been broken. The tyranny of our ancient enemy who has held us in his grips since Eden's fall has finally been undone.

We stand in that right now. This is not some vague future hope which inspires us to something. It is a real thing right now. Jesus simply did not see death when he ministered in Galilee. When he encountered dead people he often said they were simply sleeping. It wasn't real to him. To all the folks around him, death seemed terribly real, but it wasn't to Jesus. The little girl in Luke 8 who had died, was only asleep. Jesus takes her by the hand and bids her wake up from that slumber and she does, to the amazement of disciples and her parents.

It is in that gospel gaze we stand right now. These eyes will surely close in death unless that final days arrives before I die. If I have not outlived my welcome in this world, people grieve. But Jesus will not really see my death and I am not sure that I will either. Jesus will one day call my name and I will stand again. I am in that gaze right now. I stand. The folks in ancient Corinth who first read these words. They continue to stand in that gaze. Jesus just refuses to see their death. He is stubborn that way. Has been for some time. I like that.

In this Gospel we also are being saved. Here is a word which I think we use too much. The metaphor has become stale in our ears. I sometimes like to ask folks who assert that they are saved if they are saved like all the stuff I have crammed on shelves in my basement. I have saved a great deal. Probably won't ever use it. That is not what we mean by saved in this context but they are often perplexed about just what it does mean. Saved, as it is used here, is best understood as the vigorous action of a lifeguard who jumps in to the pool to save a drowning person. Lifeguards even refer to these events as saves. Jesus has jumped into the pool to rescue us from this world. We are being saved as Paul writes these words, as we hear them, as He acts. Remember the story of my prayer in the discussion of the Collect? Jesus saves. That is far more than an encouragement from LCEF or Thrivent to fund your account with them.

For I delivered to you...what I received. This is terribly important and we often skip right over it. Paul was not making any of this up. He was preaching a Gospel which he received from those who had been with Jesus. And that Gospel was centered not on the cross but on the resurrection. Now, I firmly believe that the cross is implicit in the word resurrection and I also read Paul when he writes "I preach Christ crucified." At the same time, this is what Paul says he received. And you can imagine why. It was the resurrected Christ who confronted him on the road to Damascus. It was the resurrection of Christ which demonstrated his Lordship (Romans 1:4). Do yourself a favor, if you have not yet done so, use the search engine on Biblegateway or another online Bible search engine and look up the words "resurrection" and "raised" in Paul's letters. It is just good for you to read those passages. You will find he uses them repeatedly in this chapter.

The resurrection is the heart of the gospel message. I think sometimes we focus on the cross a little too much. It is the resurrection of Jesus that stunned Paul on the road to Damascus. It was the resurrection of Jesus which pushed into a deep re-reading and re-imagining of his Old Testament. It would be the resurrection of Christ which made him, in Paul's eyes, the fulfillment of all those OT promises.

Our faith is not in vain! If Christ is still moldering away in some grave, this whole Christian enterprise will collapse. It cannot stand. One of my colleagues on the religion faculty taught courses in world religions. He invited practitioners of various religions to come and address students and field questions. It was a way to let the students experience those religions first hand instead of through a proxy. He became friends with the Muslim Imam who regularly came. The Imam asked him "What would it take for you to become a Muslim?" My friend said the words just came to his lips, "If Jesus had not risen from the dead." But Jesus has risen from the dead. He is still a Christian, by the way.

Paul puts the resurrection in this sort of a central place. How will we let it take its place in the lives of our people today? What will it have to muscle out of the way? What will need to cede that central place in our thinking, doing, speaking, and feeling? Jesus has risen from the dead and that changes everything from the way that approach brushing my teeth in the morning to the way that spend my money and love my family. Jesus has risen from the dead.

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

²⁰ And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

²⁷ *“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹ And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.*

I have extended the reading briefly, but be aware that these words are picked up next week. You will hear them then.

