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## Epiphany 7 Series A 2017

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## **Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Feb 19**

Christian preachers proclaim the Gospel, the Good News, and as Lutheran proclaimers of that Good News we notice that this proclamation happens in a tension we call Law and Gospel. That polarity marks our tradition and is actually one of the things about being Lutheran which many outside our tradition find attractive, at least those who actually look at it.

Law and Gospel is a polarity, a tension, created by two opposite forces. As C. F. W. Walther said in his lectures on Law and Gospel, we find in reading Scripture that there are two mutually contradictory doctrines in Scripture. One is the Law which tells us that we must be perfect and without flaw, that God has laid large demands upon us and expects them to be fulfilled. Our eternal fate hangs on this. Ultimately our biggest problem is a God problem, even bigger than death, bigger than the suffering which is wrought by our sinfulness, bigger than our enemy Satan who delights in our suffering.

On the other hand, we also hear in Scripture of the Gospel, the Good News that God has, in Christ, fulfilled every demand which the Law has laid upon us. He has given to us the very fulfillment of the law which we could not obtain. He has clothed us in a righteousness which is not our own. He has remade us in his image, drawing up from the waters of baptism a new human being who delights in obedience rendered to God and who is perfect in every way.

In this way we say that the Law and Gospel need one another. To preach only the Gospel without the law is like trying to stretch a rubber band by tugging on it, but without securing the other end. It simply follows you along. You need to grasp it on both ends to create the tension. The further you pull it apart, the more tension it has, the more energy it has. (Indeed, you need considerable tension to create the satisfying “thwack” and shriek you are looking for when you have snuck up on your older sister with that rubber band and given her a good sting with it. In that situation, as in some preaching, it also helps to be able run very fast.)

Our temptation is always to soften that law and somehow to make it attainable. But to do so is to weaken the Gospel. When we lower the bar of heaven, the Gospel becomes pale and lifeless, unable to inspire the hearer. Like a battery, the poles have to be opposite of one another. If you make the law nice, the Gospel will move toward the Law. Go far enough and the result will be a non-tension which ends up being simple a limp Law and no Gospel which inspires nothing and calls for nothing.

But this is our human tendency. Why do we want that? Do we simply not want to be the bearer of bad news? Are we afraid the tension in the Law/Gospel rubber band will break and shatter us in the process? Do we imagine that somehow we don't need to do that part? Or do we struggle with the scandal of Walther's statement above. Do we want our Bible to be all on the same page all the time? Do we have a hard time seeing the contradiction which is only resolved in salvation through faith in Jesus?

In the Gospel reading we hear today, Jesus speaks in some of the strongest Law and Gospel language we have in all Scripture. Can you hear his demands? Can you hear his gift? Can you preach them both?

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God is the strength of all who trust in him. Of course that implies that I am weak. But that is true. I really like the use of the verb trust here, much better than believe for our people, most of whom hold that belief is a weak form of knowledge, but that is just not so. We trust a bridge to hold us up when we walk across. We trust the guy who is coming toward us on a two lane road to stay in his lane. We trust the person who writes us a check. Or we don't trust and demand cash, swerve off the road, refuse to get on the bridge, etc. Most of the time we trust a great deal and we often trust in some of the most important things of our lives.*

*Power is such a complicated thing in our lives. We are so used to those in power being corrupted by it. It is hard for us to hear of God's power without projecting some of that experience into our image of God. But human politicians, tycoons, and other possessors of power are corrupted by it, but God is not. The preacher will want to keep that in mind.*

*We trust in God that he will use his power for us mercifully. That entails him defending us against all adversity. I wonder what our people consider to be the adversity from they need to be defended? Do they turn to the problems of this life which afflict all humanity? Do they start with the economic, physical, mental, job-related, or family adversities? Do they think of the more spiritual things, the devil who loathes them, the grave which welcomes them or a loved one into it's cold clammy embrace, or the moral turpitude which infects them and leaves them listless and hopeless? People in England today who are flooded, people in places where the weather seems haywire, or whose homes have been decimated by tornado or something like that are probably looking for protection from another sort of adversity. Terrorism probably does not grip us to the same extent, but travelers to Sochi could bring no liquids on the plane.*

