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Propers 16 (Pentecost 12) Series A 2017

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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 27 (Proper 16)

Frederick Dale Bruner wrote an excellent commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew in two volumes. It is heavy reading, but often the reader who struggles through it is well rewarded. His second volume, which starts at chapter 13 he subtitled the “Churchbook.” (The first half he called the “Christbook.”)

One way to look at much of the material we have been preaching in the past several weeks has been a description of the Church, the Bride of Christ, the congregation of God’s people on earth. We have been likened to a treasure in a field, we have been told about the weeds among us, we have sat down with the multitudes and Jesus has fed us, and we have begged for life itself from Jesus, Son of David.

Today the word actually shows up. Matthew is unique among the Gospels for using the word for church, ekklesia. It shows up in Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, but never in his Gospel account. It is likewise absent from Mark and John. The word means “called out” or summoned. That name runs directly counter to our consumerist, voluntary association understanding of Church in North America. The Greek word assumes that God has called us and we are present out of an obedience to that summons. We are not there because we like it, neither because we have been enticed, nor because we have done some sort of a cost/benefit analysis and concluded that this is a good idea. The Almighty God has called us out of darkness and into His light.

So today we might consider the Church. A quick glance around might not reveal a pretty sight. The perception of most of our folks is that the Christian Church, especially in its Protestant manifestation in North America, is largely deflating. The only congregations who are really growing are those who are managing to capture the emigrants who stream into our nation, primarily Roman Catholicism. Even the LCMS, which has not seen the precipitous decline of the United Methodists, UCC, PCUSA, or the recent hemorrhaging of the ELCA, finds that it is being de-funded into increasingly irrelevance. (Not that many years ago Concordia University was largely funded by support from the LCMS. Today, Concordia’s annual budget significantly exceeds all the budgeted income which the Synod will receive from its all its districts. That is repeated in all ten of the universities of the Synod.)

Even the recent success stories are struggling. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than the Crystal Cathedral of Robert Schuller. He started in 1955 with a rented drive-in movie theater and built an empire. Many a Lutheran preacher was frustrated by the appeal of his “Hour of Power” broadcast to weasel its way into the hearts and minds of shut-in members who had a TV and little else on Sunday mornings. Recently the Crystal Cathedral ministries filed for Chapter 11. They owed over \$50 million. The Roman Catholic diocese has purchased the Crystal Cathedral and repurposed it as Christ Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop. It is official, you can read about it in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Diocese_of_Orange. The thought of “papist” liturgies, infant baptisms, sacramental celebrations, and all that goes with being the seat of an Archbishop of the Catholic Church must send shudders down the spines of the staunchly

Calvinist Dutch Reformed who were the seedbed and backbone of that ministry. The thought rather appeals to me, but I also have to confess to a measure of Schadenfreude.

Of course Catholicism isn't without its problems either. The Archdiocese of Portland is not buying any buildings these days as it has also filed for bankruptcy and is making enormous payments to the attorneys of people abused as children by a number of priests. The local Jesuits are reeling from a similar controversy.

Yet, our texts do not direct our attention this way, but away from these things. Remember the Church is "called out" and created not by us, but by God. Isaiah urges us to consider the rock from which we were hewn, the quarry of our beginning. Abraham was no hero. He was an old man who believed, wavered in that belief, and yet, against all evidence, eventually came to confess that God could give him a child in his old age. The Gospel lesson has Jesus assembling his disciples outside the confines of the Promised Land. If you were there, you might have argued persuasively that he had been chased out of town by the hostility of the established church, the Jewish religious leaders. Yet, he tells Peter that upon his confession God will build a church against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail. He will arm it not with weapons of war, but the stronger arms of forgiveness and the authority of God's Word.

God is calling us to hope in this darkness, a hope which is built not on what we see, nor on what we feel, nor on our own sense of where things are going, but on Him, His Word, His promise, His Son. Our beginnings and present are humble, but so was Abraham. Our confession is confused and often halting, but upon it God does great things.

We confess "I believe in the holy, Catholic (Apostolic) Church" but what does that mean? What is the Church in which we believe? Why do we have to believe it? Don't we see and know it?

