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Epiphany 7 Series C 2019

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Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

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.

Mercy and power are woven together in the prayer. The preacher will want to keep a couple of things in mind as he prepares for this sermon in light of this prayer:

Power is not always heard as a good thing by people. Indeed, it frequently is a very bad thing in our lives. In Genesis 3 God described what would happen to the woman and it involved her desire for her husband and his “rule” over her. We know now that creation has blessed him with more testosterone and that means he has more muscles than she does. It is why there are very few battered husband shelters. Even within our most intimate and best relationships power has the ability to corrupt and ruin what is good. It was Lord Acton who said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is a truth which history has borne out repeatedly.

So when we speak of God’s power, we must speak of God for us. The woman whose husband has beaten her, the abused child, the man or woman whose boss has just fired him/her, or anyone who is currently being stomped on by the powerful will find the ascription of God’s power to be terrifying. To say that God is an awesome and mighty God is not good news to such a person. Power hurts. It has to be power for us or it is not good news.

But we cannot deny the power. It would be a lie and it would eviscerate the preaching of mercy which is also in this prayer. Mercy, by its very nature, requires a differential. I cannot really show mercy to a peer or horizontally. In order for mercy to be shown the merciful has to be “higher” on some scale than the one to whom mercy is shown. A judge shows no mercy when he releases an innocent man. He can only have mercy on the guilty. Likewise if I find myself in a flood and I cling to another poor soul and we are finally rescued, I showed no mercy to my fellow flood victim. I too am a victim. The person who showed mercy was the man or woman in the boat who plucked us out of the torrent. I can show mercy to the victims of a tornado when my house is intact and I have the resources they do not.

So power and mercy must go together. If you diminish the power differential, the mercy is also diminished. If you omit the merciful character of God’s action toward us, power becomes hellish.

How shall we distinguish and balance these two for the good of our people today? Perhaps the preacher needs to pray this prayer for himself first. Whoever would ascend the pulpit steps needs God’s power to be for him and a full dose of God’s mercy upon his pitiable attempt at proclamation. I don’t know how often I have had a parishioner tell me that a sermon meant so much to them. I ask what made such a difference and I found that the Holy Spirit must have blocked out every other word or something because the sermon they heard and the one I thought I preached seemed to be different. Thank God for merciful power.

Readings

Genesis 45:3-15

¹ Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. ¹⁰ You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.

We are picking this story up at the climactic moment and so the preacher will certainly want to re-read the rest of this story. It stretches back to the beginning of chapter 37. Give yourself enough time. Joseph, once sold into slavery by his brothers and now elevated to the prime minister of Egypt, who is over everything on behalf of the Pharaoh, has been playing head-games with the brothers who once tried to kill him. He wants to know if they have repented and changed. He also wants to rescue his younger full brother, Benjamin, if they have not. He finally is able to bring pressure to bear which reveals what he wants to see. He has threatened to keep Benjamin as a slave and expel the others. In chapter 44 Judah, in a frantic speech which breaks most of the rules of Hebrew grammar along the way (isn't that just the way you talk when you are frantic?) offers to substitute himself as a slave in Benjamin's place. This is important because it was Judah who really wanted to him those many years ago. Finally Joseph knows that his brothers are not the same men who sold him into slavery. They are not willing to abandon their brother for their own interests. Something has given way.

Here is where our reading picks up. Joseph has ordered the Egyptians out of the room and he reveals himself to his brothers, much to their astonishment. They had not recognized this authoritarian Egyptian who had dealt harshly with them. They probably had averted their eyes the whole time they were in his presence. Now he demands that they look at him, their brother.

They are naturally dismayed. Wouldn't you be too? They tried to kill this guy, now he has all the power.

Does that sound familiar? Peter's first sermons that Jesus had risen from the dead were not good news to the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem to whom he preached them.

Joseph launches into the speech he clearly has wanted to make for some time. He has it all planned out. His father, his brothers, their families can each come down to Egypt and escape the famine. They will be just fine. Joseph even has a spot picked out for them, Goshen.

It is a very emotional scene. Joseph falls on their necks and weeps. The last line is really poignant. It says they talked. If only they had spoken years before. Would this have all turned out differently?

