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## Propers 15 (Pentecost 13) Series C 2016

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## **Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14**

It is one of those weeks when the preacher may have regretted not scheduling a final weekend of vacation. The texts are not warm and fuzzy affairs, but readings which are both challenging to understand and which, when understood, are very challenging to the believer. But do not despair, such texts reward the preachers efforts and can be potent occasions for the Holy Spirit to do his amazing work in our midst. The challenge will be that the hearer only has a few moments to access this material. We will want to think the sermon goals through very carefully and stick closely to them.

This challenge for preachers has been around for a very long time. The modern preaching movement traces its roots through the Reformation to the foundation of the Dominican and Franciscan movements in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They also struggled with these same issues in their preaching, indeed much of it was centered on the very issues within these texts. The medieval Christians were an interesting lot. They seem strangely superstitious to us. They went on their pilgrimages and collected their relics. They credulously believed the miracles of their saints. (One English woman of the 8<sup>th</sup> century was made a saint based on her resurrection of a goose.)

We really need to cut these people some slack in this regard. Yes, medieval folks did engage in a lot of behavior which we deem superstitious and which we consider to be utterly disconnected from reality. But, are we that much different? Walk around any urban environment today and you will encounter many people who are waving their cell phones about in attempts to capture, train, and “use” Pokemon Go characters. Can we really look at the medieval man who is adoring a relic and the tech-savvy teen who is pursuing a virtual character and say that one is more disconnected from reality?

Even as Lutherans we must exercise some care here. It is true that Luther hammered the medieval church for exploiting people for their superstitious beliefs. The cathedrals, including St. Peter’s in Rome, were largely built with the offerings of pious people who believed that gift was getting them something. Our Facebook account is free as is the Pokemon game on your nephew’s iPhone, but how is that Facebook’s CEO lives a mansion which only a Medici could envision? It is because his “free” social media program is harvesting information about you as you use it. He bundles that information with millions of other users and sells that to marketing firms so people have better access to your wallet. Who is being exploited here? The medieval guy whose offering is being extracted to build a cathedral he gets to visit or the Facebook user who is contributing to the palace of a tycoon? Would Luther have purchased Facebook or Nintendo stock? Are we part of the freeing of people from exploitation or are we part of the system which exploits?

Perhaps the medieval types are not so different from us for all our technology. One thing they did have right. The cardinal sin of the middle ages was not sex, but pride. Their moralists, their preachers of righteousness railed against the sin of pride, for they saw that it was the great destroyer of faith. Their heroes were folks who had given up every worldly possession to become

a beggar. But even here they knew of another and much more destructive sort of pride, a spiritual pride which looked upon the man who still owned a house and a horse with disdain. Thus these men and women of the early preaching movements were in a daily confessional booth with a spiritual advisor, to keep them from such pride.

The readings today focus our attention on pride and humility. Jesus rebuffs us in the very areas which we often take to be our virtues: Our families and our ability to control and predict nature. Jeremiah's message will revolve around the hubristic pride which seems to afflict every age: The idea that we choose which message to hear and obey, as if God's Word was some great multiple choice test. Such an approach to the Word renders us the decision maker and effectively puts us into the divine driver's seat. The writer to the Hebrews catalogues the saints of old reminding us that they were harassed and beaten, martyred and stomped on. Yet the world was not worthy of them. This is our example, not one of winning in the eyes of the world but of being a pitiable loser – our hero is, on this side of the grave, a carpenter nailed to a cross and buried in a borrowed tomb.

The gospel will be found in the fact that we have good company when it comes to humiliation and losing. Jesus mastered that on a cross when he underwent its torture and scorn, for the joy set before him. You and I are that joy, and we are the beneficiaries of that cross. The rub here is that as beneficiaries we cannot say that we are above the cross. In fact, our lives will inexorably be conformed to it or we will be found not to be Christian. The Christian way is not one of easy chairs and comfort, but one in which we participate in the suffering of the world, sometimes to a frightening degree. The good thing is that when lying flat on one's back, the view is always up.

I find it interesting that Lutheran industrialists in the United States include the inventor of the Lazy Boy recliner and the Briggs and Stratton engines that power our riding lawn mowers. Lutherans also are behind the company you know as "Pampered Chef" (they are large contributors to Concordia, Chicago.) Of course the most visible Lutheran philanthropist is the Schwann Foundation which is built upon nothing less than ice cream.

