

7-10-2016

Propers 10 (Pentecost 8) Series C 2016

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_archives_sundaysermon



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brandt, Phillip L., "Propers 10 (Pentecost 8) Series C 2016" (2016). *Sunday's Sermon*. 110.
https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_archives_sundaysermon/110

This Text Resources is brought to you for free and open access by the CUP University Archives at DigitalCommons@CSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunday's Sermon by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSP. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csp.edu.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10

Who are the Christians? Are we eschatological people looking ahead to an end of the world event? Are we an empowered community of folks who are sent into this world to effect positive change? Are we a proclamatory people, sent to announce the Kingdom of God? Are we a radically transformed society in which the called people of God live according the Spirit of Jesus which he pours into us in Baptism? Are we an evangelistic group – sent to make disciples?

All the above are put forward by various people and the strange truth is that the answer is yes, yes to them all and more. Our congregations tend to evidence one or another of these tendencies. We would like to be all of them; many of us see weaknesses in ourselves, some would prioritize one over another. In the past when we talked about this we thought that the question should probably be asked on three levels – generic Christianity, our congregation, the individual.

This is a good day to be glad that you are of the Lutheran tradition. (Of course, I believe every day is worthy of such a “Te Deum.”) The readings today focus our attention on those significant tensions which empower the Christian life. Many traditions seek to resolve the tension and identify the Christian movement as one thing, but Lutherans tend to glory in the unresolved tension; although, sometimes we like it too much. We are a Now/Not Yet people. We are not utopians and yet we are never at ease with the status quo. We are “Sinners and Saints simultaneously.” We proclaim both Law and Gospel confessing with Dr. Walther that these are contradictory doctrines which we find in our Bibles. So we speak of God’s terrible wrath and his gentle Love, death and life, broken and whole. I teach a course in the Lutheran Confessions and one of my students, a member of a community church in the Portland area agreed with me that the proper collective noun for Lutheran theologians is a “shrug of theologians.” She is now married to a young man studying for the ministry in a Lutheran seminary. Lutherans always are most authentic when they shrug their shoulders and say “yes” to the tension.

Our human tendency, especially in modern protestant America, is to segment the descriptions above and thereby remove the tension they create. This day I will this, the next day I will be that, but the tensions don’t ever really resolve and we are left living that real tension with each other. It can be messy.

It is in these tensions, we believe, that the very empowerment of the Christian life takes place. To resolve the tension is to take the energy out of life and especially Christianity. The ethical society which has no vision of the eschatological soon runs out of steam. In the same way the folk who focus on the afterlife often lose sight of the fact that Jesus died for real life situations that folks face every day. You need them both, they have to be in some sort of an unresolved tension. I often compare this to a battery which has two anodes, positively and negatively charged, the greater the disparity between the charges of these two poles the stronger the battery. If we resolve the tension between the anodes, the battery is little more than a lump of inert metals and chemicals, so much trash. We throw such a battery away. In order for it to work, it needs that

tension, but like a battery, the tension is only effective if the two poles are in some sort of communication. The positive and the negative have to touch in the light bulb to generate light.

If you have ever spent time with someone who had it all figured out, or someone who has only one pole of the tension, you soon learn that this is not the whole story. The mystery of the tension, the pull to both sides which the tension exerts can be painful, but it is also necessary. It creates tough intellectual challenges for us. The Christian will want to remember the presence of the Holy Spirit in this. We don't need to expect that we have this right or that we will get this right. But we should expect that the Spirit of Jesus will work with these uncomfortable tensions to do his work. It will be messy, sometimes painful, an almost always uncomfortable.

Today Jesus and Paul speak of now and not yet, of Law and Gospel, of holy and profane, to the comfort of sinners and the strengthening of the redeemed.

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, in Your deep compassion You rescue us from whatever may hurt us. Teach us to love You above all things and to love our neighbors as ourselves; for You live and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Augustine often said that we either use or enjoy something. He held that a Christian needed to enjoy only God, and use all other things and people, to enjoy God. If you “enjoyed” anything else in that technical sense, you were idolatrous. If you want to read more about this, consider picking up his “Confessions” or better “Teaching Christianity” (De doctrina christiana) where he expounds eloquently on this. His theology is deeply rooted in this prayer – the love of God above all things and the love of the neighbor was his primary hermeneutic for all Scriptural interpretation. For Augustine the greatest threat we face is ourselves, our own misdirected love of self and things other than God and neighbor.

One of the interesting things I learned in a history of the liturgy class was that these prayers which are addressed to Jesus originated with the Gallican tradition of the time of Charlemagne. It seems Charlemagne requested a standard book of the liturgy from the pope who was not the strongest administrator. The Pope's people only sent a partial document and the ecclesial leaders of the Franks simply filled in the blanks. One of the places that shows up is in the Collects. The Romans always addressed their prayers in a very formal style to the Father, in the Son's name, through the Holy Spirit. The Franks who had a much more passionate style, often addressed their prayers to Jesus to confront the Arian heresy which was held by their ruling class. It also simply suited their post-Roman culture.