Joseph actually doesn't think so. The preacher will likely be attracted to verses 5-8 in which Joseph gives his take on this whole series of events. The brother are responsible for what they did. They did indeed send Joseph there. But God is also at work in all this. Even though they meant evil; God worked good. God was bringing Joseph to Egypt to save lives, not only their own, but the lives of countless others who had food to eat from the years of plenty which Joseph has saved.

This brings us to two possible lines of proclamation.

The first of these is simply forgiveness. Joseph bears no grudge. God has lifted that burden from him. He is not a fool. He tests and probes and figures out what is up with this brothers, but this is not some perverse punishment. It is Joseph using power to protect Benjamin and to discern what his appropriate next course of action should be. He does not hate them.

How can that be? They did try to kill him. The average life span of a young slave in Egypt was not long. They did not take up a knife and do him in with their own hands but it was attempted murder all the same. It was death by Egyptian. Joseph seems ready to forgive. In fact, in chapter 50 when the brothers come to him after his father's death, they are afraid that now he will exact vengeance. Joseph weeps that day. He grieves their disbelief.

How can Joseph forgive these murderous brothers of his? The clues are right here. It is God's doing, not Joseph's. The brothers meant evil. Joseph is not sugar coating this. The brothers thought they were killing him, burying him in a slavery which would be the end of him. But their evil was not stronger than God's good. He blessed Joseph and raised him up. Forgiveness happens when we take our eyes off the one we are forgiving and the sin he/she has committed and plant them squarely on Jesus. It is only looking at him that forgiveness is possible. And when we look at him, and ask whether he has died for this sin, there is no sin which we cannot forgive. I may never be able to gin up nice feelings for the person who has hurt me, but I can always say that Jesus died for what they did. I can say it every time the bile rises in the back of my throat and I am about say/do something really nasty. I can simply say, "Jesus died for what he did."

This then leads to the second line of proclamation. God works in some very mysterious ways. I would really like to live in a world where God only uses good things to do good things. Or maybe I would not like such a world. Maybe I would not be an instrument of God in that

situation. It seems, however, that God should do this. He is holy. How can he use unholy things like murderous brothers and Egyptian slavery to accomplish his kingdom? Habakkuk would wonder how he could use the Babylonians. His response to Habakkuk is the foundation of the Lutheran reformation. God offers no rational explanation to Habakkuk. He just tells him that the righteous will live by faith.

Thus the hearer to day might need to hear that the world which is so broken, so painful, so hurtful to us is not beyond the mysterious and wonderful working of God. Indeed, God saved the world through the gravest of injustices, the tortuous and barbarous death of God's only Son on a cruel cross.

Can we look at the horrors of our lives and our age and with Habakkuk look also with eyes of faith to see God at work, even in this? What does the expectation that God is not going to use the pretty, the good, the beautiful, or the noble to accomplish his tasks do for us? Does that mean he might be using me? Even when I am hardly an exemplar of his kingdom's virtues? Does that mean my mistakes, my sins, my worst days are also part of his kingdom? Does that release from me this crushing burden of a self-imposed sense of unworthiness? Of course I am unworthy. But that has not stopped God before. I won't stop him this time either.

Psalm 103:1-13

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!

² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,

so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
 so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
¹⁴ *For he knows our frame;
 he remembers that we are dust.*
¹⁵ *As for man, his days are like grass;
 he flourishes like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
 and its place knows it no more.*
¹⁷ *But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
 and his righteousness to children's children,
¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant
 and remember to do his commandments.*
¹⁹ *The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
 and his kingdom rules over all.*
²⁰ *Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
 you mighty ones who do his word,
 obeying the voice of his word!*
²¹ *Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
 his ministers, who do his will!*
²² *Bless the LORD, all his works,
 in all places of his dominion.*
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

I Corinthians 15:21-26, 30-42

²⁰ *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*
²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in
 Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the
 firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he
 delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and
 power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be
 destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says,
 “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection
 under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to
 him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.
²⁹ *Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not
 raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?* ³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I
 protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!

³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” ³³ Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

³⁵ But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”

³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.

This text has so much going on in it and the material is so mysterious, that the preacher has a hard time getting his mind around it. As a result I think we don't preach this text often enough.

Most commentators on I Corinthians believe that this chapter is the key to understanding the whole of that difficult book and this section we read today is the key to this chapter. For Paul the resurrection stands at the very center of the Christian faith. Jesus, risen from the dead, is the Christ, long promised savior from sin, death, and devil.