Does this suggest something to you? Hard work and inventiveness are great things. I am glad of them and enjoy my ice cream too, in fact too much. But have we come to value our security and our temporal blessings too much? Have they become our idols? I sometimes wonder if the Church would not be better if our buildings were all seized or burned down and we were forced to re-enter the real world of people who are suffering and dying. It was there that the Church got its start, among the slaves and the women, the poor and outcasts of the Roman world. Their leaders still had the smell of the fishing boat, the calloused hands of the laborer, and the hard edges of the scorned tax collector about them.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that I so enjoy working with this LAP/MTC program and the Diaconate. I think that we ought not seek to make pastors of all of them, but rejoice in the fact that they stand on the other side of that divide and represent the service of real people who are engaged in that real community in powerful ways.

## **Collect of the Day**

Merciful Lord, cleanse and defend Your Church by the sacrifice of Christ. United with Him in Holy Baptism, give us grace to receive with thanksgiving the fruits of His redeeming work and daily follow in His way; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Cleanse and defend the Church. Any time you are talking about cleansing and defending the church you are in a rather precarious position. When one turns to those who stand beside you and say they need to be cleansed, you have entered into a potentially explosive conversation. The danger here comes in being a judge when that is not our calling. The judgment and the cleansing belong to God and it is very easy for us to start to do his job. Please notice that the cleansing and the defending are all happening by the sacrifice of Christ.*

*What is our job? It is to be the witnesses to the truth of what Christ has done. And that too has a role to play in the cleansing and defense of the church. There is great value in the loving admonition which we give to one another. When we see the fault of another or they see ours and there is a frank and loving conversation about that, this can be one of the most powerful ecclesial moments. In fact, when this conversation does not happen, the church is fundamentally not working. It has at that point become in Pope Francis' words "another pathetic NGO (non-governmental organization)"*

*Hence the grace we need God's grace to receive the redeeming work with thanksgiving. The Proverb's admonition that a wise man receives a rebuke with thanksgiving comes to mind. This grace comes from our unity with Jesus in baptism. Remember that our baptism unites us with Christ in his death. The scriptures are really clear here that the really striking thing about Jesus in his death is his humility. See Isaiah 53, Romans 5, Hebrews, etc for what I mean here, as well as the passion accounts. Even though he has all the power and can wipe them out with a word, he humbly submits to the tortuous stripes and piercing of the soldiers.*

*Be careful what you pray for, you might not like it! If God answers this prayer it is not necessarily the way of comfort and ease which we might hope for. The lazy-boy Lutherans might find this difficult to swallow. Most folks when they pray to God for help ask him to take away the painful thing. This prayer seems to be a prayer for the grace to deal with the painful, distressing thing. Are you ready for that? It might not be comfortable or pleasant to have God say yes to this prayer.*

*At a minimum this means God will be breaking down our pride and our stubborn will with hard words and hard deeds. That way we can thankfully receive the fruit of his gracious work. It might mean that we are utterly destroyed, either in terms of our career or another aspect of our life, or even life itself. That is not bad, remember God creates out of nothing and if we are destroyed that is simply another opportunity for God to act, but you can expect the whole destructive process to be less than comfortable.*

## Readings

Jeremiah 23:16-29

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. <sup>17</sup> They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”

<sup>18</sup> For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD  
to see and to hear his word,  
or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

<sup>19</sup> Behold, the storm of the LORD!  
Wrath has gone forth,  
a whirling tempest;  
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

<sup>20</sup> The anger of the LORD will not turn back  
until he has executed and accomplished  
the intents of his heart.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

<sup>21</sup> “I did not send the prophets,  
yet they ran;

I did not speak to them,  
yet they prophesied.

<sup>22</sup> But if they had stood in my council,  
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way,  
and from the evil of their deeds.

<sup>23</sup> “Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? <sup>24</sup> Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth?

declares the LORD. <sup>25</sup> I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name,

saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ <sup>26</sup> How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, <sup>27</sup> who think to

make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers

forgot my name for Baal? <sup>28</sup> Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD.