Christ is simply addressed here, and his deep compassion is the characteristic to which the prayer appeals. I really like the word rescue here. I think it is a much more living metaphor for Christians than “save” which has become altogether too jingoistic for most of us. The careful reader of the readings today might question the appropriateness of this prayer with the Gospel reading today. The Gospel lesson is the parable of the Good Samaritan. How is this story, which

was clearly law for the man to whom Jesus spoke, transformed into a story of Jesus rescue? That is going to take some creativity and I believe some serious attention to the hermeneutic, Augustine's hermeneutic. The alternative is to posit a Scripture we can make say whatever we want.

The other question we may want to consider revolves around "whatever may hurt us." I think we are often quick to point to those things which come from outside and which truly do mean us harm. But sometimes I think we have huge blinders on about what causes us harm, and I think that so much of our harm is self-inflicted. Does God guard us against ourselves? Does he need to?

The result of the prayer, should God say yes, is that we are taught to love God above all things and the neighbor as self. Of course that fits in and therein lies the hermeneutic which guides the reading of the text. But notice, it assumes that we don't already love God and neighbor. Again, back to the identification of the enemy, is our greatest enemy our own heart, which does not delight in God and the blessing of neighbor, but which greedily always seeks to put self into the center of every picture?

Being a people of theological tension (see above) our temptation is to gloss the tension and not let it really work. We have a hard time really saying that my greatest enemy stares at me out of the mirror when I shave. If I admit that, I really have to admit that I am utterly helpless before that enemy. Our formula: "Yes you are a sinner, but Jesus loves you" is still there but unless we spend a little time on that sin part, the Gospel is also shorted. If our sins are small, the rescue is correspondingly small. If the sins are great, the Good News gets to be really good. We don't really do ourselves a favor by minimizing the sins.

The Lutheran must be careful of this. How has our love faltered and even failed both in its vertical and its horizontal dimensions? Why do we need God to teach us this, even though we are baptized? Simul Justus et Peccator.

Readings

Leviticus (18:1-5) 19:9-18

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD...

⁹ "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. ¹⁰ 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.

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

¹³“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. ¹⁴You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

¹⁵“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. ¹⁶You 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.

¹⁷“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸You 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.

Of course, this is the passage that Jesus will quote in the Gospel lesson below, but take the time to notice a couple of things here. This is a passage about walking, it is not a conceptual passage, but a passage that expects that the hearer really will do this stuff. It is not arguing case law like an attorney but describing a whole life ethos that extends to the way that people farm and deal with one another throughout the society.

Notice the society from which they are coming and to which they are going are both cited negatively. They are to be a holy people, different and set apart, not like the Egyptians they left or the Canaanites who occupy the land to which they are arriving. This raises a very interesting question. Is there any way that the members of our congregation are holy and set apart? Are we too much of this world and in this world? Have we lost the tension between those two ways to describe us? Do we even have a discipline within our communities which can say to the open and impenitent sinner that this or that is a problem, that “we” don’t do that? Do we have any boundaries across which we are not to step? What are they? Is our Christianity utterly divorced from our life?

Is there any clearer way to see this than in the way handle divorce in our midst? We love to harp about homosexuality in others, but I have been part of at least one congregation which I think may have had more broken marriages and remarriages than first marriages.

Also I would like us to notice the integration of the ethical and the theological here. This is not a compartmentalized life. Don’t strip your field but let it be a sort of welfare system for the poor and homeless. Why? This seems like bad farming practice. It is not the way a good capitalist society operates. The reason Moses gives us is shocking: Simply because God is Yahweh! I believe that too often our translation of that word as “Lord” leaves us thinking that this God asserting is power, but really Yahweh is God’s name of committed, covenant love. Genesis records that God sends the rains on the earth at the time of Noah, but Yahweh closes the massive doors that Noah could not close. It is Yahweh who leads the people out of Egypt. Their obedience to the commandments surely is obedience to an awesome, fearsome, God, but it is also

the rescuing God who has brought them out of Egypt. Their theology, the description of God, which is really the story of God's mighty deeds for us, empowers their new ethos.

I think that the way this is done is really an explanation of the ninth and tenth commandments which speak of our attitudes toward our neighbors. The follower of Yahweh, which all of us are, is not called upon to great or heroic deeds, the conquering of some primal evil, the slaying of some mythical dragon, but the real and hard work of living in a community which genuinely cares for one another. In this sort of community the hungry are fed and you have an eye out for the weak, the blind, and the deaf. Your words are spoken gently but truly. You cannot bear the grudge, but must speak reasonably with the brother. This is not a normal or easy thing. It is a creation of Yahweh, a beautiful thing.

