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Propers 12 (Pentecost 8) Series A 2017

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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – (Proper 12) July 30

For the past several weeks we have noted a “rest” theme and have seen Christ removing burdens from us. In the parable of the sower, the Word is the operator, the sower doesn’t even have to aim. God does the work, he carries the burden and the responsibility for making this entire enterprise work. He warns us, sometimes it doesn’t, but when it does, it works wonderfully well. In the parable of the wheat in the weeds, our anxiety about the gross injustice we see around us and the burden we feel to do something about it is also removed. These are God’s problems. He uses us to fix them, but he is the one with the answers, energy, and resources, not me. We want them fixed right now, but God says wait. He will do this in his own time.

Today we come to what is existentially the greatest burden of all, and one which we are more familiar with as preachers. When our eyes turn to our own selves, and we see the awesome burden of our sin, we are tempted to despair. Sanity seems only possible in some sort of denial or mechanism by which we evade the truth. So we think: perhaps if I move the standard so that I can qualify. Surely God grades this exam we call life on a curve and I am better than most. But the message of Jesus has been thorough, “be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) All of us have fallen short of the glory of God, (Isaiah 53 and Romans 3) even our own death is an affront to him. He did not make us to die. When we die we are failing to be what he made us to be. We cannot help it.

Today Jesus lifts that burden from our shoulders as well. Our worries about the church, our worries about the state of affairs in the world, these are bad enough. When it gets to be personal it is even worse. He has taken those from us, now we remember the greatest gift of all: Himself for me.

This day’s readings, however, don’t just leave us basking in the glow of God’s mercy and grace. That is a good place to be and one could simply preach that sermon and do an excellent thing in the lives of those who hear you. But the parables end with a discussion once more of church, this time bringing together all three themes in a shocking conclusion. The state of the church, the state of the world, the state of ourselves all comes together in a surprising ending.

A note about preaching parables – the preacher wants to be careful here. If you have not already learned it from last week, this week might bring this out even more. Folks love parables. They often are holding cherished ideas about what these parables mean, interpretations which were given them by dear Sunday School teachers, parents, pastors, etc. Your commentator and other resources may have a very different, indeed a better interpretation about which you are very excited. Great! But exercise caution here. You might be treading on something which is very emotional, precious, and important for your hearers. Push too hard and they are liable to get grumpy with you. Certainly you will want to couch your preaching in a way which allows them to retain the good and come to understand and believe the better.

Which of the possible readings for the parables do we think is most necessary for our folks? Do they need to hear the burden of the parable of the buried treasure? Do they need to hear the

challenge which says that God is most important for us? Or do they need to hear that Jesus has done this for us, treating us as the treasure of God? One could preach on each of these themes and be consonant with the text. I have heard such sermons and been blessed by them.

Perhaps the better question is to look to the last parable. What will make our folks most net-like? How will they fish? Will they be moved by a fear of getting sorted into the junk fish pile, burning in the outer darkness? Or is our missional complacency really a lack of faith? Do we need to call folks to a repentance which is much deeper than simply that we are not out there evangelizing? Is our failure to evangelize really a symptom of a much deeper problem we have, a faith problem? Are we really preaching to the most basic questions of Christianity here?

Why should we engage in the evangelistic task? Why do we take our faith out of the Sunday morning experience? Is it a duty? Will that really get us out of the bad fish pile? Or do we need to ask that question very differently? Why does Jesus even want me to be out there telling this good news to my neighbors? I am not terribly good at it. Is it not all about the Love which Christ has for me? As his beloved, do I not obey him for a totally different reason than fear or some economy of avoiding something bad or obtaining something good? Don't I do it because He asked me? Because He loves me, because I love him, because it is He who has asked me?