*Really it is from all these adversities which God protects and defends us. But as I noted above, I wonder if people are really aware that their greatest danger comes from God himself. The sharpest Law really tells me that God is my greatest enemy. Do they get it that in the cross God was interposing himself between himself and us, for our salvation and rescue? In this sense the traditional Trinitarian conclusion of these prayers is a constant reminder of what God has done. The only way we have understood the Trinity is through the revelation which happens in the act of salvation. I only can differentiate between the persons of the Trinity when I see what they have done in the divine effort to save me.*

*What are the adversities from which we need defending?*

1. *Is our freedom our adversity? Have we abused our freedom to our peril?*
2. *Some parishes are questioning their validity and viability. We often get into some planning mode and imagine that we need to fix the church or we will die. But that really belongs to God.*
3. *Is it culture – is the post-modern/post-Christian culture an adversity from which we need God's defending? Is adversity found in the reductive materialism which seems to drive so much of the world around us? It is as if God is completely absent from the world we live in. Has science simply replaced God for us?*
4. *Physical and emotional and usual fare of sickness, death, estrangement from family, etc.*
5. *Fear of forces beyond our control. Economic forces that will destroy my retirement accounts, environmental forces which I am encouraged to fix by recycling but I really don't know what will happen.*

## **Readings**

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. <sup>3</sup>*Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.* <sup>4</sup>*Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD your God.*

<sup>5</sup>“*When you offer a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD, you shall offer it so that you may be accepted.* <sup>6</sup>*It shall be eaten the same day you offer it or on the day after, and anything left over until the third day shall be burned up with fire.* <sup>7</sup>*If it is eaten at all on the third day, it is tainted; it will not be accepted,* <sup>8</sup>*and everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned what is holy to the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from his people.*

<sup>9</sup>“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup>And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

<sup>11</sup>“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. <sup>12</sup>You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

<sup>13</sup>“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. <sup>14</sup>You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

<sup>15</sup>“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

<sup>17</sup>“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

<sup>19</sup> “*You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.*

*When we last discussed this, the repetition of the phrase “I am the Lord” caught our attention. We thought it was doing several things inside this text.*

- 1. It drives it home, you know this by the end of reading this passage.*
- 2. It establishes God’s authority to make these demands.*
- 3. It establishes something about the nature of God. But to do this, you really need to make the next step, which is to say that the demands are in fact flowing out of God’s nature.*

*This brings us to a very important point about the Law of God. Yes, of course it tells me that I am a failure at keeping this law. But it more importantly tells me something about God. The law is a mirror, guide, and curb, as we famously sum up the functions of the law. But is it not also a prophet and a preacher of God’s nature? Is this simply revealing the image of God into which we were created and to which we are called once more, but is that demand really the imprint of God?*

*How does this change the hearing of the Law. It still accuses me, but it also becomes something good. It perfectly describes Christ, it perfectly describes God. It is also, in the same words, a promise.*

*Of course, while the preacher wants to proclaim this, he must remember that the law always accuses us (*Lex semper accusat!*) This means that while some of us at any given moment will be ready to hear this sort of a proclamation, the fact is that there will be someone in the congregation who will be convicted by the law and need that counter-tension of the gospel. It is only in heaven that we will ever understand this Law as simply the revelation of Christ.*

*And of course, every time we hit the law, there will be that person who jumps to apply it to someone else, but cannot seem to hear it applied to self. Like an eel they will slip out of its grasp and the preacher must exercise a great deal of concentration to keep them in the grip of the law.*

*Why don’t we read verse 19? Is it because the dairy farmers cross-breed their Holstein heifers with an Angus bull frequently so the first calf is a little smaller and easier to deliver? Is it because we plant hybrid seed in our garden or our alb is made of a cotton and polyester blend? Why do we not read this verse?*

*When I was at Concordia Seminary, Horace Hummel used to speak of something called “The blessed Hiphil” which is a strange “voice” or stem in Hebrew. It is causative. There is no real*