The text repeats the phrase: I am YHWH. But who is YHWH? How would we answer that question today? How do our people answer that question? The passage seems to suggest that the people of God will in some way resemble the God whom they worship. Do we actually look like the God whom we conceptualize in our faith? Do we think that God is essentially a distant, non-acting, indifferent sort of God? Is that why we act the way we do?

We also noticed that God does not leave the poor man and the sojourner with nothing to do. What does that say about God's graciousness? Does he save us to activity? I think a lot of folks imagine that we are saved like raspberry preserves, stored away in the basement until we enjoy it later. But God uses the word preserve/save to save us for something, something which engages in his kingdom. The poor man is given an opportunity to glean productively. Gleaning is hard work. It involves a great deal of bending down and picking up things from the ground. The man who eats bread made from wheat he has gleaned will have earned that bread. His back will remind of it.

I think this and some other passages of scripture are too often ignored when conflict arises among Christians. We too quickly jump to Matthew 18 which I believe is a wonderful passage but needs to be read in light of this passage, the reading on the fruits of the Spirit, last week's Galatians passage and the whole ending of Romans. Otherwise Matthew 18 becomes a terrible club we use to smash one another.

The preacher who is attracted to this reading might profitably ask questions of what it means to be a member of this congregation. What defines this community? Is it nothing more than an intellectual assent to the Catechism? Or is there a humble spirit, a servant heart, a care for children, a care for the lost and sinners which pervades this place and which defines us? You might be discouraged by this, but ask what sorts of things are outside the boundaries of your congregation? What would you kick someone out for doing? Moses in the Pentateuch is really establishing boundaries for the community.

God's definition of the community is filled with grace, but it is also a definition which has parameters. He doesn't suggest that the Israelite community bring fresh baked bread to all the

idle poor people in town. Ignoring the parameters will render the gracious inclusion of God an empty deed.

The preacher of this pericope will also need to be aware that this passage falls in a rather contentious section of God's Word. The verses before and after this section include some of the OT's harsher words on homosexuality and other rather difficult matters. Christianity is frequently accused of paying too much or too little attention to these passages. Some read them as a license to tell homosexuals that they are utterly evil and condemned to hell. Others read them and find excuse to condemn Christianity as an utterly evil and small minded superstition. Most of us just don't read them and hope the issue will finally just go away.

For obvious reasons they are not included in public worship, but they need to be included in our teaching and our theologizing. But so does the whole of the Scriptural witness. We cannot just cherry pick out the sections which we find easy and comfortable. God has a way of afflicting the comfortable and his injunction to us all is to pick up a cross and follow him. Crosses are rarely comfortable.

Psalm 41

Blessed is the one who considers the poor!

In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him;

² the LORD protects him and keeps him alive;

he is called blessed in the land;

you do not give him up to the will of his enemies.

³ The LORD sustains him on his sickbed;

in his illness you restore him to full health.

⁴ As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me;

heal me, for I have sinned against you!"

⁵ My enemies say of me in malice,

"When will he die, and his name perish?"

⁶ And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words,

while his heart gathers iniquity;

when he goes out, he tells it abroad.

⁷ All who hate me whisper together about me;

they imagine the worst for me.

⁸ They say, "A deadly thing is poured out on him;

he will not rise again from where he lies."

⁹ Even my close friend in whom I trusted,

who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.

¹⁰ But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,

and raise me up, that I may repay them!

- ¹¹ By this I know that you delight in me:
my enemy will not shout in triumph over me.
- ¹² But you have upheld me because of my integrity,
and set me in your presence forever.
- ¹³ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen.

Brave is the preacher who decides to proclaim on the psalms for a year. But it is also very Lutheran. Luther began his lecturing career with the psalter. This is natural since he was an Austin friar and thus was singing the entire psalter, from memory, every month. He knew it like the back of his hand. But the psalter challenged him and much of his evangelical breakthrough came when he realized the real narrator of the psalms is Jesus, not the morally problematic Luther who was singing it. By the gift of Jesus' faith (see the footnote for Romans 3:22 and 26) we are given to sing these words of Jesus. Somehow the prayers of David have become the prayers of Jesus and are now placed in our mouths. If you understand this, please enlighten me, yet I find the Holy Spirit's gentle touch clearly evidenced here.

Read this way the line in vs 9 becomes a foreshadowing of Judas' betrayal. The prayer in verse 10 is spoken by Christ on the cross and the firm conviction of verse 11 makes sense of Jesus' unwavering resolve in the face of torture, crucifixion, and death.

But singing the words of Jesus, while a beautiful thing to do, is not the whole story here. I am not entirely a third person observer of these prayers uttered by Jesus. By singing them, I am also invited into them and these words begin to define my life. I think this is the real genius of the monastic movement which Lutheranism has largely abandoned.