<sup>29</sup> Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

<sup>30</sup> *Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one*

*another. <sup>31</sup> Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and*

*declare, ‘declares the LORD.’ <sup>32</sup> Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares*

*the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.*

*The book of Jeremiah is sadly neglected. It is not because Jeremiah does not have important things to say, but it is because they are sometimes difficult to access. Jeremiah's book appears to us to have been put through a sort of blender. The chapters are all jumbled up, or at least they are not in any order which makes sense to those who read it. It may be that work was reassembled after the king destroyed the copy of it as Jeremiah himself records. It may be that this book is actually a compilation made by his secretary Baruch, or it may simply be that this is the result of a long and difficult transmission process. In any event, the challenges of reading Jeremiah have meant that this longest book of prophecy in the OT is often not read.*

*The other element which has contributed to the neglect of this book is the subject matter itself. Jeremiah had a miserable job to do. He was the deliverer of really bad news. The people had so abandoned the faithful, covenantal relationship with God that God was keeping the promises, all of them, even the ones about ripping the people from the land and sending them into exile. The city of Jerusalem, the Temple, the Holy Place would all fall. The Babylonians would be the instrument of God's cleansing act. This would involve rape, slavery, refugees, death, and mayhem. No one wanted to hear this and no one does today. But this was the message which Jeremiah had to preach. He was not popular in his day either.*

*It was not all gloom and doom. After the destruction came the rebuilding, the replanting, the new vineyard of the Lord, but it could not come unless the destruction came too. Jeremiah himself was uniquely equipped for this. As a direct descendant of Eli he was living under a terrible curse his whole life. You can read this in chapters 2 and 3 of I Samuel. Pay particular attention to the curse which God lays on the house of Eli. Eli was of one of the two lines which descended from Aaron. His people worked mostly in the North. They always backed the wrong candidate for king and were consistently struck down. Finally, after they crossed Solomon once too often he banished the lot of them to Anathoth, a little village outside the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is a priest from Anathoth (Jeremiah 1). He lives under the curse which is laid on the house of Eli, and part of his curse is to be the bearer of this terrible message. God will destroy his holy city, his holy house, his holy place, because the sins of the people have defiled it.*

*Of course, Jeremiah in his cursed status is also a picture of Christ, who hung cursed upon a tree for us. It is in a sense Jeremiah's redemption found within the very punishment laid upon Eli. It is mysterious and if you think about it too much your head can spin a little.*

*This text reflects the fact that the folks of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's time don't like having their sins exposed any more than people do today. They went running after the prophets of peace and prosperity and ignored the message which Jeremiah spoke, or they reacted to it, cruelly treating him when he was simply doing his job as a prophet.*

*Here God assures Jeremiah that it is His word and that will stand and it reminds all of us that God is not a buddy. He is the almighty and terrible creator, fearsome in his holiness. The beginning of wisdom is still fear. Some time ago a blog on First Things addressed this. Here it is if you are interested: <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2013/07/no-squishy-love>*

*Today things are not much different, are they? The churches of wealth and prosperity have parking lots that are full. Those who faithfully proclaim the Word of the Lord are often asleep because even those who attend are not really interested in hearing the rock crushing word which God has for us. American laws and culture have reduced the Church to a sort of popularity contest which struggles to compete with the spectacles of NFL and PGA, and now must face the competition from those who cloak themselves in religion, but preach a message of greed and acquiescence to our fallen human nature. We also saw many who held the idea that they were self-competent in matters spiritual. They could piece together their own spirituality from pieces of different religions that appeal to them. Behind such an idea is that I am able to do this. Are we? Is that a truth?*

*But we cannot always blame those outside the Church. Often the preachers are afraid to speak the full Word of God. After all, a paycheck and a pension plan are all paid for by those folks whom we preach. In this regard, I really think the lay diaconate has an advantage over the full time clergy. When your paycheck is guaranteed by the folks to whom you preach, it can be very easy to tell them what they want to hear. I am not saying that such a lack of integrity is wide spread or even seen, but it does not take much imagination to see why it might just be easier to avoid certain hot topics that will likely tick off some of the folks, especially the folks with the deep pockets and the influence.*

*Yet God's Word is clear and it has power. God wants to destroy his people, but that is not the last Word and it would be a mistake to claim that it is the last word. God destroys so he may build. Just as the wrecking ball brings the building down so that a new structure can be built in its place, the word of God smashes our pride and our conceit so that a new person may be built on the solid work of Christ and live in His kingdom, on and in His Word*

*We wondered where one might find some Gospel in this text. It seemed like very heavy law. This is hard. One might find the Gospel in the very fact that God is still talking. He is concerned that his message gets out and that others are distorting his truth. That truth about which he is concerned is the truth of the Gospel, the truth of His love. But that is a tough connection to make here. It is couched very lawfully.*