*equivalent in English, at least not without a lot of extra vocabulary. But Hebrew has a whole voice of the verb which is dedicated almost wholly to this idea that another causes something to be or do in another person. It was powerfully used which God as the subject. He caused holiness to be and he caused men and women to do his righteous deeds and to proclaim his holy name.*

*You shall be holy because God is YHWH (LORD). This is one of those places in which that accommodation to our Jewish friends really does us something of a disservice as we read these words of the Torah in English. Jesus will be busily working against that misunderstanding, but we need to hash it out right here.*

*When we see the word LORD in all capitals like that, we know that this is not actually the word in the Hebrew text, at least not the consonants. The text itself has the tetragrammaton (literally the four letters): YHWH. This is the covenantal name of God. When Moses was on Mount Sinai before the burning bush and asked for the name of God, God replied with “I am who I am” or in transliterated Hebrew Ayey asher ayeh. When the people indeed asked Moses who had sent him, Moses simply conjugated the verb. He did not say “Ayeh” (I am) sent me, he said “Yahweh” (He is) sent me.*

*This is the name that God revealed when he kept the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the promise keeping name of God.*

*Now, remembering that, read the text above again. Take out the word “LORD” with all its emphasis on power and sovereignty and authority. Insert instead the gentle “I AM” or if you want to join Moses in his conjugation “HE IS” and fill that term with the promise keeping history which undergirds the Exodus event.*

*Thus, we read, that we are to be holy because your God is YHWH the promise keeper.*

*We will remember the homeless and hungry when we conduct our business, because he is YHWH, the promise keeper.*

*You will not lie or deceive because your God is YHWH who keeps his promises.*

*You will not abuse your neighbor or the hired man because your God is YHWH who keeps his promises*

*You will not corrupt the courts and deal unfairly with anyone because your God is YHWH who keeps his promises.*

*You should be getting the point by now. The presence of the word “LORD” completely changes the way that we read this passage. I believe that this same was true in Jesus day. The Jews of his time did not ever pronounce the tetragrammaton and substituted the word Lord in its place, just as our Bibles continue to do.*

*Normally this is not a big deal, we can teach around that, but here, in this passage in particular I think it is a problem. For when we come to this demand by God in the context of his power and*

*righteous rule, we cannot but hear this as Law, strong law. And I don't want to say that this is wrong, it is just not the whole story.*

*The real gospel is to be found in the fact that God is not asserting his almighty power here but his promise keeping. The folks Moses spoke to were not particularly good at these things either, but God was promising to work them in their lives. These are not only prescriptive of what they were supposed to do, they were and are also descriptive of what God makes of his people.*

*It is only in that second part that we have any hope. And it is that hope which we preach.*

*Notice the end of the description/prescription here in Leviticus. This is exactly what Jesus will talk about in the Gospel lesson. His reinterpretation of the Torah, according to Matthew, is far more an authentic and accurate reading of the text. That does not surprise us who confess Him to be the Word and thus the ultimate author of all Scripture, but it was certainly a surprise for his contemporaries.*

*Jesus will notice that this Torah was always understood to be an internal reality, not an externally imposed law. As Jeremiah envision, a Law written on the heart and which would not need to be taught (Jer 31).*

#### Psalm 119:33-40

- <sup>33</sup> Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;  
and I will keep it to the end.
- <sup>34</sup> Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.
- <sup>35</sup> Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.
- <sup>36</sup> Incline my heart to your testimonies,  
and not to selfish gain!
- <sup>37</sup> Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;  
and give me life in your ways.
- <sup>38</sup> Confirm to your servant your promise,  
that you may be feared.
- <sup>39</sup> Turn away the reproach that I dread,  
for your rules are good.
- <sup>40</sup> Behold, I long for your precepts;  
in your righteousness give me life!