But like the foundation of our house we might walk by this a hundred times and never pay it any attention. We will fuss and dither of what color to paint the living room or whether we should replace the flooring in the bathroom but who thinks about their foundation? When it comes to houses, no one thinks about this until it breaks. I remember looking at houses after we moved to Roseburg and our realtor showed us a beautiful home which fit in the price range. It even had a sunken living room. Of course, it wasn't supposed to have a sunken living room. The foundation had subsided that much! We walked away in a hurry.

The resurrection has its own day in our calendar, but it is Easter and everyone is so focused on the celebration that we rarely actually think much about what we are proclaiming. Jesus has risen from the dead – that changes everything. Death is no longer that snap-jawed foe who never lets go. Jesus has broken that jaw. So what does that mean?

For the Corinthians it meant that the lives they lived now mattered. It was not a matter of indifference, rendered unimportant because real Christianity was somehow incorporeal and the resurrection was a transition to another place. The resurrection means that life, this life, this flesh and blood thing we call humanity, this is real. The resurrection is not some spiritualized transition to another sort of being, but it is the resurrection of this body. Yes, a glorified body and one which will be so much better, but this body is the one that is resurrected.

Resurrection means that the things we do in the body are real. The factions, lawsuits, and sexual immorality which plagued the Corinthians were not matters of eternal indifference. They were

sinning with the bodies that Jesus has washed in baptism and which Jesus will raise again on the last day. That makes those bodies, and the sins we commit in those bodies, eternally significant. The man who is committing sexual immorality had to be cast out of the fellowship, and when he repented in II Corinthians that body had to be readmitted to the fellowship. We could not simply say about that sin that it was a thing of this life and that a new life would come and replace it. The new life is this life reborn. If you deny the reality of this life, you cannot but deny that life.

Modern Protestantism has often been smeared with the label of being functionally gnostic. I think that may go too far, but it is rooted in the truth. Too often we have pretended the cartoons with their depictions of heaven as a cloud-based reality involving only white robes, harps, halos and angel wings is not what Paul is talking about here.

Paul intimates in vss. 23-24 that we are living in a time between. Jesus has risen. He is the firstfruit who promises a harvest yet to come. But that harvest has not come. He reigns until the last enemy, death, is under his feet. We are not at that day yet. And so we live in this in-between time. A preacher might use this text to preach the nature of that time. I like to think of it as an overlap time. The kingdom which will be revealed on that last day was established in Jesus death and resurrection. It is real. It is present. It is also only recognizable to us by faith.

By sight we live in the old created order which Satan led into rebellion and which is in an inexorable decline. Paul in several places says we live by faith and not by sight. This is how I understand this. We are in heaven's kingdom. We are children of God. We are holy and perfect and deathless. But this is by faith. With the eyes of this old creation we can only see that old creation in its dying. We remain the sinner, we grow old and die, we suffer, and too often I am found to be a poor child of God, failing again and again to live up to the life to which he has called me. I am sinner and saint. I must live in both kingdoms.

This is a tension and no one likes tension. We want to escape it, resolve it, and make it go away. But we cannot. The tension simply must be present. So we remain.

Paul, in vss. 30-34, speaks of what resurrection does to him now. Here too is a good conversation. He speaks of his courage and perseverance. If there is no resurrection this life becomes meaningless and we probably ought to just make the best of it. Eat, drink, and die! But Paul says that the resurrection is real so he fights the beasts in Ephesus (courage) and he continues to battle sin and live a life which is not in sin's drunken stupor (perseverance). This too might make a great sermon. Resurrection gives us courage and grit.

Finally, in the concluding paragraph of this pericope, Paul speaks to what we should expect and not expect in the resurrection. The conclusions are somewhat vague. We will be sown mortal and raised immortal. We will not die after the resurrection. This is not a life like this one. The biologists on the faculty here will tell me that scientifically speaking there can be no life without death. Paul imagines something which cannot be described scientifically. Don't even try to do such a thing. Paul does imagine that this will involve a different nature of some sort. What exactly that nature entails we cannot know. Paul chastises the Corinthians for imagining that they do. I would not go there.