*Even the phrase, "Am I not a God who is far away." while it can be a statement of God's presence which could be good, here God asks if you really think you can hide from him.*

*We thought that God was actually pretty gracious to let the dreamers tell their dreams. He just asks that they don't attribute this to him. His Word is fire and a hammer. The rock is broken, yes, but broken so that it may be used to rebuild something. Perhaps that is the place we will find the*

*Gospel – but more likely we will go to the other readings. Any one up for preaching the psalm this week?*

Psalm 119:81-88

### **Kaph**

- <sup>81</sup> My soul longs for your salvation;  
I hope in your word.
- <sup>82</sup> My eyes long for your promise;  
I ask, “When will you comfort me?”
- <sup>83</sup> For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,  
yet I have not forgotten your statutes.
- <sup>84</sup> How long must your servant endure?  
When will you judge those who persecute me?
- <sup>85</sup> The insolent have dug pitfalls for me;  
they do not live according to your law.
- <sup>86</sup> All your commandments are sure;  
they persecute me with falsehood; help me!
- <sup>87</sup> They have almost made an end of me on earth,  
but I have not forsaken your precepts.
- <sup>88</sup> In your steadfast love give me life,  
that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth.

*The words of this Psalm could be the words of Jeremiah and of course the words of Jesus.*

*Psalm 119 is an acrostic, the first line of each section begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in this case the letter “Kaph” which roughly corresponds to an English “K.” The psalm itself is a massive reflection/mediation upon the Word/Law/Torah of God. The psalmist professes repeatedly his love of God’s statutes and the role they play in his life. Properly understood, these are the mediations of Jesus upon the commands of his father to redeem the world. Properly understood and within the faith of Christendom, these mediations of Jesus become our own mediations upon the law of God.*

*The person who does not participate in this faith can only consider such thoughts to be psychotic. But for the person inside the faith, this is holy ground. Consider just slowly and carefully reading through this passage for your own edification. Ask what it is like to feel these things, why you might feel this way, how that might be a way to live and most of all what this says about God and you.*

Hebrews 11:17-31 (32-40); 12:1-3

<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, <sup>18</sup> of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” <sup>19</sup> He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead,



from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.<sup>20</sup> By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.<sup>21</sup> By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.<sup>22</sup> By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

<sup>23</sup> By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.<sup>24</sup> By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,<sup>25</sup> choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.<sup>26</sup> He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.<sup>27</sup> By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.<sup>28</sup> By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

<sup>29</sup> By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.<sup>30</sup> By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.<sup>31</sup> By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

<sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,<sup>34</sup> quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.<sup>36</sup> Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—<sup>38</sup> of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

<sup>39</sup> And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,<sup>40</sup> since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.<sup>4</sup> *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*<sup>5</sup> *And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?*

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

*<sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

*The preacher must read such a passage and be willing to consider the most fundamental of questions. What is faith? If we would take up this beautiful text we must come to the task with this question carefully considered, so we can articulate it. Most today read faith as a sort of virtue to which we might aspire and struggle. We commend the person of faith as an example we ought to follow. Faith is something good which we really want to have.*

*But is this really faith? Is this the faith that Jesus authored and perfected? Luther helps us a great deal here. Faith is not a something that I cultivate and to which I might aspire. Faith is a gift of God. Jesus is the author of our faith – it comes from him. He “faithed” in the Father when he ascended that cruel hill. He “faithed” in the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, “Thy will be done.” He faithed in the Father when he said, “into your hands I commit my spirit.” He authored our faith, wrote it down, originated it.*

*Jesus perfects our faith. Having planted that mustard seed in us, that tiny thing which the world despises, he causes it to grow. I don’t. It is like that seed which grows automatically in Mark 4. The farmer sleeps and waits, but the seed itself does the growing. Just as God makes the seeds to grow, so the faith which Jesus has planted grows.*

*But here is the funny thing about faith. It is mine as well. The relationship which is faith is also something that I can call my own. It does in fact act through me. It is bestowed upon me passively, my righteousness is alien in that sense. But once bestowed it is given, it is mine, it does change me. Faith is lived out in very concrete ways. For the folks of the first century this meant enduring a persecution which caused them to “live in caves” or be killed for what they were and did. What does it mean for us? What is the faith lived out today? It is not simply a good habit or an act of the will; although, faith certainly does affect our habits and our intentions.*