The last time we considered this we came to say this. Is it still what we want to say? The Church is:

1. All the disciples of Christ and those whom God is already bringing into the Church but whom we have not perceived as of yet.
2. A divinely defined distinction – not something we get to decide (denominational distinctions cannot define the church)
3. Confessional definition: (Augs Conf.) Wherever the Word is preached and the Sacraments administered according to God's Word.
4. Visible/Invisible distinction – is this really helpful? The preacher finds it helpful or does he just use it as an excuse for the bad behavior of some? The fact is that there is no invisible church – it always gathers, it is always visible, or it is not a church. There is an extreme which needs to be avoided. The person who wants only the invisible church free of hypocrites will stay away from the assembly. But the person who sees that the denomination or the visible church is the Church and refuses to acknowledge

that there is another distinction to make runs the risk of spiritual triumphalism and many other problems. The distinction remains valid and helpful, but not in every circumstance.

5. The church must be believed. The effort to “prove” or otherwise identify the church which does not need faith is misguided. It will take faith to see the sinner next to me and perceive the saint. Always, this side of heaven.
6. The Church acts in a priestly office. It proclaims the message of God, particularly the proclamation of forgiveness, to a whole world of sinners. It also, in turn, brings the prayers of humanity to God.

Collect

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

What is a “bold confession” of Jesus to be the Christ? What is the “steadfast walk” in the way to eternal life? Are they the same or different things? We thought they were different, but they have to be connected.

1. *Bold confession and steadfast walking is only the result of God the Holy Spirit working on/through us. This is not our doing but God’s working.*
2. *Don’t be afraid to let people know you are a Christian – Jesus is my Lord because he is the Christ. He rules in my life and you can see that because he orders my life for me, not me. That means sometimes I do things that I would not rather do but which are done out of obedience to a Lord, that is Jesus.*
3. *Your confession has an effect on your life – you are not a Sunday only Christian but someone for whom this confession makes a difference in life.*
4. *Attend church – regular church goers are not just once a month when it is convenient.*
5. *The confession and walk happen even when the going gets tough – bold confessors and steadfast walkers are persistent and stubborn.*
6. *Jesus is the only way that leads to eternal life – this is an unpopular position in this time and place – bold confessors buck societal trends for the sake of this truth who is Jesus, this way who is Jesus alone and this life who alone is Jesus. All others are death, error, and dishonesty. (Scandal of Particularity)*

This prayer prompts a number of questions: How does knowing God equate to everlasting life? How is the knowledge that Christ is the way, truth, and life help us be bold in our confession?

How does that God given knowledge of Christ's nature help us steadfastly walk in the path which leads to everlasting life?

This knowledge is clearly not the same thing as a knowing math or another academic subject. After all, simply knowing about health does not make us healthy, nor does knowing about life itself mean we do not die. This is much more like saying I know my friend or wife or child. That "knowledge" is really a shorthand way of talking about relationship. When I say I know my wife, I cannot tell you exactly how much she weighs or how many hairs she has on her head. And if I were to ascertain those numbers, would I really "know" her any better? Indeed, I might actually compromise the relationship if I pursued the weight question too assiduously.

That said, such relationship is not satisfied with mediocre or slight knowledge about the other. I want to know what my wife did today. When I have a friend who is absent, I am always glad to have news about them. Those little facts are all part of the great knowledge which is the relationship. I hunger for that knowledge too and when I don't care about the other, isn't the relationship soured as well? Do I really still "know" them if I don't care about that other knowledge?

We are on the edge of language here. "Know" approaches the truth here, but it cannot actually say the whole thing.

We pray: Grant us to know your Son who is the way the truth and the life so that we may boldly confess him and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life.

There are so many things which get in the way of us knowing this Jesus this way. What gets in your way? Is it the discouraging things of life? Is it the success? Does our own sin stand in the way or is it something else. Our enemy doesn't care what keeps us from looking at Jesus, he wins no matter what it might be.