There is a blessing for the man or woman who considers the poor. I think Leviticus need to inform that consideration, but it is a good thing to do. God has a care for the people on the bottom of the heap and the farmer who leaves something for the gleaners is precious to God. How do we do that? Our welfare state has created a narrative in which consideration of the poor is only to be found in involuntary taxation which is then turned into housing projects and WIC benefits. But I don't think that is quite what God had in mind. I don't know that God even had in mind a hand-out to the poor. As I note above, the bread baked from gleaned wheat is something for which you have worked hard. But the consideration of the farmer meant you had an opportunity to glean fruitfully.

As Christians we have another narrative to provide to the consideration of the poor. The idea that good Christians always vote for the expansion of the welfare state is a problem. Much of what passes for "charity" in the welfare state robs people of dignity.

The middle section of the psalm reflects the psalmist's penitence acknowledgment of his guilt and the unfair smear campaign of his enemies. We should not expect that such a thing will be well received.

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians is a singular work in all of Paul's letters for several reasons. In the first place, Paul never visited the place. We see that in verse seven where he notes that they learned this message from Epaphras. That makes this letter unusual but not unique among Paul's letters. He also never visited Rome before writing them, but this letter seeks to solve a particular problem in the congregation where Romans is a different sort of letter altogether.

This letter also is unique in that he is addressing a problem which he has not faced in other places. Paul was normally quite open to the culture of Hellenism and the Empire. He uses athletic imagery and military metaphors throughout his letter to the Philippians. Last week we saw his discussion of boasting was couched in the attitudes of Hellenistic gentiles of the first century. He posits sort of a Divine Empire in Romans. He preaches that Mars Hill sermon in Acts in which he notices the "unknown god" and asks his audience to think the previously unknown god is in fact Jesus and the Father. That was pretty daring actually.

In this little letter he much more decidedly closed to the larger culture, in fact he is filtering it out of the hearts and minds of the readers. Colossians reads much more like a filter than a letter

of an expansive movement which is sweeping through the illiterate slave class of the empire. This is so different for Paul that some have questioned whether he wrote this letter. If you read in a number of commentaries you may note that this is a hotly debated topic. Luke T. Johnson of Emory University is probably the best known defender of Pauline Authorship, if you want to read someone who thinks he wrote it. Bart Ehrman would be an example of someone who doesn't.

I think these differences are overstated. Paul also takes on Roman culture in Philippians, urging a humility which was totally absent from the first century culture. He also urges the Corinthians to leave much of their old life behind.

Many have also noted that Colossians and Ephesians are similar. It would seem that Paul wrote both books at the same time, using the same structure and vocabulary.

What really makes this letter unique, however, is the role of Christ which Paul ascribes herein. It is not that this is denied in other places, in fact one can find hints of it, but in this book Paul really explores the whole issue of the Cosmic Christ. He suggests that Jesus is not only the salvation of our lives, our souls, our eternity, but also of every thing. He means the rocks, the birds, the oceans, and the trees, all of it. This is Jesus dying literally for the whole world, to reconcile the entire broken creation to its creator. Really this letter is about the relationships which you and I have with the physical world.

In the ancient Greek speaking world there was a deep suspicion about the physical world. Their default understanding about salvation involved escape from the physical into a spiritual realm. They could not imagine a good world in which the physical realm was not corrupted by disease, death, hardship, earthquakes, and danger. But the Hebrew understanding from which Paul came did imagine just such a world in the first chapters of Genesis. In that Jewish world God looked at the physical world and called it "very good."

Thus, we see Paul in this letter filtering out the Greek notions about the physical world.

As is usual, the careful reader of Paul can discern his main points and items of interest from his opening verses which are before us today. From reading the whole book it appears that the congregation in Colossae is dealing with a group of folks within the parish who are asserting that they are somehow more Christian or closer to God or somehow superior to others by virtue of what they know. We are not entirely certain we can ascertain exactly what their superior knowledge was, but by reconstructing based on Paul's rebuttal from his arguments against this situation, we come to some understanding.

It appears that there is something about spiritual and physical going on. It would seem that the literate, the philosophically trained, the educated among them held that of course God was spirit, therefore the spiritual, the non-physical was the real scene of salvation. Indeed, it was a widely held Greek idea that real salvation was to escape from the physical world into a world of pure thought, spirit, mind, etc. You can still run into something similar in the teachings of

Buddhism which holds that salvation is Nirvana, a state where one has no body and no sense of self and has been reabsorbed into the cosmic consciousness.

Closer to home, I run into this sort of an attitude all the time in the academic world and it drives me nuts. Often I hear academics, professors and scholars of the text, speak of the lay members of congregations with disdain. They hold “simple” ideas about God and the Bible. If they only would go to school and learn a little bit, then they would understand what we mean when we say this or that. There is a measure of truth to this. Anti-intellectualism is a sin and an abuse of God’s creation that is your intellect. But within the criticism is a pernicious lie, that somehow knowledge is what this is about. It diminishes faith. In truth, the real theologian is able to learn from the simplest Christian, especially when it comes to things like prayer, faith, love, service, etc. It is a pseudo-theology which scorns such things. I learned more about prayer from a high school drop-out named Herb Womble than I ever did from a seminary professor.