*The protestant culture of North America frequently suggests that the choice is between material things and spiritual things. Faith should pay attention to the spiritual. But Colossians helps us here. It is not a choice between God and the material, but rather faith says that the material is a gift from God and an avenue to enjoy God through the material. Faith lived out in this way would suggest not that I sell all and go live some hermit existence but that I would live with and through my materials things in constant service to God. The real question might be whether we are just fooling ourselves. Perhaps, like the earliest Christians, we need to be divested of all our possessions in baptism so that we can receive them back after baptism to be used in his service.*

*This reading from Hebrews includes the whole reading, all the optional sections, assigned for the day, plus a few more verses tacked on for good measure. Those last verses are important and*

*should not be missed by the preacher. This was not an abstraction for the people to whom he wrote. They were being persecuted. This was all very real for them. The preacher of this text will need to make this very real for his people.*

*This passage is very familiar and justifiably so. It is the great catalogue of faith. Pay special attention to the assessment of Moses. The prophets as well are hardly to be considered successful by any worldly standard and yet the writer to the Hebrews can say that the world is not worthy of these guys.*

*All this culminates in the application in the first verses of chapter 12. The race set before us takes endurance. It is not something that we should expect to be easy. I think that we have often grown far too comfortable in our Christianity. I used work across the hall from the LCMS mission executive for India and Sri Lanka. He says that the Christians there simply expect persecution. It is normal for them. They are not distressed by the fact of persecution or difficulty. They walk miles to get to Church. When they build a new church building, they give one month's salary, over their tithe, to the church until it is paid for. Our people are afraid to let their neighbor know they are Christian lest they be laughed at. Would we give up an additional 12<sup>th</sup> of our income (a little more than 8% for those of us who like percentages) over and above the tithe we already give? What is wrong with this picture and why is this so? I believe that the people of the developing world have much to teach us about faith. The colonial attitudes in which we came to bring civilization to them have been reversed. They scorn us in our faithless impiety and spineless confession. To them we look to be the Godless heathen. We truly need to learn from them.*

*And so we go chasing after all the wrong stuff. We need to make our worship contemporary so the young people will come. Get real! These folks in India are not walking barefoot for five miles to church because they have looked at a variety of churches and chosen this one because the music is good or the children's programming is better. They are coming to encounter Christ, the Jesus who has condemned their sin and died for it. The Jesus who has transformed their life and their whole way of looking at the world is met in that service. They come because Jesus has changed them into the sort of person who worships. If the change is not happening, perhaps it might because there are not enough Jeremiah's preaching the tough word and so the pride of humanity clings tightly to each of us and in our fear of death we refuse to die to sin.*

*Try preaching that and not getting stoned!*

Luke 12:49-53 (54-56) (Jesus did not come to bring peace, but division!)

<sup>49</sup> "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! <sup>51</sup> Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. <sup>52</sup> For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> They will be divided,

father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

<sup>54</sup> He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

*Is the fire which Jesus yearns to cast upon the earth really the Holy Spirit, the Pentecost event? Does Jesus yearn to pour out the Third Person of the Trinity but before he can do that he must go through this baptism of suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Why then does Jesus tell us that this brings division even to families? See a couple paragraphs below where we talk about idols and the need for Jesus to redeem and restore even the things we love and which we think are good about our lives.*

*This is tough. Our people will likely hear these words about family and immediately be hurting for their own families. How do we let this be a proclamation of kingdom without simply being a therapy session for hurting families?*

*Like Jeremiah, Jesus has a hard word to cast. His word is a consuming fire, but what does it consume? Does he refer to his eschatological judgment here? Or does he mean the preaching of Law and Gospel which happens in pulpits today? Or is this one of those both/and moments? Does this fire not consume our very being, that old man whom Paul says has been drowned in our own baptism? Christ yearns for his baptism and our baptism, for they are of one piece. We are baptized into his death (Romans 6). That is not just a figure of speech. It is a reality which transforms us. Yes this is a radical word which divides, even within households it divides. But that cannot frighten us from preaching it.*

*I recollect some time ago when we discussed this we had a really interesting conversation about what this meant. All of us had seen families that had been divided over the conversion, the real discipleship, of one of the members of that family. Jesus’ call is still radical, it uproots us, and there may well be a price to pay.*