I think this last bit has led some to believe in the cloud-based heaven theory I discussed above, imagining that the new nature is non-corporeal. This is a mistake. Better is to talk about Jesus in his resurrection. Remember, he is a first-fruit. He eats, he drinks, and he is recognizably Jesus. Yet he is also different. I don't know if the disappear and re-appear feature is something that all resurrected humans will come with or not. That might be a divine nature thing and we don't get that. I don't know. But Jesus did not resurrect as anything other than human. He was surprising to his disciples but once they got over the shock, they were always overjoyed to see him. They were seeing him, the man they loved. He did not have an extra head nor was he some translucent ghost. They had breakfast with him. I am not sure this is really a sermon but might make a better discussion in Bible study.

Luke 6:27-38

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.

³² “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

Here we have the content of the Sermon the Plain, the Lucan parallel to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Matthew's account is much longer and in some ways more difficult. But Luke also pulls no punches here. Most of the time we really are not able to handle this and so we glide through these words without thinking or praying too hard about them. The result is that they become insipid and reinforce the flaccid piety which passes for Christianity in many places. Jesus is speaking of a radical re-ordering of the world, a new paradigm which sets the Christian at odds with the world and its foul master. It is a good day to remember two kingdom theology and the powerful Law-Gospel tension which makes our preaching

So let's think and pray hard about them this week. Who wants flaccid piety anyway?!

Jesus says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for the one who abuses you.

Does he really mean that? Does he want the concentration camp victim to bless the guard? Does the abused victim pray for her abuser? Does he really mean that the Christians should pray for their Isis tormentors in Iraq? Too often we skim through to the final phrase in the paragraph, the golden rule, which we are able to tame and make reasonable. We will hang out with people like us, whose petty sins are a good match for my petty sins and we will all just get along. We will do to others in a rough parity. We won't be happy, but it will be tolerable. And we imagine that someday we will all be in heaven where we will be nice to another and it will be better.

This is not what Jesus has in mind here! The Lord is speaking of a world which is operating on a radically different principle than the shattered human community in which we live today. He is not imagining some distant future but a right now. That reality, however, seems to be so far away. That man who clings so tightly to me does not know this graciousness, patience, and love. He knows only one thing – if you let people stomp on you, you will soon be a door mat. You must meet their evil with force. You might even need pre-emptively to do unto them before they can do unto you.

Jesus won't let us spiritualize this. He gets right into physical abuse. If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek. We don't live in a similarly violent world as Jesus and Luke. There was a great deal of striking which took place in a society powered by slaves. When high ranking government officials are proceeded by lictors carrying fasces (an axe surrounded by a bundle of rods) you can suspect that there is someone using them. Did you know that the fasces are worked into the symbol behind the Speaker's dais in the U. S. House of Representatives? It is also on the back of a dime.

But what are we to do with Jesus words. I have to admit that he is not obviously describing me or you. He is certainly not describing the LCMS or any other church body I have seen in action. We have individually and corporately drunk deeply of the cultural well. Church politics are a blood sport. If you haven't seen it yet, you may want to read the essay written by my seminary classmate, Ed Engelbrecht. It is disturbing. Pray for love, patience, and discernment before you do so. Here is the link: <https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/mobbing-systemic-spiritual-abuse-in-the-lcms?rq=Engelbrecht>

Jesus today calls for something completely different. How can a church begin to embody this other kingdom, this heavenly kingdom, which is ruled by grace and in which we love and serve each other instead of dominating and abusing one another? How can my family look like what Jesus describes? How can my life change? This is a question which breaks into every dismal, dreary place in life: work, home, neighborhood, church, or any other sphere. The ways of our enemy are fear, domination, power, abuse, and every sort of evil. By them he enslaves us and makes us miserable. He enjoys your misery.

Of course the answer is found in verses 35-36. Jesus goes on to point out the bankrupt nature of most of our friendships and "good" deeds. We are just in it for ourselves. We invite to dinner the people who will reciprocate. This is simply the other side of getting even. It is not good. It is an exchange. At best it is fair. But then Jesus throws a wrench into the whole thing. God doesn't act this way. He is gracious to his enemies. He is kind to those who abuse him. He is merciful. See

the discussion under the Collect of the Day for more on that loaded term. Our mercy is not our own. Our graciousness is not really our own. The Judgment-free-zone that Jesus calls for us not of our own willful creation. It is God's to make.