*The psalmist, especially in Psalm 119, often expresses his great love for the Law/Torah. In the first years of the 1520's two of Luther's friends and colleagues got into an argument about the role of the Law in the faith and life of the Christian. They had just experienced the liberation of the Gospel and one of them, Agricola, held that the Law was impotent and supplanted by the*

*Gospel. The other, Philip Melancthon, argued that the Law was instrumental in salvation and the life of the Christian. Luther would disagree with them both and suggest something else. I think it was because his first lecture series as a professor of theology was on the Psalter and it was reading the psalms that he really forged the underpinnings of that liberating reformation. Agricola's formulation had no role for the Law and thus this psalm simply could make no sense. Melancthon, however, retained the Law, but it was not the dear treasure that Luther heard the Psalmist singing about.*

*Luther's genius in this regard was to note that the redeemed person was in fact coming back to the very Law which had accused them, but now approaching that Law from a completely different place. The Law was something else now and he found the theological justification of that and the theological meat of that right here in this psalm and others. The Law was no longer the terrible task master, but the beloved treasure from God.*

I Corinthians 3:10-23

<sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

<sup>18</sup> Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." <sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

*Paul continues to talk to the divided congregation in Corinth about his vision of what he has already done. It is important to remember that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians essentially failed. It would be followed up by a painful visit, a harsh letter, and finally, under the gentle ministrations of Titus, the congregation would be reconciled to Paul and re-enter a measure of health. At least that is what II Corinthians suggests to us.*

*Here, Paul wants them to see what his role is in all this and to contrast and compare that with the work of others.*

*Paul uses a metaphor here of a man who builds a house. Paul was the contractor who laid the foundation upon which another contractor, the framing crew, is building the house itself. Paul notes that this can be of various qualities of workmanship. It might be, according to a certain children's fable, a house built of straw, or sticks, or masonry. Each of these will be revealed on the "Day" clearly a reference to the end of the world but it might also simply be a time of testing and trial. The Day will come with fire and that will be the test of what we have built.*

*And then Paul says something really interesting. My building might be burned up. I will be saved, but like a person whom the firefighters pluck from the fire, but whose whole house is destroyed. A rural volunteer fire dept. used to have the motto that it had never lost a foundation. Jesus is the foundation, that is incapable of being lost. But the life which is built on the foundation can be utterly lost, or it can be saved and come with us to heavenly glory. In other words, we are not talking about salvation when we talk about this house. This is the rest of the story. Salvation is the foundation, that is true, no matter what house is built upon it. The foundation laid in Christ is true, but there is something to be lost here. What? Paul seems to envision that while we might go to heaven (be saved) it might not all be the same. What else is there?*

*Is he suggesting that while we are not talking about salvation that there are in fact elements of this life which are somehow important after that translation into heaven? He also seems to suggest this later in the book when he discusses love in chapter 13. It seems there that while prophecy and knowledge and the other spiritual gifts we enjoy here will not persevere in heaven, the gift of love does. We essentially get to participate in a heavenly virtue right now when we love.*

*Perhaps another way to think about it: in love we participate in Christ. When he comes again and brings us to heaven, he will finally and fully slay that old man who clings so tightly to us. Is Paul suggesting that there will be something which Christ does not slay? That a life built on the foundation of Christ and with the material of his love will involve elements which Christ will welcome into heaven?*

*This of course seems to transgress my piety which suggests that I am wholly corrupt and filled with sin. I confess on one hand that there is nothing good in me and that I am utterly unworthy. But if I persist in that confession after the redeeming work of Christ, am I not perhaps also denying that redeeming work? Do I look at some place in my life and find not my work, but Christ's work, holy and pure. And do I rejoice to see it?*

*In verses 16-17 Paul makes another interesting statement about this life, a statement which seems to come all the way from his own conversion experience. On the road to Damascus Jesus does not ask Paul why he persecutes his people. Jesus asks Paul why Paul is persecuting Jesus. "Why do you persecute me?" But Paul's persecution happened years after the ascension of Jesus. The claim seems to be made here and in the Acts passage that Jesus is found today in his people.*

*That is easy to see when the Disciples go on to do the same miracles that Jesus did. But also that appears when someone would destroy God's people, even when it is done by someone inside the fellowship. Does that put a different cast on the sort of words we speak to one another in moments of conflict? Does Paul here warn his audience that if they attack a Christian, they are attacking the very body of Christ and God will have something to say about that?*