There is a strange and profound mystery at work here. If we keep the command to love God because he commanded it, we are breaking the commandment. If I love God because it is my duty, it is not love. Likewise the service rendered to God for any reason other than the love which he has created is not really a true service rendered to God. He simply not for sale, he cannot be manipulated. This sermon requires a whole new way of thinking about our service to God than we can come up with from a purely human point of view. It will take God importing a new way to our hearts.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase of faith, hope, and love, that, receiving what You have promised, we may love what You have commanded; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Here is this prayer again. We have talked about this before. Do we love the things he commands us to love or do we love the things he commands us to do? Is the command to love something/someone or is the prayer to love the commandment itself? I don't want to spend too much time on this, but I think the preacher wants to have this figured out or at least be aware of the possibility of both meanings for this. I have always found it interesting that the Psalmist regularly extols God for the rules, commandments, laws, statutes, etc. My good Lutheran training taught me that the Law was an enemy which crushed and killed me. But the gospel also transforms me and one of the things that it does to me is makes me into a person who loves the Law of God.

We ask for an increase in faith, hope, and love, the essential virtues of the Christian. Faith trusts the promises of God. Hope eagerly looks forward to and expects what God will do. Love acts in

light of that faith and hope of God's gracious love and action to me. I love my neighbor, Jesus died for him after all. I love God, he has given himself for me.

We have received what God has promised. The savior has been sent, the debt paid, the gift given. Now we pray that we may love it. We are not waiting for more Jesus, we are praying that this Jesus may be seen as enough for us by us. The world will work overtime to undermine that faith in Him. Again and again it will want us to put our faith in something else, to love something else, to consider that his death upon a cross, his sacrifice made for me, is surely not all there is. I have to do something? Do I? Surely my response is what sets me apart from the man who is going to Hell. Does it?

Readings

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

⁶“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, ¹⁰and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. ¹¹You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.

The Torah sets these words on the plains of Moab, after 40 years of wandering and purification of the people of Israel. Since Egypt's plagues and the Exodus through the Red Sea, God has been purifying his people and getting them ready for this time. Moses is simply telling them that the time has arrived. They are the holy people of God. Paul will say in I Corinthians 10 that these people had been baptized in the water and the cloud. You are perfectly scriptural to think of the whole exodus event as a very slow-motion baptism and to draw some conclusions about the baptism of you and the hearers today.

Moses puts this into context for them and us. They should not think that this is because they are just so special. They were not numerous nor great. They were in fact, if anything, chosen because they were nobodies. Their status does not bring glory and praise to them, but to God. His love is shown in their condition. He is the promise keeping God who has followed through on what he spoke to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is really marvelous stuff, but the preacher also will want to take into account the material which surrounds this text, lest we be accused of taking it out context. Immediately before this

God enjoins the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites, destroy their altars, slay them all. God is holy, after all, and so are his people. I have printed for you the conclusion and antithesis of these words. The one who loves God does indeed have his favor, but the one who hates him also has his wrath to contend with. God will not be slack with him.

But please notice the difference. God keeps his love to a thousand generations, but the rebuke of God is to the face of the one who hates him. I don't think that is an accident; although, elsewhere one can find passages that speak of God visiting the sins of fathers on their children to the third and fourth generation. But even then, that sounds like consequences. The wrath of God, the rebuke of God, that seems to be directed at the man or woman who hates him.

Moses ends it with an exhortation to do all the commands, yes, I suppose, even the elimination of all the Canaanites command which starts the chapter. But surely these commandments, statutes, and rules also included the whole sacrificial system which was designed to restore the sinful Israelite to the good graces and favor of God. The rules which God instituted were not only a moral code but a system by which sinners, those who broke the moral code, were restored to right relationship with God.

The dominant theme of the reading we will hear on Sunday, however, is that we are the holy people of God. We are treasure in which God delights because he does, not because we are so great. Keep that in mind.

Psalm 125

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.

³ For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
lest the righteous stretch out
their hands to do wrong.

⁴ Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts!

⁵ But those who turn aside to their crooked ways
the LORD will lead away with evildoers!
Peace be upon Israel!

The psalmist sings of faith today, the relationship in which God is our savior God and we are the saved people who are blessed by him. The psalmist notes the protection of God and the fact that with God on our side, we are immovable. Think of the Epistle reading too as you hear this.

The psalmist also notices the connection between those who exercise authority and the average person over whom that authority is exercised. The scepter of wickedness seems to me to be an

evil king. The result of this sort of rule is that even the righteous stretch out their hands to do evil. What an interesting observation. Today our tax dollars are regularly funding abortions and wars which many find morally objectionable.