*Another way to read this is that Jesus is denying us any of our idols. We like to think that redemption is for what is wrong with us, but that God should leave alone what is good in our lives. Yet the truth is even in our best moments, the mom and apple pie moments of our lives, we are profoundly broken. God has sent Jesus into this world to redeem us from our vices, yes, but also our virtues. We need redemption then too.*

*Jesus puts into practice then, immediately, what he is talking about. We are all blind. We think we can figure this whole world out. I love his allusion to the weather. Here we are with all this technology and we still are little better off than the ancients in predicting whether it will be hot today or not. And yet God can tell you to the smallest fraction of a degree what the temperature will be in this place ten years from today. Yes, we can point to the signs and tell you what the*

*weather will be in the short term. But Jesus has something larger and even more obvious in mind, and we cannot see it. The world is coming to its dreadful conclusion. But we are blind to that.*

*Our meager ability to interpret the weather is nothing compared to our blindness when it comes to the end of things or the significance of things. For this, we must listen and like blind men trust the one who tells us to step there or walk here. God has told us what we need, and yet we would too often try to chart our own way, with disastrous results. We piously claim to follow him, until, that is, he tells us what we don't want to hear. Just take the sermons we have preached for the last couple of weeks as an example. We have said that my things are not really mine but his. But will I live that way? Will I use them that way? Or will I serve him only out of my excess after I have bought my massive TV and the latest iteration of the Apple i-phone? God has promised to hear our prayers, so do I actually pray or do I stubbornly insist that my time is my time to arrange the way I want to? Last Sunday, the coveting Sunday, we heard God enjoin us to trust him. We have heard it, but is our motto, "in God we trust, when it is convenient." I have always found that phrase an interesting addition to our money, which for so many is the idol in which they place their trust.*

## **Law**

1. I am fundamentally rebellious. I like being in charge, or perhaps better said, I don't like others being in charge of me. I really might not crave dominating someone else; I just wish they would leave me alone to do as I please. But while that may be fun in the short term, it runs into serious problems when my health fails or my finances collapse, probably because I have not been listening to the good advice and admonitions of folks who know more than I do.
2. I am good at lying to myself. I have all sorts of ways I can exert my need to be self-determining. I might simply not listen, or I might seek until I find the person who tells me what I want. Or I might just make it up myself. In any event, when my ears are not tuned into God, the result is always the same. Cut off from the Word of Life, my life withers and dies and the Devil likes that.
3. My enemy is sophisticated. Of course, when my life is in the tank, it is harder to be too self-confident about my abilities, to chart my own course. The man who has been utterly crushed is not likely to think he has his act together, so my enemy lets me have some success, some pleasure, some tantalizing taste of what I think it should be like to be in charge. My family, my health, my career might actually be pretty good, though these are fragile and fleeting things. I imagine the Devil watches me in these things a little like I might watch a mouse sniff his way into the cheese laden trap. I am willing to let him have

a bite of that bit of cheese, because you know this will be the last cheddar he will be filching from me.

4. When confronted, really confronted by this reality, I know all this and I am afraid – I have a God problem. The aforementioned elements of the law are simply true, but they may be too terrible for me to think about, hence I don't want to. I really don't see a way out of this. I have an enemy who is too much for me, and I have a God whose righteous demand I have not met. I fear that I will lose even the miserable little bit that I have.

## **Gospel**

1. God has made me and loves me. My rebellion is real, but it is not as real as his love for me. I cannot explain this or rationalize this. God is just strange in his love for his broken and sinful world. I try to assert my control and he ought to fry me, but he does not.
2. He knows that cut off from Him, I am unable to sustain life. So he sent Jesus, the ultimate physician of my life. With the brutality of a surgeon who is excising the cancer that will otherwise kill me, he slices and dices me, but not that I may die, but that I may live. His words may be hard, but behind them stands the incredible love of God.
3. He knows my enemy, and he is craftier still. He not only asserts his lordship over me, but He knows that even if, with his help, I have my way straight, I am still liable to some bizarre asceticism and pride. He not only breaks my of self delusion that my family is good, or my job is good, or that health is good, but then he returns the very things I once trusted and gives them to me as gift.
4. He has not waited for me to come to him, but he has come to me. In the incarnation he entered this poisoned world to breathe its fouled air and suffer an excruciating death, he has come to me personally in the waters of baptism, the meal of the Eucharist, the word, and the fellowship of my brothers and sisters in Christ, he has come to seek me out, apply his sharp word and give me the trust and life which I could never have in him. He has overcome every barrier that I may be finally and completely his person.