*Does he give hope in this to the people who have been attacked. Their cause is in God's hands.*

*At the end of our pericope, Paul goes into an interesting string of ownership. We ought not to deceive ourselves. We are not wise, but we are fools. Humility is important here. Compared to God all of us look stupid. But God's wisdom is also interestingly interrelated. Because God owns all things, so do we. We belong to one another and to God, for God dwells in us because Christ dwells within us. I cannot get away from the fact that Paul seems to be telling his audience in Corinth that their conflict with one another is really almost like an "autoimmune" sort of disease, it is the body attacking itself, and finally really self-destructive. God will not permit this.*

Matthew 5:38-48

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

<sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

*Three years ago we were once more talking about retributive justice (eye for an eye/tooth for a tooth,) the idea that there is a payment which reflects the sin. Thus the murderer who is sentenced to death is suffering the atoning sacrifice which his sin demands. But that is a terrible and cruel way to run with this text. Playing by that letter of the law will always come back and bite us hard. The demands of perfection are rigorous and terrible to experience. But even retributive justice is not really just. It is simply fair. But real justice, real holiness is much deeper and more profound than that.*

*Jesus' system, which at first in this text seems to be attainable, in the real world of practice, proves absolutely impossible. Jesus gives the lie to that when he says that if are kind to the folks who are kind to us, we are simply acting human. But God calls for us to be divine, much more than human.*

*This text seems to be demanding that we die to self, that we lose the pride of being able, we are not able, but we are given a great gift in Christ. God is the covenant God, YHWH, who calls us into being something new in Christ. We want this for ourselves, but do we want it for the other? We want as much mercy as we can get, but it sure feels good to stick it to the bad guy who has hurt us. But God's demand and his mercy deny us that sort of thinking.*

*Matthew shows us Jesus the teacher, Jesus the master of the Torah. He is radically reinterpreting the Law/Torah of God for the people of his day.*

*You might want to familiarize yourself with the story of Solon, as told in the history of the Persians wars and written by Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, in fact the man often called the father of history. He recounts the time that the citizens of Athens realized that they needed to reconstitute their government, so they went to the wisest of their citizens and demanded that he craft a new constitution for them. He agreed, on one condition: that he be the only one who could make any amendments for ten years. They consented to his demand and he went about crafting a new constitution for them. Once they approved it, he took a ten year vacation out of the country so no one would be able to change his constitution for ten years.*

*The Torah is in many respects the Constitution of Judaism. At least that is how they read it. We don't really get the intensity with which they read it, but they pore over its every word like lawyers pondering the meaning of every comma and preposition in one of the ten articles of the Bill of Rights as they prepare for a Supreme Court case.*

*And Jesus is rewriting them before our very eyes. It is a little like George Washington coming along and saying that we don't really understand that whole bit about gun ownership in the Second Amendment or the non-establishment of a religion in the First Amendment. The Torah questions were hotly debated in their society as these constitutional questions are debated in our legal circles. They mattered to them in a way which we often don't see in our own study of Scripture. And Jesus is telling them that their whole conception of this Torah is wrong, misguided, and off base.*

*What is Jesus saying here? Where his Jewish audience of the first century, at least as depicted in Matthew, said that the Torah was simply a perfect way of expressing the law of the world, Jesus seems to be suggesting that the real message of the Torah is the unfathomable grace and love of God. The Torah sought to contain the urge for vengeance by saying that one could only extract a compensatory amount, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Jesus' take on the Torah simply will not allow for vengeance at all. Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give freely and love even the enemy. The Torah does not demand the retribution, but it limits the retribution.*

*To the world of his day and our day, this is not a motto to live by, a creed or life principle which will result in my own happiness. This is the way to get stomped on, chewed up, and spit out by the world. Jesus seems to be speaking of another planet here, heaven perhaps, but not my life.*