The psalmist wants the Lord to do what is good to those who themselves do good things. It is an interesting prayer, spoken because the psalmist often doesn't see it. The good which one might expect to rain down upon the righteous is not always apparent. So we pray for it.

But those who do evil will be led away to another ending, the ending of all those who do evil.

Romans 8:28-39

²⁶ *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* ²⁷ *And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?* ³² *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* ³³ *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.* ³⁴ *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* ³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* ³⁸ *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,* ³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

All things work for the good...there is so much happening in our world, between natural and manmade disasters. Do we need to preach this on Sunday? How would those words be heard? I have found that these words are often cruel when spoken to a person who has just been diagnosed with cancer. They will unconsciously flip the subject of the verb and wonder if God has stopped loving them if things are not working out so well. The person in the midst of the tragedy really needs the whole story, not a platitude or some sort of filler for an uncomfortable moment of silence.

Most often I have found the person who is suffering ends up consoling the folks who came to console him or her. It is wonderful to see and I am regularly in awe of the folks who can pull that off.

What does one say about these words of Paul? They are so beautiful and compelling that to comment on them is almost by definition a diminution of them. Paul has for the prior 8 chapters been laying out his message which he preaches to the Gentiles and this is the recapitulation of the whole thing, the capstone. The ensuing chapters will really be a sort of catalogue of exemplars and case studies which were of interest to that original audience.

(Many theologians conclude from Paul's own words that this letter is something of a grant application. Paul wanted the Roman Christians to help him expand his ministry to the west as far as Spain. Thus he wrote the letter, en route to Jerusalem. He envisioned that after doing what he set out to do in Jerusalem he would head west, stopping in Rome, to meet this congregation and secure their support for the Spanish mission. In the course of asking for their prayers, blessings, and financial support, he in turn gave them a summary of the Gospel he would preach and how he dealt with several hot button issues of the day. This may not exhaust the reasons for the letter, but it does make the most sense of the data we have. Of course, these plans did not come to fruition as Paul envisioned. He was arrested and finally arrived in Rome, but in chains as a prisoner.)

The preacher should expect that this conclusion to the first part is particularly densely written. It is not the sort of passage which lends itself to "skimming." Hence, if you want to preach this, I would really recommend that you limit yourself to a very small, discrete portion and unpack it. Expect to find a longer section in the earlier part of the letter which addresses this very question/topic. Trying to preach the whole section we have before us is possible but a difficult task. Often the preacher who tries this will find that he is a mile wide and an inch deep, not a good place for a preacher to be.

Matthew 13:44-52

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure. Notice, that in verse 44 the comparison is to a treasure buried. It cannot be easily seen. In this parable a man in a field finds it. We learn from the next sentence that he is not the owner of the field, he must be someone passing through or perhaps a hired plowman. It isn't important, we don't know. He finds a treasure out there.

This in itself was not unusual in the ancient world. Armies moved very slowly in those days and frequently a wealthy person who saw that his city would soon be besieged would bury his treasure outside the city walls. Because newly turned soil would be a dead giveaway that a treasure had been buried there, this often was done in a tilled field where all the ground had been disturbed. If the city fell and he escaped, it was safe and he could return and retrieve it. If the city did not fall, he could still go out and get it. But often enough a person would die in the course of the siege, or perhaps he was enslaved and never was able to return. Others probably may not have been able to find the treasure after a marauding army had tramped through and cut down trees and changed the landmarks. Such treasure might lie in the ground for centuries before erosion or happenstance brought it to the surface and it was found. There were no serial numbers or anything to track down the owners, they were probably dead anyway. The general rule in these situations was simply, “finders keepers.”

This is what makes the parable odd. The man does not have to buy the field to gain the treasure. Simply finding it was claim enough for the common law of the day. But Jesus has the man in great joy selling all so that he might claim what he already owns.

I have heard this parable preached and taught as an exhortation to the Christian to be willing to give up all to gain heaven. That sentiment is surely true for heaven is more important than all else, but I am not sure it is what this parable is really saying. In joy the man sells all he has. Does Jesus really say that I should enjoy losing all for him? Should I smile if they take my family, my home, my wife? Is Jesus more important than them? Yes he is, but that is not the point here. Am I supposed to be glad to lose them? I don't think so.