Do you want another article to read? This is also a difficult read, but it is very different than Ed's article about the LCMS and mobbing. It plugs into another sort of kingdom, the kingdom of God. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/03/baptism-of-blood>

I am not of that world, at least not fully yet. I must admit that Jesus has some work to do in me. I pray that I am never asked to come up with the gentle peace of the people El-Aour, Egypt in the way that they have. I pray that every time I speak the Lord's Prayer. Yet, I know that God can do that for me too. I am glad.

Law and Gospel

1. We all have problems. Joseph's brothers had tried to kill him. My problems might not seem so great in comparison to that, but they are still real. It doesn't take much to make us miserable really. Relationships, health, finances, job, or some basic confusion about the meaning of life can make us pretty unhappy. We all got a problem somewhere in the mix. Chances are that I stand at the root of a great deal of this problem, but perhaps not. It doesn't make a big difference. I have a problem. You do too. God is bigger than my problem. I will not likely be able to solve my problem or if I do, another will take its place that is beyond me. There are no problems bigger than God. As Paul says, even death is put under Jesus' feet.
2. But what if my problem is God? Yes, God has a great deal of power, but what if that power is not for me but against me? The Muslim also believes in a powerful God. So do all religions for that matter. Humans seem to think God is really big and powerful. He could squash us. Is he just taking his time to get around to it? Or is he just patient and going to let us poison ourselves like bacteria in a petri dish on the verge of colony collapse? The good news for today is that God is for us. Jesus has risen from the dead in his human nature. Joseph looks at the wretches who are his treacherous brothers, he sees them with God's eyes, and he forgives them. Jesus calls us to lives which reflect God's mercy to us and that means enemies are loved and blessed. God has overcome my God problem – God is for us.
3. But that means we have another problem today. God for us does not seem to be that much of an advantage by any measurable scale. As Paul says, if it is only for this life that we believe we are the most wretched of human beings. Joseph is dealing with his stinker brothers. Jesus exhorts and calls us to lives which reflect God, not because we are already there but because we actually have a long way to go in order to get there. We are sinners still. We are mortal still. Death haunts our lives, no matter how much we want to deny it. So God gives us faith. Jesus words are not just prescriptive but descriptive. I am a child of God, perfect in my obedience because Jesus has given me his obedience in baptism. I am deathless because Jesus has risen from the dead. The death I die is but a temporary

thing. I too shall rise with Jesus. Relationships can be restored. God is at work even in the most difficult of places right now. Joseph embraces his brothers, weeps, and they finally talk. Even in their sinful attempt to murder him, God was saving lives.

Sermon Ideas

1. God sent me before you (OT – That the Holy Spirit would give the hearer eyes to see even the worst things of life as occasions when God works for the good of people, often despite the actions of people.)

Joseph had them right where he wanted them. He was the most powerful man in Egypt next to the pharaoh. He could have had them killed and their bodies dumped into some pit and no one would have ever said a thing to him about it. It would have had a certain symmetry had he done so. They threw him in a cistern once and then had sold him into the slave pits of Egypt. Now they groveled before him, not even lifting their eyes to see the brother they had tried to kill.

But Joseph does not do this. This is not sentimentality on his part. He is not just overwhelmed by brotherly affection or some longing for a lost home. He has calculated and manipulated this moment. He has brought them to this very time when they would speak their sorrow and offer their own lives in the place of their brother.

But all that manipulation and drawing out of them their confession was laid on top of a reality which Joseph expresses in this text. God had sent him to Egypt because God was saving lives, not only the lives of Jacob and his sons, but the lives of untold millions of people as Egypt was the storehouse of food in a brutal seven year famine. God had sent Joseph to Egypt.

It probably did not feel that way to Joseph as the Ishmaelites counted out the money and bound him up for transit to Egypt. It did not feel that way when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of rape and he ended up in prison. But somewhere in all that darkness, God revealed to him his favor and he became Joseph's strength. He did not need a fancy coat. He had God.

Every human life experiences the brutality of human existence. If nothing else in the death we all die. But death and suffering and affliction come to all people in so many ways. We could focus on it and assume that God is not with us anymore if we are suffering. But that would be a mistake. God has a strange and mysterious way of working. It was through a cross that he saved the world, unequalled suffering and torturous death. Now our suffering and trials have been transformed.