In today’s text we see Paul giving a number of back-handed compliments in the prayer. This is masterfully done. Paul thanks God for their faith and love which have been present among them since the day they first heard and understood the message.

In the prayer he prays that they may attain to knowledge and wisdom and strength. In other words, Paul congratulates them on what they have, namely faith and love, and prays that they may get what they don’t have. But these people are disdainful of the Christian who simply believes and loves, and they are asserting their superiority based on knowledge. Paul congratulates them for the thing they disdain and prays that they get some of the very thing they believe they have in abundance! Ouch!

The preacher in this first sermon of Colossians will want to address the issue of what are “yes/no” questions and what questions are really dealing with a spectrum which is measurable. The yes and no questions revolved around the relationship we have with God. Am I beloved? Did Jesus die for me? Those are yes and no questions. It is a little like pregnancy in that. One cannot be more or less pregnant. A woman either is or is not pregnant. Faith doesn’t really have a measure. One is either in the God created relationship in which he forgives, loves, and saves me, or not. You cannot be more a child of God nor less a child of God. He has no grandchildren.

But there are areas in which I can grow. I can intellectually learn, I can grow in strength, I can grow in wisdom. Those virtues of knowledge, strength, and wisdom, while they are not essential for anyone’s relationship with God, are also very good things and they manifest in every human being differently. My experience has often been that those whom I once thought of as “handicapped” e.g., the developmentally disabled person who is trapped, perhaps for a lifetime, behind a façade of disability, might in fact teach me quite a bit about the very essence of my Christianity.

Paul would have us remember that the divine value system is not based on the scalable virtues, but on the “yes/no” sorts of things. The developmentally disabled girl who appears not to be

paying attention during my sermons but is listening and processing all that I say is just as much a precious child of God as the learned professor or the chairman of the congregation. She is also just as much a witness to God's kingdom and a valuable servant of that King as the preacher. It is simply inappropriate to talk about which one is 'better' or 'more significant' than the other.

On the other hand, Paul does say that the virtues of wisdom, knowledge, and strength are important and have a place as well. Frankly, for all her value and amazing faith, I would not recommend electing someone with a profound developmental disability to the role of congregational president. It won't be kind to her or the people who are members of the parish. She is a wonderful witness to the love of Christ but that does not mean she has the capacity to chair a meeting.

This sermon will hold up faith and God's love for us as the defining characteristics of our worth in God's eyes and hence our eyes. But it will also celebrate gifts of the mind, the body, and the rest of our created being.

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many

things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

“What shall I do....?” The innocent sounding question which the lawyer poses to Jesus is actually dripping with some acid. Left alone it will corrode away faith and life itself. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” makes the basic assumption that this is something for me to do. It has returned me to the driver’s seat of life which my fallen self so desires to occupy. I find it interesting that in the elided verses which fall between the sending of the 72 last week and the parable of the Good Samaritan which we find today Jesus praises God and rejoices with His disciples over the Holy Spirit’s work and the fact that their ears have heard and eyes have seen some things. But he does not rejoice over what they have just done, even though they seem to have been on a very successful missionary journey.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is familiar to us, perhaps it is too familiar. We often see it on hospital doors and it is frequently invoked in law as a “Good Samaritan clause” which protects people who stop and render assistance at the scene of an accident. We can give to a Good Samaritan fund which helps the poor or unfortunate travelers. You might even end up living in a Good Samaritan home for the elderly when you can no longer make all the way to the restroom without a little help.

We think we have this figured out when we hear an exhortation to be kind to strangers, when the Parable lays on us the admonition to be kind and good. And in one sense that is exactly what the parable might say. But I am not sure that is what the parable actually is supposed to be saying. I have also heard the parable used as an exhortation to overcome racism or negative attitudes toward the alien/other person.

The crux comes in the discussion Jesus has with the teacher of the law who poses the questions to Jesus. The Parable clearly is pointed and in its context seems to be a message of the Law to the man. He thinks that he needs to do something in order to inherit eternal life. He must somehow be worthy of that gift, which of course means it is no longer an inheritance or a gift, but a purchase. But that little linguistic failure on his part doesn’t seem to trouble him.

Jesus starts by asking him what the Law says. He responds with the two summations of the law which were current at the time and the last part of which is quoted in the Old Testament lesson. Jesus approves of the summation, but that is not really the issue, the issue is the man’s heart. Jesus is far more interested in the man than he is in his deeds. The fellow is persistent, because he really wants to know. “Who is my neighbor?” He figures he has God identified, but how can he know who is the neighbor. He needs a reasonable definition, but Jesus does something really odd here. He redefines the neighbor completely and unreasonably.