*There are two ways to go with that, and they end up in a similar place. Either this is a reflection on my lack of faith in God and unwillingness to act on his command or I really do live in a world which makes this impossible. In that second way Jesus is actually describing another planet. In either case I am trapped, stuck. If it is me, I have to admit that I cannot follow this command. If I live in a world which makes such obedience impossible, I am likewise stuck and trapped. The result is hardly different and both realities may be in large part true. I don't do this because I am part of the world and the problem which makes such obedience problematic.*

*Then, in the last verse of our reading today, Jesus drops the bomb shell. Be perfect as your father in heaven in perfect. A few years ago I observed a NT section. The class was studying this very verse. I was amazed at the mental gymnastics of one of the students who was doing her very best to weasel out of this. "It is holiness, and we just have to be trying to be holy, doing things out of holiness, then we are actually meeting this demand. We don't actually have to be perfect." I was an observer and so had to keep pure neutrality in all this, but I kept marveling that she needed to preserve for herself some way that she could meet this demand. It was really important, she believed the Bible, but here it was telling her something she could not bear, so she was ready to completely dismiss the text in order to preserve that for herself.*

*Don't do that. If you preach this text, let this really sink in. The standard of heaven is not trying hard, not having simply the right motivation, nor is it about being better than most of the rest of the people. The standard is perfection. Jesus doesn't say, "become" nor does he suggest that he will measure you for effort of on a sliding scale. The standard is perfection.*

*And we are profoundly not perfect.*

*This is one of the simplest and best sermons to preach.*

*Jesus is perfect. He has given that perfection to me in baptism.*

*I am simul justus et peccator. That means I am the wretch I feel myself to be, that any honest reflection on my life reveals to me. It is true. I have not met heaven's standard. I don't need to fool myself into thinking that the bar is really low enough for me to slouch over it.*

*At the same time, I am perfect. Yes, as a Christian, even a Lutheran Christian, I can say that. I am perfect in every way. This is not a perfection of my own making, but a gift received from Jesus. What I may find difficult to is believe that it has been really given. It now is really mine. I am perfect.*

*Of course, it while you would think that the first part, the sin part, would be harder for us to say, I have found that most Christians actually struggle with the second. Our enemy the Devil is at work in that. For he would not have us trust that God has given us that perfection. When we trust that, when we "faith" it, we are lost to him. So he will do everything in his power to keep us from believing that. And so God has decided to thwart his wicked plans by sending you.*

*Yes, you preacher. There is a very good chance that your people may only hear this message once this week, and you are it. God has made them perfect.*

## **Law**

1. God says I need to be perfect – I can't manage that. He doesn't say try hard, he doesn't say work at it, he doesn't say "improve." He says "be" perfect. And I am not. The implications of this are dire and profound.
2. My struggle with this shows up in a number of ways, all of which demonstrate that I am not like God. Moses reminds me over and over again of what it is that I am supposed to do and have not done. I have not thought of the poor and helpless, I have sought my own well being before that of my neighbor. I have lied, I had cheated, I have tried to bend the rules to my own advantage. I am not like God.
3. While I often live in a hazy denial of this fact, I also am driven to do some pretty stupid things by the desperate fear which permeates my life on its account. I can build my life with all sorts of ephemera, the fame, and money, and power, and success, and recognition, and the rest of the crap that I think means something but which will evaporate on the day my heart stops and I cannot draw that next breath.
4. The result is that too often I am friendless, afraid, unhappy, and simply ill-at-ease with myself and my life.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus is perfect; the Ten Commandments describe him perfectly. He is totally serene in his perfection; he is not striving, nor is he worried about losing it. He lives in a loving and perfect relationship with the Father which knows no fear. He has given that to me.
2. Though I continue to live in this broken and imperfect world, his restoration of me and my life has already begun. His perfection given is transformative, not merely a truth which is only true in God's eyes, it increasingly is true in my own eyes and those of the world around me. I can care for the poor, live responsibly and at peace under the rules of this land, show mercy and kindness. I can do that because God has changed something inside of me. He has entered humanity and become like me, so that I become more and more like him.
3. This means that the Spirit of God starts to build my life not on the ephemera of money or power or my own self, but on the very building blocks of heaven, the permanent elements which can withstand its eternity. He builds my life in love, peace, and joy.
4. To the utter amazement of the old man who thought that all revolved around him, when he is displaced and Christ and His Spirit start to this renovation, I am no longer friendless

and alone, I am not afraid nor unhappy, but my life shares the serenity, joy, and peace which belongs to the Father as his very essence, which is communicated in the life and ministry of the Son, and which touches me in the gift of the Spirit.