Perhaps we also need to ask what it means to look at Jesus. Obviously we cannot see him as Peter and James and John did on the shores of Galilee. But there is something to see. The men and women who create the icons which adorn Orthodox churches do not say that they "paint" them; rather, they write them. They are a communication of the Word, hence the verb is one of writing. The idea is that the picture is somehow a communication of Christ to us. Perhaps that idea is uncomfortable for us, but the Bible is in fact much more clear about where we might see Jesus. Acts tells us that Jesus is to be seen in the disciples. Peter raises the dead and gives the lame to walk. Their word has power and Christ empowers their community with his very Spirit.

But, as the prayer says, even our confession and our following in that way are gifts from God. Where do we fit into that scene? What is the preacher calling for? If God does it all, what challenge can we offer to people? Do we just proclaim the gospel and wait like Quakers for some act of God? Jesus will tell us today that Peter's amazing confession is itself a gift of God, it is not of flesh and blood, so can we even in good conscience call for our people to do anything?

This is a profound mystery which the preacher can never say he has a grasp of completely. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the sacrament of baptism. We confess this to be an act of God, yet the altar guild must fill the font, the parents must bring the children, the pastor must speak the words or there is no baptism. So where does the person leave off and where does the God stuff start? Can we mark that line clearly? If we cannot, how do we preach this?

The prayer asks God to grant us to know. We know. God grants it. Within that tension is a great sermon for our folks this week. I look forward to hearing it.

The preacher who is working toward the sermon which makes use of that tension this week, however, has another question to ask: Where does our confession need boldness today? Is it the teen who is pulled by his peers into the morass of contemporary culture with its freewheeling morals and refusal to call anything a sin? Do we need to be bold in other places too? Is it a bold thing for a father to call his children together and have a time for scripture and prayer? Do the elderly the nursing homes need to be bold with their fellow residents? Do we need to be bold ourselves? Does the waitress who brings us our coffee in the café know we are a Christian? Should she? How would she know that I am confessing Christ?

This might lead to one of the hit topics of this day, and that is the freedom of religion. The Bill of Rights forbids the establishment of religion in the United States, but it also expressly protects the practice of religion. When the constitution was written, the founders were still reacting to the bloodletting of the wars of religion. They were looking for a way to tame the religious impulse, in effect a way to save religion. Many of them were very religious men, but some were deeply suspicious of religion, especially Catholicism. They wrote a constitution for one set of circumstances, a world in which they felt that religion needed to be constrained. But in so doing have they simply empowered another sort of religion, a secular religion whose primary tenet is anti-Christianity? Today it is considered gauche to talk religion at a party and it may be forbidden at your place of work or in an educational setting. Have we allowed an established civil religion of “don’t offend me religiously” inhibit our free exercise of our religion?

At the same time, we too have encountered the uncomfortable situation when someone pushes this too hard. When does wearing Christ on our sleeve become counterproductive? When do we become the person who is avoided as a religious nut-case? If we are concerned about that, are we timid or are we just being tasteful and considerate? The preacher will want to tread thoughtfully and carefully here. This is not a black and white situation, despite what some would say.

Readings

Isaiah 51:1-6

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the LORD:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,

and to the quarry from which you were dug.

² Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him.

³ For the LORD comforts Zion;
he comforts all her waste places
and makes her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

⁴ “Give attention to me, my people,
and give ear to me, my nation;
for a law (Torah) will go out from me,
and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.

⁵ My righteousness draws near,
my salvation (Jeshua = Jesus) has gone out,
and my arms will judge the peoples;
the coastlands hope for me,
and for my arm they wait.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and they who dwell in it will die in like manner;
but my salvation will be forever,
and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

*An exegetical note to start: The Hebrew word for Salvation in vs 5 of this text is “Jesus!”
Remember his name means “God saves.”*

In the second part of his book, Isaiah has a difficult challenge for any preacher. His people are discouraged. They believe that they have come to the end of Israelite history and that their God has fundamentally failed them or that they have so failed their God that he has rejected them. If you hold to an historical Isaiah authorship, he is writing for the people who have already been carted off into an exile, leaving a tiny rump state which can claim control only of immediate area of Jerusalem. If you hold that this is a later prophet, as some do, then he is writing after that rump state has collapsed under the weight of Nebuchadnezzar’s army. In any event, politically the situation is extremely bleak.