## **Sermon Ideas**

1. The Hammer that Breaks the Rock into Pieces (from the OT and Gospel Lessons – That the hearer would perceive the God's love for him/her even in the crushing moments of life, and certainly as they reflect upon them.)

This sermon has three possible avenues presented in the two readings for approaching this. Jeremiah really is attacking the idolatry of autonomy, the idea that we get to choose which voice we listen to. Americans have drunk deeply of this well and the idea that if I

don't like this congregation I can just go find another seems to be woven into our very fabric. But with that has come also the idea that I can choose to listen to another God, or, worse, I can find the same God speaking in a multitude of different and even conflicting voices. The result is that it feeds our human desire to "be like gods" which has afflicted us since a scene in a garden long ago.

Jesus then takes two other tracks. The first is family. We have at times almost enshrined family to extent that it is the expression of our religion. It is still the excuse which trumps all others. A frequent reason cited for folks who leave government service is to spend more time with family. Even Steve Carroll's departure from *The Office* was occasioned by his decision to spend more time with his family. All of this is good, and families are good, but they are not the Good. Family can be an idol and Jesus tells us that he will split families apart, causing divisions within them. His kingdom is more important than family.

Then he hits a theme which is particularly resonant with our generation. He notes that our knowledge has not brought us wisdom. Knowledge is good, but like family it is not the Good. We can interpret the signs of the weather, sort of, but we cannot interpret the signs of the times. Jesus is pointing out that for all our intelligence and knowledge, there are many things we are just stupid about. We need him. But we often believe that the way to solve a problem is to devote more money to research, to have bright people thinking about it. But what we often fail to realize is that the problems solved are simply symptoms of the root cause of our woes, and that is sin. That will take a God solution.

All three of these are examples of God's Word doing its hammer job on us, breaking the stubborn heart. The preacher could use all three or develop one of them very effectively. But it is important that the preacher also realize that the goal of the hammer is not only to destroy, but it is a tool we use to build the house too. God destroys our self-vaunting pride so he can replace it with the humble faith which will be lifted far higher than we could even imagine. He crushes our rebellious nature so he can revive us as more than we ever thought or deserved, the very sons of God.

I used to work for an antique store, the carpenter in there would often pull apart a piece of furniture to fix it. He could not force a little glue into the loose joint, he had to tear it apart to restore it. (Jesus said that he had not come to sew a new patch on an old garment or put new wine in an old wineskin.) Jesus becomes the glue that restores the relationship, but to do that he must assert his lordship over the whole thing. My relationships are not really mine, they are his too. He becomes the governor of them, he gets to determine how I live in them. He defines them with his forgiveness, love, honesty, and standards.

Thus the proudly self-determining spirit whom Jeremiah crushed becomes the very citizen of heaven, able to choose right from wrong naturally and effortlessly when we are

in heaven. We won't need to work at that anymore. The family which has taken its rightful second place in the Christian schema of life becomes this tremendous blessing from God, a treasure for our good. Knowledge and the ability to know, when they are dosed with a measure of the humility which they need, becomes a great tool by which life can be made better and diseases can be cured. It won't cure the problems of death and sin but it can help us alleviate the pain and treat the symptoms of our sinful condition.

2. Eyes on the Founder and Perfecter of our Faith - (from the Epistle reading – that the hearer would fix his/her eyes on Jesus as the sole source of life, peace, and joy.)

This sermon seeks to teach something but also to encourage it. For the Law/Gospel preacher, it might help to think about this as a sermon which relieves a burden. We can obsess about faith. Do we have it? Do we have the right sort? Do we need to work harder at this faith thing? But this sermon will take the approach that these are the wrong questions. Indeed, these questions often are distracting us from the much more important questions of what is Christ doing.

The current take on faith is a problem. Many think today that faith is some sort of an act of the human will, a decision reached. But the biblical picture of faith is much different. It is far more like sight, a seeing of something. To “faith” in the biblical sense is to be watching or seeing Christ doing something. It is not us doing something. God is the actor in faith. Luther used to say that he wished he could look at God and pray to him like his dog watched Luther when Luther was eating a sausage.