We will not all become the saviors of millions of people from starvation, but God does not keep that sort of score and we should not either. He values the one child who finds a gracious and healthy friend as valuable as the one who casts down the dictator and frees the masses. Today we can look at our problems in a completely different way than the world can see them. God is at work, the gracious and loving God. I cannot see the end or

goal of what this man's suffering or that woman's affliction will be. But I can know and love the one who works through such things and who has promised to be with each of us in those days. And I can look forward to what he will do.

2. So in Christ shall all be made alive (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would embolden and encourage the hearer to courageous deeds and persistent service.)

In two months we will gather again around this text and we will celebrate the greatest festival of the Christian year: Easter. The resurrection of Christ will draw people and fill this church. We will have lilies and joy. What are we gathering for? Paul gets us ready for Easter today, but not the Easter which ends after the egg hunts are done and new dresses are put away. Paul gets us ready for the real Easter, the life which is lived in the resurrection every day. Jesus has risen and that changes everything.

For Paul that meant he faced the wild beasts in an arena and eventually an executioner's sword. When he was in prison, he wrote the Philippians that he had joy, even though he was in jail and facing death. That was resurrection joy, his because he knew that they could not really take his life away. His life was bound up with Christ's life and that life would never die. He knew this because that resurrected Christ has knocked him off his horse on a way to Damascus. Jesus has risen and that changes everything. It completely turned around the life of Saul of Tarsus. He became the Apostle Paul who courageously proclaimed the Gospel and toiled tirelessly in the kingdom of God.

Resurrection changes your life too. You too have met this resurrected Jesus in Word and Sacrament. He tells us that his sheep know his voice, they know it because they have heard it. You have heard it. You have felt his gentle touch in baptism. You have eaten at his table with disciples of every generation. It is the resurrected Lord who speaks through pastors and Christians when you hear the sweet words of forgiveness.

That changes everything. The world will threaten and seek to intimidate you. They cannot, not really. You are one with Jesus. He is risen and no death can touch him or you, not really. The world will seek to wear you down, one miserable moment at a time. It cannot. Jesus has risen and you will too. That means that these present sufferings are light and cannot be compared the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8). The burdens of sorrow, pain, and suffering which the world would heap upon us to crush us cannot do so. The pain is but a reminder of Jesus' death. And Jesus death simply reminds us that Jesus lives.

3. My mercy is the Father's Mercy. (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit moves the hearer to a life of merciful love of enemies, service to the needy, forgiveness for the sinners, and charity for all.)

This sermon's trick is to get the hearer to see Jesus words as more than a simple bit of Law which is condemning me and ordering me to do better. We want to see this text as a

description of me. The only way to do that is to take Galatians 2:20 rather seriously. Christ is at work in me, in my flesh. The life I live is not really me living, but is Christ in me. I don't think Paul was speaking metaphorically here, as if some vacuous spirit of Jesus was motivating me and calling for some response. I think he is asserting that Jesus really is working in the lives of Christians, rendering lives which are not holy in themselves holy and pure and good.

Of course a simple look in the mirror will cause a problem here. We don't look much like the Jesus who lived and loved perfectly. But that is seeing only with the eyes of this world. We need to see with the eyes of faith. Faith tells us that in baptism Jesus takes our sin and replaces it with his righteousness and obedience. That is real, as real as the water which touches our heads. The body and blood of Christ have come inside us. He is in there, really in there, not just in some wishful thinking, let's pretend it is real, sense. This is what we are contending for over against the Calvinists in the dispute about the real presence. It is a real presence and it really does things to me. One of the things it does to me is fill me with mercy which God has.

So Jesus describes another sort of life than that which the world knows. In this life I look more like God who loves the rebellious children of Israel even when they rebel and turn against him. Read in the book of Hosea, especially the first chapters and again in chapter 11 in which God says he just cannot but love them even though they have forsaken him. And so we love the unlovable and care for the needy and forgive the sinners, even when the world cannot see how that can be. We cannot point that we are better, it is the one who lives in us.

Now, of course, we live in the now/not yet. The world will quickly point to our hypocrisy and note that we too have our sinners and sins aplenty. But this is just the mercy of God at work again. He does not love us and work through us because we are good but despite us. It is true. But he does work nonetheless.

Here the preacher will need to point to something. Best if it is something you can point to locally, something in which your own people have participated, an act of mercy, forgiveness, charity, or love which exemplifies the Christ who dwells in us.