In truth this does not really describe me very well as it is. There are times when I am reluctant to miss a football game to come to church, and I am the pastor! Surely my parishioners sometimes feel the burden of being told they have to come too. In joy he sold all he owned... that does not sound like me and I am not sure that it is supposed to. It does, however, sound like someone else I know. This someone else for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame that he might redeem me, the treasure.

In this reading of this parable, Jesus is the man. We are the treasure, buried in the sin of this world. Jesus has every right to us, but he gives up all to buy the whole field, the sin and all. That totally changed this parable for me. It is not longer a burden laid upon me, but a gift given, a moment of grace. I am the kingdom of God.

The preacher really needs to make a choice here about how to proclaim this parable. If you go with the way I heard it as a child, it is really heavy law, crushing us. We must give up all. And there are Christians who have to give up all, even their lives for their confession of Christ. If you go with the way that I am suggesting, then it is all Gospel. We are inert, lying buried in a field. Jesus has uncovered us and given up all to get us. We are the art work which hangs on God's refrigerator!

When preaching this, use the OT text to tie this together. There God says in so many words that the people are the treasured possession of God, held in his hand, not because they are so special but because he loves them. His love makes them special.

We get another parable which is similar but not quite the same.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

We thought in this parable perhaps we were the merchant. In baptism we lose it all, but are raised from the font possessing this great heavenly treasure, worth more than any other. It does not enjoin us to go out and sell all to get it, the parable is observing that this has already happened to us in the kingdom. We have already died to sin (Romans 6) and raised with Christ we have a treasure beyond all others.

Another take on this is that God is the merchant. Is this a parable of the king of the kingdom? Is this the kingdom reduced to One? He has given up all, even his own Son, to possess this valuable treasure. In this take on the parable, it is parallel with the treasure hidden in the field, but this focuses on the king of the kingdom, not so much the people of the kingdom. The first one tells us that we are precious possession of the one who gives up all, this second parable then speaks to the one who searches us out, who appraised the cost and paid it willingly because he loved that pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant. This parable is very similar to the prior, but please notice the critical difference. The kingdom is compared to the man this time, not the treasure/pearl. The kingdom has a king, and in truth it can be reduced to him. He ruled with a crown of thorns once, he reigned in grace from a cross. The kingdom of God came to earth that day and was found on Golgotha's gory crest.

Again the merchant sells all he has to buy this pearl. As the man in the field, and as the farmer in the parable of the wheat and the weeds and the sower in the first parable we considered, this is not sensible behavior. To risk all on one pearl, and that a pearl he wants to possess, his business is ruined or certainly at great risk. If he has sold all, what will he eat? Pearls are not very tasty. What if he cannot find a buyer willing to pay the price he has given? What if he cannot bear to part with it?

Notice the merchant is not actually said to sell these pearls. He just buys them. Likewise Jesus is not the seller of his treasures, but the purchaser. He has found us and found us to be a great

treasure, worth more than his very life itself. He has bought us at a great cost. The message is very similar but told from a different angle. This time the kingdom is the king, not the people. He desires the treasure so much he makes a decision the world really cannot understand. But in both instances the treasure/people and the plowman/merchant are engaged in the same great and gracious exchange. All is given to gain the treasure.

While the parable of the treasure buried can almost stand on its own two feet all by itself, this one almost needs the first parable to work. It is best read in some sort of a relationship/tension with the prior parable.

The text goes on with yet a third parable.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now we come to the surprise. Jesus wraps up the whole chapter of parables into one little capstone parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a great net, cast into the sea which gathers up all sorts of fish, some are good, some are bad and the men who draw it up will sort things out. The sower is here, casting his seed indiscriminately the weeds are here too, the bad men who are sorted out. The treasure is here, the good who are kept, the harvest of the sower. Even the angels from the parable of the weeds make an appearance in the little explanation that Jesus gives. If you read the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast which we skipped, you would also have seen the mysterious working of the kingdom, seemingly powerless, in the net cast which looks to be full of holes but which catches all the fish.