I have in the past used the illustration of a radio's antenna. It is utterly passive, it makes no music nor does anything but hang out there. Yet it is necessary. So too the faith of the Christian. It doesn't actually do the good work, it is utterly a passive receiver. God is the one who works through the faith, and like a good radio tech, he is the one who installed the antenna to begin with.

For the preacher the challenge is to speak about faith without falling into the current conventions of speech which almost universally use the word as an act of the human being, a virtue to which we can point and marvel at it. The Scriptures speak of faith differently, it is more akin to a sense like hearing. I happen to live in a part of town not far from the Portland Airport. I really don't have a choice about the airplane sounds that invade my back yard. I cannot shut off my hearing, I don't direct my hearing to only one thing or another. I could sell my house and buy a spot out in the country, but even there, I won't be able to entirely determine what I hear. This has an affinity with the description of faith. It is eyes fixed on Jesus. He is the one who begins faith and perfects it, not me.

It is the act of seeing that is the faith, it is the relationship he has established in Christ in which I am looking at him. I am not looking at my faith, by the way. That is a form of



navel gazing and it does no one any good. How does one look at sight anyway? Faith is not something other than me looking at Jesus; faith is me looking at Jesus. I can no more consider my faith than I can really get a good look at my own eye. The eye is the very thing that does the seeing. Faith is the sense of sight, it is the seeing.

The current generation often wants to look at the faith, as if the faith is really the thing which creates the salvation. But in so doing we take our eyes off the very author and perfecter of faith and thus stop “faithing.” We start to believe in the faith instead of the object of our faith. It is quite possible to turn faith into an idol, a merciless and cruel taskmaster god, for you will never have enough.

Faith is quite different. It looks to Jesus because I am a failure, I have not done it right. I need that Jesus whom I see, so I keep looking at him. This removes a huge burden from us. I am looking at the solution to all my woes.

Faith as small as a mustard seed can move a mountain or cast a mighty tree into the sea, because it is not the faith that does this, it is God working through the faith that accomplishes the mighty deed.

This sermon really seeks to relieve a burden. The question is not whether you have faith, or enough faith. The real question is what is Jesus doing? Did he die to save your sins? Does he keep his promise to be with you and help you every day? When I finally come to my last breath, does Jesus catch me in his strong arms and carry me to heaven?

Yes, yes he does!

3. Surrounded by a cloud of witnesses we look with them to Jesus in Faith (That the communion of saints would encourage the hearer to face difficulty and success faithfully.)

This sermon might be preached on the Sacrament of the Altar as well. When we commune we commune with the whole “angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven” which would include all those who have run this race before us.

Being surrounded by others we are strengthened. Many years ago, early 1960’s, Stanley Milgram, a researcher at Yale, conducted a series of experiments in which he put an actor in another room and told a person that when given the wrong answer they should push a button which caused an electric shock to be given. When the person was alone in the room, a shocking 65% of the participants were willing to push the button, even when they heard the man in the other room screaming. There was a fascinating news article about this a number of years ago on Radio Lab, an NPR program which can likely be downloaded as a podcast if you are interested.

But when another person was in the room, and especially when that person expressed a doubt about this experiment, the percentage of people who were willing to push that button dropped precipitously, sometimes to less than 10%.

To be surrounded by a cloud of witnesses is a powerful thing. It is not just a bunch of happy thoughts, but a potent shaping of who we are and what we say/do in life. The truth is we don't often think before we act. We are not really deciders who rationally contemplate what we will do and then do it. We are most often living life in the moment. It is those things in which we are enmeshed that will determine and influence how we deal with the life decisions that are before us. We just do it, to quote a famous advertising slogan. Being surrounded by this cloud of witnesses means they are shaping our responses to this world.

With those witnesses we are given to look to Jesus – (see the sermon above for a discussion of faith as an act of seeing)

Looking at the one who suffered all, even death by crucifixion, we stand with others who have suffered disappointment, heartache, pain, and yes, sometimes cruel death. With them we do not lose our faithful expectation (hope) in the promise which Jesus and His Father have made to us. Abraham ascended that hill with Isaac ready to make a sacrifice because he had his eyes on Christ and the promise which God had made. Rachel practiced hospitality with eyes on that same promise making God.

The preacher might want also to point out that we are also part of that cloud of witnesses. We are encouraging others to follow Jesus, to keep their eyes fixed upon him. Our faithful deeds of generosity, love, care, and sacrifice have become instruments of God to this world, to our families, to our neighbors.