This is usually called the Sermon on the Plain and it is the lesser brother of the more famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. We get the Sermon on the Mount in year A but it also frequently is silenced by the migration of Easter, appearing in the seldom used days of late Epiphany and picked up again in the first propers after the Feast of Trinity. We always get the Beatitudes in the Day of All Saints, so it is heard.

I am always struck by how much people like the Sermon on the Mount. I am not certain that this is sensible on their part. Jesus seems to be laying impossibly heavy burdens on our shoulders, setting the bar unrealistically high. Is it a perverse love of the Law, especially one which lets us apply it to others that we feel here? Or is it something else? The Sermon on the Plain is similar.

Scholars are torn up about the parallels between this passage in Luke and the one in Matthew. Is this the same sermon but recast by Luke? Or by Matthew? Why the differences? Why the similarities? Don't let that bother you. I can only imagine that Jesus reused material and probably preached these words more than twice. If it is recording the same event, then Luke has something else to tell us about Jesus. It might be a good idea to listen to what he says.

Luke connects this sermon to the deeds of Jesus. The massive crowds are following Jesus with a reason. He is healing, performing miracles, and casting out demons. Apparently if they just touch him power flows out of him. This sort of behavior is apt to draw a crowd. But Luke is doing more than just explaining their presence. He is also connecting the words which follow to this ministry of Christ. These are healing words for a terribly broken, even demonic world. Jesus mere touch is enough. His words are even better and because they can be written down and remembered, re-spoken, and re-presented, they allow the hearer to be in the presence of this Jesus as the crowds of long ago were in his presence.

There is much good to be done in a comparison with Matthew, but I wonder if sometimes we forget to listen to Luke in this. Jesus speaks blessing to the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated people. Whom does he have in mind? The clearest and simplest reading of this is that means simply the folks who are on the bottom of the socio-economic heap, the folks who do not have enough to eat and who have no homes or security. The kingdom of heaven is for these folks. The blessing belongs to them. This is the sort of text to make Lutheran Community Services happy. Of course this means we also then know what the blessing is. Jesus has been healing the sick, but he has also fed the poor, comforted the grieving, and generally been do good things for needy folks.

But when Jesus speaks of the hated he takes it to a very specific place. You know exactly who are the hated folks. They are the ones hated for the name of Jesus. Their blessing calls for joy in the face of their persecution. They should leap for joy when they are hated. You are in good company. They treated God's prophets in the same way.

But the blessing is not so clearly articulated here. The poor inherit, the hungry are fed, and the weeping laugh. It would seem that, if we follow our pattern, the blessing for the persecuted would be an end to the persecution. If blessing for the hungry, the poor, and the weeping is some amelioration of their condition. But they own their persecution and apparently get to keep it.

Unlike Matthew Luke goes on to a series of woeful statements. The opposite of the blessings are spoken. The rich, the satiated, the laughing and well-esteemed folks will see a terrible reversal. If we preach the second half of this like we do the first half, we almost cannot but have our own congregations in our sights. My experience in preaching in LCMS congregations is not that I am addressing gaunt, half-starved and impoverished folks. If anything, the Lutherans I know tend to be a little on the round end of the body type spectrum. Is Jesus condemning us? If we are going to honestly preach this passage do we need to assume some socialist high ground and sound like certain popular politicians today as they bash rich people but being rich? Is that what Jesus is doing here? He might be. I am always somewhat suspicious of an interpretation which gets me out of asking tough questions about myself and my spending habits. That said, I am going to do just that right now.

I assert that the best reading of these opening words of the Sermon on the Plain may not be the condemnation that a simple or simplistic reading of the first half of this passage suggests. Who are the poor and rich in this passage? Who are the weeping and laughing, the hungry and sated? I think the key to this passage is the expansion of the description of the reviled (vss. 22-23) and where Jesus takes this message in the verses which follow.

Luther is said to have written “We are all beggars” on the night before he crawled into his deathbed. The scrap of paper was found on the table after he had passed away. Luther seems to have seen himself in the first half of this passage, among the poor, weeping, hungry folks. A quick glance at Cranach’s portrait of the later Luther does not suggest a fellow who was deprived of too many bratwurst. There are multiple chins involved here. How can Luther say he is a beggar?