The story told at the end of John in which Peter and the disciples catch 153 fish seems to be a telling of this parable in narrative. Jesus seems to enact it with much the same message.

When you read all the parables together a message starts to coalesce here, a message which is uncomfortable for many. (Which means it might just be on target – God often has a way of comforting the distressed and afflicting the comfortable.) It seems that the church really does not have much of a mandate to decide who is in and who is out. The sower sows everywhere, the master knows that the weeds are there and he will deal with that at the end. The Savior has joyfully given his all for every treasure, for every sinner. He hears the hymns of the hypocrite and the faithful man. That is the king and the kingdom in its starkest simplicity. Jesus died for sinners. So the church is sent out to be the church, the proclaimer of a strange message from God, not something we deserve, not something we have earned, not a tax notice, but a message of grace and peace.

Institutions are in the business of saying who is in and out. God seems to be reserving that judgment to himself. He will judge, there will be a destruction for the lost, but he seems to be saying that this is not our job, it is his. We are the net, cast into the sea, gathering up all sorts

and conditions of men. We cannot worry about whether they are “true believers” or “right thinkers” or any other boundary that our human, sinful selves want to set up. We are supposed to be out there sowing, the seed indiscriminately, gathering up the sinners. God will sort out the good fish from the bad.

This does not sound as much like an institution as it does a movement. Movements scare the bejeebers out of institutional types. Movements work by word of mouth, out of the control of the central office. They often develop in surprising ways and may function independently of authority. What makes them especially dangerous in the minds of some is that they are messy. They don’t obey the rules very well. In one place they will get the word out one way but in another place they will do it differently. What matters to them is that the message gets preached and Christ is glorified. (Does that sound like Paul in Philippians 1?) As long as that is happening, they are happy with it. As long as the net is filling, the net is doing its job. The day speedily comes when the angels will pull on those ropes and gather the net up into the boat. Yes, there will be a sorting that day, but that is his to worry about, not ours.

This is not how institutions really see things, but perhaps if we couch it this way: On the last day when Jesus comes back were we to point to the fact that our budgets balanced and we found someone to fill the Sunday School Superintendent’s position, are we really going to get a commendation? The real mission of the Church is about gathering the fish, the net function of the Church is the salvation of people. Is it really about balancing our budget?

Jesus ends this long section of parables with a question and Matthew recounts the disciples’ ambitious and perhaps delusional answer.

"Have you understood all these things?" They said to him, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Have you got it? I would guess that if you say “yes” you are just as clueless as the disciples are and I am.

Jesus ends with a parable for the preachers. Trained for the kingdom, we are equipped to bring out something old and new, as though we are someone showing off our treasures. Like a table set with grandma’s china and the anniversary gift received last week, it is a beautiful thing.

Law

1. We are lost and cut off from God by our sin. Though we belonged to him by virtue of our creation, our rebellion means that he ought to destroy us. If I build a table and the legs wobble, I am perfectly within my rights to tear it apart, so is God perfectly within his rights to destroy us for our sins.

2. My sin can only be dealt with at great cost. I am not just a little sick and a shot of penicillin will make it all better. My problems are significant, profound, and stubborn. The solution to this problem will involve an act of cosmic proportions and expense.
3. God's solution to our problems looks like it should not work and is frightening for us. We want him to take away all the bad stuff, never dreaming that we would have to go with it. In his mercy God waits so must we, but it is hard to wait for God's justice. Like the great pearl we have been tucked into the merchant's bag waiting for the day when he will put into a place of honor and treasure us every time he sees us.
4. Afraid of the way that God has done this we try to solve the problems ourselves with rules and regulations, with guarantees and insurance. While these can be used to serve the Gospel and every time you have some people you need some common ground rules and understanding, the rules themselves can often get in the way. Too often we find our energy exhausted in keeping up the rules that there is none left for the real work of the kingdom. Have you ever found council meetings and the like so exhausting that you really don't want to see any more people?
5. We lack faith to count on God to deliver on his promises. We lack hope, joyfully expecting God to do something awesome. The result is we often lack love as we try to marshal our pitiful resources to make our own lives comfortable unaware that we ourselves are a treasure and all our real needs are in God's hands and he handles them rather well.