The man is wondering who it is that he should be helping, and Jesus turns that upside down. It is clear that the man thinks of course he should help the man on the road, as would any of us. The priest and the Levite are despicable. They care for cultic purity more than they care for this poor

man's life. To touch a dead body would render them unclean and thus they could not perform their sacred duties. Since the road was between Jerusalem and Jericho, one presumes that they were on the way to the temple to serve in the regular rotation of priests and Levites. This would have delayed their journey and caused them some expense. They walk by.

The Samaritan, however, is another story entirely. He helps the man, takes him to an inn, practices a radical hospitality, and saves his life.

The lawyer had asked who it was he should love, or the proper object of his love, but Jesus defines neighbor as the one who loves the other, thus making anyone a neighbor. Jesus is not really answering the man's question, but he is forcing him to reconsider everything he ever thought about this world. For a Jewish man this Samaritan was worse than unclean, he was a heretic who claimed to worship the same God but was in fact corrupt in his worship. But Jesus forces the man to say that he was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves. The lawyer is wondering if it is necessary to love someone like the Samaritan, Jesus asserts that not only is it possible, that person may in fact be neighbor in his love to you.

The preacher might want to point out that the very worst of situations often brings out the best in human beings. We saw a little of that after the Orlando shooting as long lines of people endured brutal Florida sunshine to give blood. The most selfless act of love might be practiced today not in our midst but by the folks who are sleeping under bridges, in the mental wards of our hospitals, in the homeless shelters, or the drug treatment centers, or a crack house. Jesus forces us to see people today as he sees them, all of them, the wayward children of the creator, and yet also people through whom he works his subversive kingdom of gracious love.

The man who queried Jesus was looking for clear boundary – whom should I love as myself? Is it my fellow Jew? Is it my fellow townsman? Where do I draw that line? Jesus will have none of this. The boundaries are only less clear for the man when he leaves Jesus.

And this is just where I think Jesus wants him to be. He wants this parable to create a sense of disconnect and discomfort. For the real issue here I don't think is only the way we think about the neighbor but it is also in the first part of this summation of the law. If we love God as an act of obedience, do we not break the commandment in the very act of keeping it? If I love God because it is duty, is that really love? If I love the neighbor because he fits inside the parameters of my definition of neighbor, is that really keeping this commandment? Hardly. The relationship we have with God is not a box to be checked off on some list.

The preacher of this parable will need to create the tension. God commands love, but that is an impossible command. It is an impossible situation, a situation which will force us back into the grace of God, the very place in which the text finds us prior to the parable.

We have another challenge in this parable in its very familiarity. This parable is regularly proclaimed as a moralizing parable – be nice to all sorts of people. Be like this Good Samaritan. I don't want to suggest that this is wrong or that it has failed as an interpretation, but I think it

often is heard as the answer to the first question of the Lawyer and not the second. Too many of our people hear the injunction to be a good neighbor as the answer to the question about what we must do to inherit eternal life.

Is there another way to look at this? Is this actually the answer to that question? The lawyer, if you read it carefully, is actually asking who is his neighbor. As Jesus tells the parable, the lawyer is the guy lying on the road, half dead, and bleeding. The law, in the persons of the Priest and Levite, do not help him there. They walk on by. The Samaritan is the neighbor to the assaulted man. Is that the message Jesus is trying to get across to him and to us. We want to be competent and in charge and doing something, but Jesus says that eternal life is a gift given to helpless people. What we must do to inherit life? Lie there, dead, dying? Robert Capon says that the only requirement for the kingdom of heaven is to die, because Jesus is the resurrection and life. We are all rather good at dying, humanity may have failed to do a lot of things, but dying is something we are all rather good at. No one fails. Is this a moralizing parable? Or is it a justification parable? In our past discussions we concluded it was about Justification, not the moralizing/sanctification. Do you agree?

This seems to be in line with the way that Jesus uses parables, but as a sort of self-discovering sort of way of teaching. The wheat is left in the field for us poor men and women to glean, but he is not going to package it up and deliver it to our door.

Law and Gospel

1. I am human, fallen and broken. I realize that I have a problem when I feel my body betray me or when I have made a mess of things and they bite me, but often I am oblivious to so much that is wrong with me. I have grown used to it. I am comfortable with much of my brokenness. But God is not. He loathes what sin has made of me. And so he has sent Jesus into the sinful flesh of humanity, to suffer, die and rise again to break its iron grip on me and my life, to set me free of the cycle of death and destruction which otherwise would control me in ways I don't even realize.
2. One of the ways my broken nature asserts itself is in this basic competitiveness with which I see my neighbor. I see his success and I cringe and am jealous and would ruin it for him. I see his failures and I laugh in my hat at him. I cannot but look at him without comparing myself to my neighbor, am I taller, richer, better, or younger? He may be smarter but I know how to change the oil in my car. She may be prettier but at least I am a better mother. God rebukes such thoughts, and infuses into us a very different sort of love which flows from Jesus. He has come to love the whole world, and in the relationship which has established, he has poured out his Spirit and love into our hearts. There are lots of things that make us different, but nothing makes us more or less a child of God.