Of course the answer is found not in the monetized view of the world with which we normally see, but in a spiritual look. The human being who holds himself or herself to be flush and secure and esteemed by God may have another thing coming. The man or woman who recognizes his/her poverty, hunger, need, and, in penitential grief, weeps over that condition, will indeed be satisfied.

What then of the veer into persecution in vss. 22-23? Here we are all indebted to solid Saxon whose portrait graces the prior paragraph. Luther understood the bitter truth that the ways of Christ and the ways of the world were in diametric and ferocious opposition to one another. The ways of the kingdom of God are not merely strange to the world. They are anathema, loathsome, and intolerable. Indeed, sometimes it is the way we know we are hitting the mark, when people reject us. This is embedded in what we often call the Theology of the Cross, but which is better stated being a Theologian of the Cross. It is not an abstract but an embodied reality. This cross is a preached and lived thing.

My father used to have a man who would greet him on the way out of services with these words on his lips, “Pastor, I hope they were listening.” After a few times of this, my father held his hand, looked him in the eye, and softly said, “I hope you were listening.” My father also put himself in that hoped-for audience. The preaching of law and gospel shatters the securities that

my old sinner constructs for myself. The guarantees and assurances which look to anything other than Christ will end in weeping, and hunger, and death. Only when I am poor, hungry, tearful, and reviled by self and others can I be that person who does what Jesus commends to me in the paragraph which follows. Then I am able to love the neighbor, even the enemy. Their abuse and their hatred are no longer a real concern for me. I have been blessed by Jesus and they cannot take that away, even if they kill me. So I can bless them. If they take all I have, they have not taken Him.

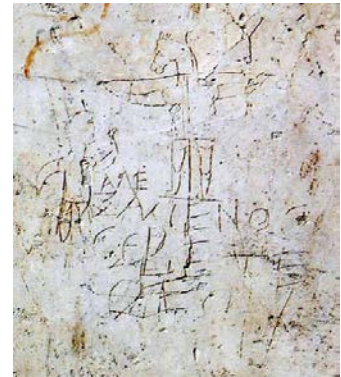
This picture of a human being which Jesus paints for us next week in the reading seems so far from me and the people whom I have served as a pastor and taught as a professor. The old man lurks in me as much as he does in all of us. He gets offended easily, delights in the suffering of my enemy, and would call down curses on his head. He craves respectability and a security which makes sense to him. But this is vain and empty. It will let me down. Jeremiah told us cursed is the man who trusts in men, even in their own flesh. Trust only in God.

Law and Gospel

1. Life sometimes sucks. Promises get broken. Health fails. Children break your heart. The Church can treat you very badly. The government is a mess. Social mores are going to pot (quite literally in Oregon!). This whole thing just looks messed up. But the Christian doesn't lose heart. In what was surely the most messed up day ever, the sinless Son of God hung on a tree, executed as a common criminal. There is no suffering beneath God's notice. He has had his heart broken too. Just read Hosea. He has drawn ragged breath until he could not anymore. His own family tried to have him committed as a lunatic. It was his own people who shouted "Crucify!" in Pilate's square. God sees the poor and hungry and grieving people and he has given us Jesus.
2. The worst of this life is not life, but it is death. What is life but a temporary reprieve? And if we escape does not old age make us long for the grave? So I exercise and eat right, take my vitamins and supplements, and die anyway. But Jesus, who took my life to himself and died my death, did not stay dead. He rose. And that has changed everything. I will close my eyes in death to be sure. But baptized with him I shall be raised. Jesus just doesn't really recognize death as death anymore. By the same power which called light into being, he will call my name. I shall live that day.
3. Yeah, yeah, I know, we say it every spring – He is risen! And then we go back to dismal lives of suffering and pain. What has he done lately! The luster is off that Easter message it seems. I have become jaded and cynical and wonder if it is really true. The church can easily become a social group and a debating society in which politics plays the greater part over against the joy of the redeemed at the resurrection of Christ. Paul wrote these words years after his encounter with the risen Christ. He has endured much. He is still excited about this. That joy is not his doing. It is Christ who has not left us with nothing but a decaying afterglow of resurrection joy. Christ is celebrating resurrection right now. He has a smile on his face. It is no accident that so many parables he told end with a

party. He likes a good time and brings pleasure eternal. He pushes through the cynicism to our grumpy hearts and gives us real joy.