Gospel

1. God has not done as we deserved. He has sent his son, the one who speaks these parables to us, that he might redeem us.
2. He has paid the price of my sin, undertaken the great work of redemption. I no longer must bear it.
3. His solution, though it looks frightening, is also gracious, good, and wise. The power and glory solutions we seek don't work to bring about faith. They only frighten and confuse people. It is all about relationship and so he has set up this vast "Amway" sort of organization. It doesn't have a central control, it doesn't have lots of rules. It just has a message to tell and a bunch of strange people to tell it.
4. God wants us to succeed as the netlike church. He is not concerned about our pitiable performance thus far. The red tape can be cut rather quickly, he continues to give us opportunities to share the good news and often despite our foolishness, he does just that and the kingdom continues to grow one redeemed sinner at a time.
5. God would remind us today that the greatest asset we have his Son, the son who has taken up residence in us and who speaks through us, acts through us, suffers with us, rejoices in us and loves just spending time with us. When you have God that close, what

challenge can overwhelm us? What foe can defeat us? The world of sinners is our mission field and though the task looks terribly daunting to us, it does not for God.

Sermon Themes:

1. In His Hands: God looks at us and rejoices today. (OT and Gospel – That the Spirit of God would comfort the sinners in our midst with the sweet news that God considers us His precious treasure.)

While our enemy and our own sinful self would quickly condemn us and have us despair over our condition. God comes to us today with marvelous contrary news. He really does love us. He loves us so much that he has given up all, even suffered death upon a cross for us, just so we can be his precious people. So intense was his desire to be our God and we his people that he even went to a cross. That is always true, no matter what we have done or how we have failed.

That truth now inspires and moves us to his service. We can hardly imagine a free lunch, somebody is paying for this! And so our human nature often takes the sweetest of Gospel and contorts it into the law. I don't know how you have heard the parable of the treasure in the field taught and preached before, but I distinctly remember being told by my Sunday School teacher that it meant that the kingdom of Heaven was so important that I should be willing to give up everything for it. This is true, but is it what Jesus really was trying to say? It seems that the kicker in here is the description of the man's joy at selling everything. I may well have to give something up for my Lord but do I have to enjoy it? What if it is my life, my family, my job, etc.? But Jesus, for the joy set before him, did indeed give up everything, including death on a cross, to gain me.

Jesus again is giving us rest. He is not calling us to some willing loss of all we own or have, but he is describing his own actions on our behalf. He already owned us by rights, but willingly went to the cross to redeem us from slavery to sin, death, and devil. We are the treasure of God, the jewel he holds in his hand and considers more precious than anything else. There is nothing else you have to be in order to gain his favor. You don't have to sing well, dance, think, say, or do anything. He loves who you are.

2. God for us (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would turn the eyes of the believer to the truth which God has revealed about his love and care for the sinful, but redeemed human being.)

This passage is tough, not the least of which because it uses that word "predestination" and Lutherans have a visceral reaction to that word, after many years of interacting with our Calvinist friends. It is difficult, but silence means we are missing the opportunity to express some excellent, loving good news for people.

Luther was initially a great proponent of the doctrine of predestination, asserting that all that happened was by the will of God. His friend Melancthon, however, took him aside and helped him see that this would lead to some conclusions which were expressly contradicted in Scripture. One notices that Luther speaks less and less about the subject as he matures. Finally, refusing to discuss it.

What he would rather talk about as his life unfolded, was the passage we are preaching today: “God for us!” But the real impact of that phrase needs to be heard in the context of Predestination and why Luther did not talk about it.

Luther properly held that God was omnipotent and that he was all knowing, and all wise. But like many he looked around the world, saw a papacy which was corrupt, a political system which was no more functional in his day than ours is, sickness, war, famine, and plague. Luther wondered how all this reflected an all wise and all knowing, omnipotent God. Was God a monster who loved to inflict pain upon people? Hardly, but what can one say about this? Luther’s answer is a good one.