In chapter 51 he uses a tactic of remembering and hoping. He encourages them to look to the quarry from which they were hewn, the people from which they got their start. God once took a childless couple in their 90's and made a mighty nation of them. Don't you think he can do that again? With YHWH it is never too late for redemption and salvation. This is rather reminding us of Elijah at Horeb who thinks he is the only one left. God has reserved 7000 whom Elijah cannot perceive. We also were reminded of the Mustard Seed Parable in which this tiny seed which looks like such a nothing becomes this huge thing. The kingdom of God works like that. Isaiah 55 points us to the fact that God's Word does not return empty. The fullness is defined by God, not me, and that is hard, but he sends and he defines success.

In the course of pointing them to the past, he also points them to a future which is even better than the past. God will pay attention to the ravaged land, once promised to and tended by the children of Israel but now desolate. It will bloom like Eden. The whole land will rejoice.

But takes it even further. Starting in verse 4, even this harkening back to Eden is deemed to be but a foretaste, a shadow of the reality which is God's salvation. Heaven is even more than Eden restored to us. The earth and sky will vanish like smoke, they are not the place to locate the fullness of YHWH's redemption. In a beautiful twist on the words, he urges them to look now to the very earth and heavens which seem so solid, the quarry from which they were hewn as Adam was shaped from the dust of the earth. It will pass away but the salvation which God has promised and delivered in Christ will not pass away.

God will establish his justice for the whole world. The coastlands, probably the regions of Ionia and the Aegean Islands of the Mediterranean Sea are what he has in mind. At the time this was the Western edge of the civilized world as they saw it. Soon the mighty Persian Empire would try to conquer it and be rebuffed under Darius (battle of Marathon) and Xerxes (Thermopylae and the naval battle of Salamis). The uncouth tribes to the west of that (the Latins and others) were unknown, apparently. They would eventually be the Romans, but now they were simply a small tribal area in the middle of the Italian peninsula. These coastlands were waiting for the justice of God to be revealed. I am not sure that one cannot but think about that Macedonian man in the dream that Paul had in which he was urging Paul to cross over into this very region of northern Greece. They were waiting.

I once heard a story told by a missionary of a man who was preaching in China at a small village. As he was walking away to his next stop, he saw a man chasing him down on the road from the village he had just left. Turning to speak to the man, the Chinese fellow blurted out, "What took you so long to get here?" I have no idea if the story is apocryphal or not, but it makes the point. The salvation we proclaim is often eagerly sought by those in the clutches of darkness and sin. They want relief. Our struggle in North America is that often we have allowed ourselves to be portrayed as purveyors of Religious Truths and not the people who bring relief, salvation, and rescue. Indeed those religious truths are the truths of salvation, but we have often failed to make the connection between the two thousand year old story of Jesus and his death

and resurrection and the lives we live today and the suffering which is visited upon people because of sin. Jesus did not die those many years ago to be another footnote in history, but he died and rose again in order to make a fundamental transformation of your life right now today. The kingdom of God is here – not far away in heaven. I think we have forgotten that.

And so we too are urged to consider the rock from which we were hewn. Peter of little faith will make a great confession today. He is still Peter. In the very next paragraph Peter is called “Satan” by Jesus. God started long ago with a dozen fisherman, tax collectors and social outcasts and through them turned the mighty Roman Empire on its ear. He converted a whole Samaritan village through the testimony of the town’s serial polygamist (John 4). In the demoniac of the Gerasenes he seems to have called to the whole region of the Decapolis (Matthew 13:34). God has used far less than we are, even as a singular congregation, to do far more than we can imagine. He is the God who takes a few loaves and fishes and feeds the multitudes. God’s Kingdom is indeed very much like a mustard seed. It really doesn’t look like much when you cast it into the soil, a tiny, impotent thing. Yet it produces this great plant which shades the animals and provides a roosting place for the birds. God’s kingdom is like that.