## **Sermon Ideas**

1. Perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect (Gospel and OT lessons: That the hearer would joyfully embrace and use the adjective “perfect” to describe him/herself, trusting that God has indeed given that perfection which the uber-Law demands of us.)

This is raw Law and Gospel preaching. The Law is brutal in its demand. Jesus says we must be perfect. He speaks of an internal perfection which flows from a heart which is in perfect harmony with God. He speaks of a perfection which takes shape and form in righteous deeds and holy words. He speaks of a life which I have not lived.

The Old Testament lesson is a promise, a description of what God is making his people. That is a powerful way to explain or proclaim that text. God is describing a saint here, and in Jesus he makes us saints. We are simultaneously saint and sinner. We are not denying that we have no real perfection of our own, but in Christ we know that God has given it to us. He has given us a righteousness which belongs in heaven, which belongs to a saint. He is working that in us.

Again, and if you have not yet done so, this is the time, remember the very next words of Matthew after this Sermon on the Mount. Jesus descended from that mountain. A leper runs up to him, asserts faith in Jesus power to heal “if he wants.” And Jesus replies that he does indeed desire to cleanse him, he touches the leper and the man is cleansed.

The words of Jesus have been striving to make us all feel like leprous sinners. His desire is to purge us of that leprosy. His power/authority is sufficient to the task. His love is more than enough. He does it. Actions always speak louder than words. His words have made us leprous; his deeds have made us pure.

The mechanism or metaphor for the preacher his is the great exchange. Christ has taken my sinfulness to himself and in turn given me his perfect obedience. The leper was given Jesus perfect health. We may want to spend some serious time on proclaiming the very perfection that God has given me. Jesus lived in a perfect obedience, not under the dominion of sin and death, the cosmic forces which result in my own sins and my own death. I am enslaved to them, but Jesus has given me his status as Son, free from such things. I am perfect in him, it is not that I am now living some perfect life, but that I have been given a status before God in Christ. I am perfectly whom Christ has made me to be. In the words of Colossians 1, he has transferred me from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his son.

Jesus did perfectly live this life. He was completely secure in his relationship with the Father, never at doubt. He did not simply get lucky and avoid sinning, but he was a different sort of person. He was perfect from the inside out, in all the ways that I am not. It is that perfection which has truly been given to me. I live by faith, not by sight, I believe that this has happened, despite what my own eyes have seen and what the world has seen in me. This is true.

I have not accomplished this on my own, but God has done it, and to deny it is to deny the very work of God. So I may, even must, say that I am perfect in Christ. When Jesus says be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect, I can with all honesty say that I am. Not arrogantly as if I had accomplished this, but in the praise and glory of God the Father. He has made me perfect. I am righteous and redeemed. The Lutheran seems to have a problem saying that, but we have to say that. God has said it.

It is this faith that my perfection is assured and a gift from God which now may assert itself in the decisions in my life. But that is the next sermon.

2. The Building Blocks of the Heavenly Life (Epistle: That the Spirit of God would lead the hearer to build his/her life and congregation with the heavenly materials of love, joy, and peace, for these are the very things of heaven, they endure in the day of judgment!)

The preacher will want to read carefully I Corinthians 13 in which Paul says that Love alone endures, it is the thing we can do right now that we will also do in heaven. It is the gold, silver, and precious stone building that endures on the Day when everything is tested with fire. Even faith and knowledge will pass away that day. I won't need faith in heaven and my knowledge now is "looking through a glass darkly." There I will know God and that will make all earthly knowledge pale. But love, I can love now, I will keep on loving in heaven. We will need not light in heaven for God is our light – think of the OT reading and the motive for being the holy people. God is holy, he is light, he is love so we will be as well.