4. When I am honest with myself, I have to admit that I am getting what I deserve when I suffer. I have a heart problem and I cannot fix it. It is not really the case that my interior self is good and my exterior is a problem. The problem goes all the way to the root of my being. The lies I tell and the self-serving deeds I do are not anomalies but authentically me. I cannot love God with my whole heart. There is always that old stinker lurking within me who secretly loves the sin I confess, who craves the attention, and who would do anything to get what he secretly desires. I cannot get rid of that old man. This is why Christ has come. He gives me his perfect obedience, his true love, and his stalwart confidence in the Father. Now my life becomes something other than the wretched story which sin has written. Now my life bears witness to another truth. My suffering not only speaks of what I deserve but of my connection with Jesus.
5. The world seems to be rejecting what we say. After over a millennium of being the voice of God in the west, Christianity is taking some lumps. People are turning to others, ignoring us, ridiculing us, or declaring that the Bible's god is a horrible abuser and an evil god. Can more active persecution be far behind? The Christian needs to remember the words of Jesus. He expected this and our movement was born as a despised and reviled movement. The image on the right is one of the earliest depictions of Christ. It is not complimentary. The caption says something to the effect of "Alexander worships his God." It is a man on a cross but he has a donkey's head. The graffiti "artist" is making fun of this Christian and his God. This was normal for the first Christians. And Jesus says that is OK. It does not mean he has abandoned us, indeed, his prophets and his people have often been treated this way. God loves his persecuted and reviled church and the witness to Jesus which it bears, sometimes in blood.



Sermon Ideas

1. Blessed is the man... (OT and Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would strip from us our idolatry and cast us helpless and powerless upon the gracious mercy of God.)

Jeremiah and Jesus are not playing nice with us. They are exposing one of our most deeply held idolatries, the idolatry of self, the idea that I can do this Christian thing, I've got this covered. I don't. Jeremiah just lays it out. It is the heart relationship with God that matters. Trust God. Don't trust anything else. What the pericope leaves out, however, is that our hearts are terminally tuned to trusting something else. We are like trains rolling on twisted tracks. This will not end well.

Jesus tells us much the same story. Real blessing, food for the real hunger, comfort for the deepest of grief, an inheritance which wipes out the deepest poverty only comes from Jesus. Find your wealth, your comfort, your sustenance anywhere else and this will not end well.

Don't think the world will understand this. Your own sinful heart won't understand this. It makes no sense. You will revile yourself and the world will join it, rejoice in that moment. You are as close to right as you are going to get. When the world calls you "Loser!" smile. It said that about Jesus and all his servants. You are in good company.

In order for this sermon to work the preacher will need to know his people well and the idols of their hearts. What do they really trust? My first parish was in a comfortable suburb of a small city. They were successful people who had comfortable incomes and fat pensions. They were paying down their houses ahead of schedule and were living the sorts of lives that financial planners encourage. Their idols were often found there. They were difficult to separate from the people. Jesus was right, the rich man is hard to bring to heaven.

My second parish was in a community many socio-economic steps below that first congregation. There was a very thin veneer of professionals in town who did well. Some of them came to church there. But most of the folks in the pews were loggers and the various dependents of saw mills and the trucking industries which supported timber. It has the lowest per capita income of any county in the state. But it was a transplanted bit of the Bible belt, filled with folks who had migrated from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee to California in the great depression and north to the timber mills during WWII. The whole community had made a decision for Jesus and they trusted it. Their decision was their idol. This sermon would sound very different in both of those communities. How will it sound in yours?