First of all there is much of God which we do not understand, we are not able either to comprehend or handle that information. It is too much for us. Our sinful minds have been stunted. Thus God had hidden much of himself from us. Power is something we cannot but try to control, so he hides that. Knowledge is simply another form of power. God’s eternal glory and majesty likewise would blind us to anything else, so he hides that too. Through the otherwise impenetrable darkness of sin, God has punched a cross shaped hole to communicate with us. And what he has revealed for us to see and believe is nothing more or less than his love.

We are saved by that love, we are promised eternal life in that love. That love permeates our lives and permits us to forgive one another and be a blessing to this whole world. The love is powerful, it is wise, it reflects God’s many other attributes, but they are only seen through God’s love.

Predestination belongs to that hiddenness of God. If we try to pursue that line of thought, as Luther discovered, we end up in terrible places. He would urge us to leave it alone. Rather than wondering about what God has not told us, he enjoins us to remember, consider, and think about what God has revealed to us in Christ, the cross, the empty tomb, and the outpouring of the Spirit.

I do believe in predestination, the broken predestination which says that those who go to heaven do so because God has willed it. But not the double-predestination which suggests that God wills some to go to hell. The bible is clear about this. His love wills that no one is lost. How exactly I square God not getting what he wants with omnipotence, I do not know. I must leave that to heavenly minds which are far better and larger than mine. I myself will stick with what God has told me. God is for us.

Here the preacher might simply want to read very carefully what Paul means by that in the final verses of this text and conclude.

3. Three Parables (Gospel Reading: That the Spirit of God would increase the faith, hope and love of the hearer so that he/she sees self and all of life as a privileged opportunity to love and serve God, especially as his living invitation to our neighbors and friends.)

You might just compare the conclusions of the meaning to the first and second articles here. In the first article of the creed Luther says that it is our duty to serve and obey God. At the end of the second article he says we “may” serve and obey God in His kingdom. And then in the third article we are empowered to serve, it is possible because it is the Spirit of God at work in us.

We thought that this sermon might end with a minor point being developed out of the fourth sermon idea below. That God’s loving me, is a purposeful loving. This sermon might simply walk through the three parables that Jesus tells:

- a. Parable of the treasure buried – you are the treasure
- b. Parable of the merchant and the pearl – God’s love is completely irrational
- c. Parable of the net – God’s beloved and precious people are now cast as a net into the sea of our community to serve as the gathering instrument for more lost treasures and precious pearls whom God has already loved with us.

We also considered ending this message with simply reading the Romans text, emphatically – not a wooden recitation of the words, but really reading the text as if we were speaking it to them.

4. Net Fishing (Epistle and Gospel: That the hearer, liberated by the Spirit from the need to earn his/her salvation, would join hands with his/her fellow congregant and be made by Christ into the net which he casts into this community.)

This sermon would reengage the hearer with the mission of the Church – to reach out, call, and bring people to Jesus.

This sermon relies upon the image of a net, a form of fishing with which many of us not familiar, indeed, it often gets a very bad rap. The nets are stripping the oceans bare. We will consider the whole congregation as a net cast into the community. Its individual members are a single strand of that net, but we are only effective in concert with our fellow members, bound in the love of Christ. Every week Christ draws us back into worship, repairs the rips and tears through forgiveness and the sacrament, and casts us back out into the world again.

We often hear exhortations to evangelism and being a witness in our communities. And quite often when we hear those messages our eyes roll and our minds immediately start listing off the reasons why we cannot do this. Usually at the top of that list is my own

competence and my lack of time. But is that really honest? I don't think so. The greatest impediment to evangelism is our lack of faith and hope.

Let me say that again, because we do not really believe/trust that Jesus has saved us, we are busy and exhausted from trying to do his job. Because we don't have an expectation/hope which is looking forward to his great work in our words and deeds, we are convinced that we cannot go and make disciples. Our failures of faith and hope are the greatest hindrances to the Gospel in this place. Our sinful nature wants to make work for ourselves and take the role of God in this. Our human nature rebels against the idea of grace, and so we want to make our own salvation. But that is really hard work, so hard we don't have time for anyone else.