This sermon is once more based on a text addressed to the congregation and the people in conflict. Christ, in asserting his ownership over me and the whole church and in bestowing forgiveness on his people, has given us a wholly other way to understand success and accomplishment. Whereas the world defines success in the accumulation of things, in the power, the status, the glory, indeed in the very things which often cause the strife and conflict in congregations, Jesus has paradoxically defined success in his cross.

In the cross of Christ and the love which God has expressed to us, God has through his servants laid a masterful foundation for our lives. Here the preacher will need to be careful. If we don't get this part straight, this sermon can easily slip into a form of works righteousness. The foundation is the salvation which is Christ. Make that point clearly.

Now, having been saved in our baptism, in God's gracious action on our behalf, we may build great and grand edifices of love, trust, joy, peace, and fellowship upon his great work. The Christian church when it gets this right is perhaps the most potent instrument for health and peace on the planet. Consider all the hospitals, service agencies, and schools which have been built in the love of Christ. But this requires that we get this right. One can have a great foundation, indeed salvation itself, and build with straw and sticks. The man who lives in such a house is indeed saved on the Day of Judgment, but Paul describes that as a man who runs out of the house but loses all to a fire. Is this time for a three little pigs object lesson? Is this perhaps what is even behind that little children's story? On a family level, the straw based life will need to be right, but it just cannot see that the "right-ness" which you have fought for will go up in smoke on the day of judgment when we stand before that judge. Better to build with the enduring love of God which forgives and which allows us to be forgiven, even in our homes. On a congregation level, if I win the fight in the voters meeting and get my way, but I lose the love of a friend, will that victory really stand on That Day which fire will test it?

We do not want to be that fellow who builds with straw, but another sort of person, a person whose house stands on the judgment day, when the wolf comes, because it was built with the very building blocks of heaven – the primary material of which is love itself, the very love which Christ has shown us and given us in abundance. That love does not judge the neighbor, but embraces him or her despite her sin and forgives her, bathing the past in the blood of Christ and stepping into a future with Jesus at our side. This house is a house of peace – we have a way to establish and keep peace in this house because we are authorized to forgive one another with the very authority of God himself. This house is built on joy – God is joyful, not dour. He has accomplished his salvation, he rejoices in our presence here today as we rejoice in yours. God is happy that he has saved us. He never regrets what he has done to save us.

The second part of the text may also be really important here. Paul doesn't seem to imply that this will look particularly wise to the world. The wisdom of the world will suggest that we need to have a guarantee, a plan which will produce the results we want. But God's love often looks foolish. It doesn't look like it should work, and so we follow our wisdom and build with wood, hay, and straw.

This house built is not a physical structure with walls and windows and doors. But it is the very community of God's people. This could be discussed in terms of our congregation, but it could also be discussed in terms of the family. In this latter example, the vocation we have as parent, child, spouse, would be seen as the life built on the salvation which Christ has won. I can apologize to and forgive my family members because Jesus has laid this foundation. His love permeates. This life which we live within it, the life which loves our fellow human being, which rejoices in God's love, this life

will stand on the day of judgment, tested by fire. (Here I would bring in the I Corinthians 13 passage, Love does not pass away. You could also talk about the Matthew 25 text and the reward which Jesus has in mind for the one who so much as gives a cup of cold water to a little one on Jesus behalf. He receives such a life as lived for him. You might also point to the end of the Sermon on the Mount in which the wise person builds on the rock a house which is not overcome by the waves and storms.)

3. I am the LORD, Your God (OT and Psalm – that the Holy Spirit would give the hearer the free and merry spirit which embraces the Law of God as his gift.)

Pay close attention to the goal of this sermon. Our goal is not the embrace of the Law of God for that embrace's sake. Our goal is really the free and merry spirit which will embrace that law. This is actually a quote from the Formula of Concord, Article IV. While that joy-filled human being does indeed do the good things which God's law requires, that obedience is wholly other than the fearful, dutiful, or otherwise flawed obedience of the old man. We are preaching to raise up the new man through the life-giving work of the Spirit. We are not putting people into a legalistic pressure cooker; we are taking them out of that situation.