The danger of the sermon is that working them into the place they need to be may simply overwhelm the good news which is intended for that person. The poor, famished, weeping soul which has been stripped of its idolatry is gifted with heaven itself, fed by Christ's own hand, and given laughter in place of weeping and the oil of gladness for their ashes.

2. He has risen and that changes everything! (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would rejuvenate the Christian to joy at the resurrection of Christ.)

We get this text on Easter regularly. But this is not the great festival. It is always a little Easter so resurrection is never out of style, but this day and next week (when this reading will continue) should give us a chance to ponder deeply the resurrection. The law of this sermon really is that we are cynical and jaded people about the resurrection. The good news that Jesus has risen from the dead inspires either great fear or "alleluia!" in the one who really hears it, not the languid yawns and watch checking which I sometimes see from pulpits. (I am assuming they got up early to work at the Easter breakfast!)

Our culture is a culture which is terrified of boredom. We cannot handle not having something to do every moment. Smart phones have only made this much worse. Jesus resurrection can too easily become a stale meme, yesterday's news. We don't need to modernize this with some rap music and a few edgy phrases.

Paul asserts in this passage that the resurrection stands at the very heart of Christianity. It is what was given to him and what he carefully handed on to the folks in Corinth and us. Jesus has risen from the dead. The preacher will now want to ask "so what?" How is it that Paul can say that is so important? I commend to you some of the writing of Jeff Gibbs from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis on this. I have included an article he wrote in the CJ several years ago. I highly encourage it.

The preacher will want to find therein the terrible thing that resurrection makes good once more. It might be simply we are dead and then alive. For many folks, a lot more of this broken life doesn't sound so good. Consider what the resurrection means for you personally and how Jesus risen has changed everything. Could you even imagine if he had not? What would change? There will be your best sermon.

3. When they revile you (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would inoculate the hearer from the first assault of persecution, replacing fear with a stalwart faith.)

Since Constantine's declaration for Christianity over 1600 years ago, Christianity has had a pretty good run, especially in the West. 1400 years of Islam and Communism have made it a dicey thing for a lot of our eastern Christian brethren. But that Constantinian consensus seems to be breaking down and Christianity should not likely expect to retain that privileged space in community. Already there are attempts to take away tax exemptions and some would chip away at protections for religion in state and federal laws.

But even more pernicious is the cultural displacement of Christianity from its privileged position. It simply no longer has the voice it once did. Read the letters of Civil War soldiers home and be amazed at the fluency and ease with which they speak of faith. It is as though they are in a completely different world from our coarse and debased emails, memes, tweets, and Instagram. I have students who are devout Christians in my classes. I read their papers but they are terrified to speak of it. They are not afraid of me; they fear their peers and what they will say. The Christian faith has become risible, gauche, and impolitic. Court appointees are deemed unacceptable because they are Christian in some circles. A Pagan would be ok. Not a Christian.

Jesus tells us to rejoice when we are reviled. This is not new. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and all the prophets of old were not accepted. Jesus was persecuted, arrested, put to death. 11 of the 12 apostles endured martyrdom. Only John died of old age, but was exiled to Patmos as an old man. We should not wonder at this. Take a clue from brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries where persecution is the normal state. They are not cowering in fear. They do not wonder where God is or whether he has abandoned them. They know that Jesus suffered too. They look like him now. And they are glad.

The enemy will use this to try to silence you. But he does this because he knows something that Jesus knows too. When you suffer your voice gets louder and speaks with a greater authority. Jesus knows that the Gospel is loathsome to this world. He endured crucifixion in part because the world lashed out at him as it will lash out at us. But just as his death on the cross and resurrection from the tomb was the undoing of this world's prince, so too our suffering and persecution is a sign of satan's defeat.

Do not seek suffering, but when it comes, do not run and do not get quiet. These are the moments when the resurrected Christ, holes in hands and feet which bear testimony to his great work, is at work in you. You look much like him in your humiliation and suffering. Hear his admonition and encouragement today. Smile. Rejoice. You are in very good company.