3. Perhaps the most pernicious way that my human nature asserts itself, unconsciously, is that I often want to put myself into the driver's seat of my own salvation. It feels just so right that I want the right things and that God should recognize that. Even if I don't always do it, surely he can see that I am at least trying. But God doesn't think that way about us and he doesn't recognize that in us. The human nature has to be dethroned so that Christ can properly occupy his place as the Lord of life, not ruling in power and some raw exercise of authority, but in the very love which he embodied on the cross.

Sermon Ideas

1. Because he is Yahweh (OT - That the hearer would believe and live out of the truth of God's gracious love)

This sermon challenges the counter-narratives which would define us. Am I a homo economicus? Do I know who I am based on the sort of car I can afford to drive, the neighborhood I can afford to live in, or the comfort in which I can retire? Or am I homo otiosus (leisure man)? Am I defined by the boat or the cabin or the tools in my woodshop? Am I, rather, homo operans (working man) who will be absolutely adrift when retirement comes because my whole identity is wrapped up in what I do. Am I homo philosophicus (thinking man)? Do I disdain the sort of identity which is rooted in doing things and do I choose my identity rationally? But perhaps, I wonder, am I supposed to be homo fidelis (faithful man) who is defined by his faith?

This sermon will challenge all of those. For this sermon's proclamation will begin not with the question "Am I...?" but with the statement I AM or as the non-transcendent beings we are, Yahweh (YHWH) which is the third person form of the name which God gave to Moses at the burning bush – I AM becomes HE IS when we are honest about things.

Leviticus proclaims over and over to us that God is Yahweh and that means something for the living of our lives. The motivation for that living is what concerns us here. The farmer is to farm in a way that considers the poor man who will glean. Why? Because our God is Yahweh. To the Hebrew reader, this name is not loaded with the authority and power burden which attends the word "lord" for us. The idea of lordship causes us to fear and even rebel. We just celebrated American independence last week, when we cast off the overreaching lordship of an English king.

This is not at all how one should read LORD in the Old Testament. Yahweh is the divine person on the other end of all the gracious covenants in the OT. Yahweh walks in the garden with Adam and Eve and fashions skins for them after they have been cast out of Eden. It is Yahweh who cared for Noah and promised no more floods. It is Yahweh who called Abraham and made a covenant with him. It is Yahweh who helped David defeat Goliath and established him on the throne of Israel.

A Quick but Necessary Theological Grammar and Orthography lesson:

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses asked his name so he could tell the people. God replied "I Am Who I Am."

When Moses got to Egypt and the people asked, he did not say, "I AM" but he conjugated the verb saying "HE IS sent me." That form of "HE IS" was written as YHWH or Yahweh.

Jewish people were unwilling to speak this name out of reverence for it, so they substituted the term Lord (Adonai).

Hebrew originally had no written vowels but later added them (about 1000 years after Christ). Because the reader never actually said "YHWH" but always said "Adonai" the vowels for Adonai were added to the text, giving us "Yahowah" or as the King James translation provided: Jehovah.

Most modern translations have retained this practice of not writing Yahweh but note the presence of YHWH in the text by rendering LORD in all caps.

The Israelite is defined by God's nature not our human nature which is always grasping and self-interested. This is cruel Law at first. For we do not live by these descriptions. We have failed in this regard. We have lived by other principles which have often led us to shameful and destructive deeds.

But the preacher will point to the opening paragraph of this reading. It begins with that sweet declaration by God to a people who have already been in long rebellion against him: I am Yahweh (LORD) your God. This is not written to them in the heady moments right after Sinai when the people have all vowed their obedience. This was written during 40 long, rebellious years of wilderness wandering. No one has a delusion about this anymore. God loves and claims this people despite their behavior. The same is true for us.

That said, God's unconditional love doesn't leave us wallowing in the sty of our sin. His love once given becomes a transformative force in our lives. "You shall..." he says. It is a description of what he is doing to us, not only a harsh word of law which condemns our past. It is also a sweet word of promise for our future.

2. You and Me through God's Eyes (Epistle: That the hearer and all Christians would be defined and valued in God's terms, through the gift of faith and His love for all.)

This sermon works off the opening prayer of Paul's letter to the Colossians (see those notes). The whole idea of spiritual or Christian rankings is seemingly hard wired into our system as human beings. This could really also be couched as a ninth/tenth commandment issue about coveting. We love to look at our neighbor in a spirit of competition and comparison. In a sense this could also be worked into the first lesson. The treatment of neighbor is based not on some pragmatic outcome, some sense of duty, or other logical reason, but simply because God is YHWH. Also look at the Psalm for the day.