This sermon would liberate your hearers to be the net which God casts into your community. First a bit about fishing. Most of us are line fisherman. We have a rod and reel, we put a hook with bait, or a lure, or a fly on our line, cast it into the water and hope to reel in a fish. This is not evangelism and is not the model which Jesus is using here. The disciples were net fishermen. They went out on a boat at night, so the fish could not see their crudely made nets, and threw their nets over board with the intent of scooping up fish by the score. I think most congregations are really lure fishing. They call a pastor and imagine that he will attract folks to their parish. He is the bait, the lure, which will reel in the catch. But this puts a huge and unreasonable burden on the pastor. If the congregation is shrinking, it is his fault. If it grows, he gets undue credit.

We are the net in Jesus' hands, cast into the sea of our community. Perhaps that means we will be asked to give up all, many have and have willingly handed over their possessions, their careers, even their own lives. But even then, they have never left the hand of God. We will gather all sorts of people, but that is no concern of ours. The evil is sorted out in the end; the good is carried into the treasure house of God. And what does God want of us? Simple to be that net he casts into the world. Nothing catches a sinner like another sinner redeemed. We are the perfect evangelist, the most appropriate spreader of that message. Bound together into this community called (name of church) Lutheran Church, we are cast through these doors to be the net which will gather his fish this week.

Remember the rest thing – God's word does the work, God will take care of the good/bad issues, God will make this work, he mends the net today in this meal and absolution. This is counter-cultural. The cultural net is scooping people up and making them all the same, forcing them to conform to the world. This sermon will urge them to be part of another network.

This will take faith and hope, but those are very powerful gifts from God and they do work. We first must believe that God is at work in our lives and the lives of the man or woman who is sitting next to us in the pew. We must learn to see past the sinner who stares at us in the mirror and the sinner who sits next to us in the pew. We learn to find

the smiling face of Jesus in both places and reach out our hands to form the community which is the basis of the net. Individual lines cast into the sea do not function as a net. They are simply individual strands. Holes in the net, conflicts which are unresolved in our midst are the holes through which the fish swim out our doors.

The net in its totality needs all the strands to be connected and working. But in truth, only a few strands of the net will be given to be in contact with the fish itself. But those strands really need the other strands in order to be effective. They sustain the actual fish catchers with prayers, material support, and simply being the witness to the love of God in Christ which is implied in a life lived in love, service, and worship.

We will need hope, the joyful expectation that Jesus works through our words and deeds to do his great work. The kingdom of God is like a net, you see. Jesus is gathering sinners. This is his work, not ours, though we are the tool he casts into the sea. But he leads us to the sinners we will meet, he leads us into the conversations and the relationships.

Believing what God says, hoping to see his work, you and I are a net cast into this community, God's net, for the salvation of many.

5. All things work out for the good of those who love God (Epistle: That the Holy Spirit would comfort and prepare the hearer for the day of stress and tumult.)

Three years ago the news brought us the disturbing scenes of Mosul, once home to many Christians. Paul speaks of God's love for people going through seriously difficult times, but he assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Change comes. The people of Mosul have included Christians for nearly 1800 years, and this is the first time in millennia in which there is not a Christian worship service in that city. Now that city has been "liberated" but if you see pictures, it looks more like it has been demolished.

But while it looks bad for them right now, they have not lost Jesus or his love. There is nothing that ISIS or anyone else can do to them or to us which comes between us and that love.

This sermon might pick up here on the "God is for us" theme above. The preacher will want to speak of the last part of this in which Paul asserts that there is nothing that comes between us and Jesus' love. He pushes through all of the crud, even the really bad crud, to his ultimate goal: us!

This is hard to preach to people who are in the middle of suffering. Often they can see little beyond their suffering. But when things are not yet there or when you can look back on suffering, this is the time to preach this sermon. It inoculates them spiritually and intellectually against the temptation which often assails us when things go bad, namely that God has abandoned us or no longer loves us. But Paul anticipated days of suffering, knew them himself, but attested that God's love in Christ transcended all, even death.

The sermon ends on a resurrection note. The Law is the sense that God has left us. The Gospel is that he has gone to a tomb and emptied it, not only of his Son's crucified corpse, but also of all our bodies as well. So let the bad guys do what they will. We cannot really stop them, but they cannot achieve their goals either.