Paul's audience in Colossae had subscribed to the Roman ideas about social stratification in terms of knowledge and wisdom and strength, looking down the slaves and illiterate in their midst and disdaining them for a simplistic or childish faith. Paul gives them a back handed compliment. He praises them not for their self-vaunted knowledge and wisdom which they so valued, but for the very faith and love which they shared with the simplest Christians in their midst. Any slave can believe, any slave can love, and that is what God saw as important. If you have mentally retarded folks in the congregation, you might want to use that.

We are not above such comparisons, but God is. He has established us in his kingdom through faith, a relationship which he establishes in baptism. As a pastor or a preacher my head was no more or less wet with baptismal waters than the youngest child or the

simplest Christian. In the measure which matters most, we are all equally the children of God. He simply does not engage in that comparison game.

That is a rebuke to our human nature which loves to see those comparisons and make much of them. Churches can be quite cliquish and much like a country club. And it is wrong. Paul points out its fallacy. But God loves country clubbers and snobs just as much as he loves the fool and the scoundrel, with a deep and abiding and everlasting love.

This is why the preacher wants to end with the last verses of the text. We have been transferred to the kingdom of light, we have had our citizenship transferred to heaven. That was not our doing, but God's, accomplished in the cross. God came to us in Christ because our human natures are so messed up, because we are so fundamentally broken in heart and mind and spirit. We cannot get this right all the time, so he has come and united himself with us, reconciled the whole of creation to himself, and today dwells in us with his great love, the sort of love that stops comparing, and just loves. By the end of the book, Paul will exhort the Colossians to a different sort of life, not because they can, but because the Jesus who lives in them, who exhorts, empowers, and loves through them works that change in them.

3. Is the question "What must I do?" or "What has God done?" (That the hearer, realizing the futility of pleasing God through our efforts, would believe that God has graciously revealed his love to each human being through Christ.)

This sermon is not so much about the parable of the Good Samaritan as it is about the man and the question he asks of Jesus which prompts that parable. The parable is really about crushing out of him the whole notion that this is something that he does. Jesus exhorts him to an impossible task really. Or the parable puts him naked and bleeding beside the road, helpless and helped by a Samaritan. The Law, in the person of the Priest and Levite cannot help him, they walk on by. The Samaritan, the least likely savior, comes and helps him. Jesus will not look the rescuing super-hero on that cross in a few chapters. He will look more like the unlikely helper Samaritan. He will be my neighbor when I am in the greatest need of rescue.

Building on the Gospel reading of last week, Jesus is really speaking to the fallacy of the question which the man asks. If you remember last week Jesus spoke of people hearing him when we spoke. He said that we don't worry about where the "peace" lands which we speak, it will either land and take root or it will come back to us, because it is God's peace. Likewise the concern about whether we have enough resources is asking the wrong question, they are all God's resources anyway. Our eyes have seen, our ears have heard, and the Holy Spirit has revealed, this is what matters, not what we do.

But this man is persistent, as our own human nature is persistent in its desire to be in control. He wants Jesus to define the neighborhood, whom must he love in order to qualify. Jesus defines a very expansive neighborhood indeed. The hated Samaritan befriends and is neighborly to the stricken Jewish man. He is neighbor. The ritually pure, the proper Christian, the Sunday attender, they might not be, but the guy with needle tracks up his arms, the Muslim, the prisoner, the skateboarder with tattoos all over his body, that might be the neighbor to me when I am lying beside the road.

Jesus essentially defines the whole world as our neighborhood and all the people in it. It is too much for any of us, impossible. This is exactly the point. The man cannot do it, nor can we, but God can and God in you does. The man's eternal life does not hang on his obedience to some commandment, but on the love of God, the very love by which God possesses him and enables him both to love God and every human being.

This whole sermon proclaims the incapacity of people, and the capacity of God. He is the promise keeper, the covenant maker, he is YHWH and he is the one who keeps those promises to love this whole world through us. Of myself, I find that I cannot do it, but in him I can.

I am reminded of the story of the disciples facing those five thousand hungry folks with only five loaves of bread and two fish. What must have that felt like? It wasn't until they started handing out the food that the multiplication seems to have taken place. What did it take to say, "come and get it!" to five thousand when you only had that much? What was it like when you got to the twentieth person and realized that the basket wasn't getting any emptier?

Theologically we might say that God loves the world through us, psychologically, however, it will feel that we are loving. That is the nature of God. He delights in us, remember. He loves our loving deeds. They are empowered by God, miraculously, but those loving deeds also in a strange way remain our own.

Other ideas – shall we develop one of these?

I am YHWH so you are.....?

You finally figure out who your neighbor is when you are lying half dead by the road?

Jesus the man who fell among thieves?