The last verses urge us to look up at the heavens or down to the earth. The world would tell us that there is nothing else to see. But God turns our vision to the salvation and righteousness he has wrought in Christ.

What is discouraging our people? What feels like they have been crushed?

- 1. Small and dwindling congregations can feel like they are dying. They feel hopeless.*
- 2. Culture wars – it feels like our society is breaking down. Monuments are being removed. The society seems to be coming apart. We seem incapable of having a civilized conversation about difficult issues. Mobs seem to be making decisions.*
- 3. Culture wars – part II It feels like Christianity has been marginalized. We remember when Christian leaders like Billy Graham, James Dobson, Martin Luther King Jr., and others were religious leaders and cultural leaders. But today Christians have been silenced. If they confess their faith (collect) they are silenced. Christianity seems like it is in retreat.*
- 4. Culture wars – Part III – we are legalizing marijuana, homosexual marriage, and just about every vice which our parents considered worthy of a night in jail. Today it is legal and “praiseworthy” behavior.*
- 5. Culture wars – Part IV – State, School, Media, and more have displaced Christianity. Who would go to church when the songs are better on the radio and the football game is just more fun to watch. Christianity is for losers, not the people who are “with-it.”*
- 6. Culture Wars – Part V – Our own colleagues in Christ have succumbed and tell the “itching ears” just what they want to hear. And they succeed at it. The mega church*

which preaches prosperity is full to the bursting. The preacher who calls for repentance and obedience preaches to a shrinking and aging congregation.

What hope does God offer them?

- 1. We often come up with solutions which seem reasonable to us – but God looks to the fantastic, unbelievable story of Abraham and Sarah, two lonely old people whom the world had written off as childless. God however sees things differently – the preacher will want to call his hearers to consider that God may have other solutions than the one we have in mind. Remember Abraham first tried Eleazer, then Hagar, and a number of solutions. But finally God had Sarah give birth.*
- 2. To the culture wars we need to proclaim that God has not changed, no matter what we see. Vs. 6 – the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth in like manner and all the people therein will perish in like manner. What seems like a terrible turn for us is nothing compared to the terrible turn that comes. Our confidence is not that we will win in this world, but that God has already won, and he will win. His will shall be done. His Kingdom does come. His name is holy. This is now and not-yet. The not yet can be troubling but the now is real and it will only be more real on that last day.*

Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;

before the gods I sing your praise;

² I bow down toward your holy temple

and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,

for you have exalted above all things

your name and your word.

³ On the day I called, you answered me;

my strength of soul you increased.

⁴ All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,

for they have heard the words of your mouth,

⁵ and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,

for great is the glory of the LORD.

⁶ For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,

but the haughty he knows from afar.

⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble,

you preserve my life;

you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,

and your right hand delivers me.

⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

The Psalmist here is singing the praise which the Gospel lesson and Isaiah are evoking. He walks through trouble confident for God preserves his life and that is not his own hands. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. The love of God endures forever and that means that kings from afar will give thanks and sing the ways of the Lord. They will do so because God considers the cause of the humble and the poor, such as the psalmist.

All of this is predicated upon the reality that one day the psalmist called and the Lord answered him. He does indeed have a story to tell. Don't we all? He is simply engaged in evangelism here. He has called, God has answered, and now he is telling about it. He anticipates that kings from afar will respond to this message because God has acted. Back to one of my favorite themes, the Psalmist is not recounting the tales of old, but he is starting with what God has done in his life. He then connects that to the ancient stories, using the same language which the Torah uses to describe the deliverance from Egypt, but this is all in response to his own story. My most potent witness will always be the story that I can tell in the first person, as I relate what God has done for me.

Romans 11:33-12:8

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if

prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

This text bridges two sections of Paul's letter. The initial doxological section is the end of a long element in Romans which began in chapter 9. Throughout Paul has wrestled with the question of whether the Jews will believe in Christ. He finally offers up the idea that God will eventually bring them to faith, but through seeing the amazing work of the Holy Spirit in the Gentile community. This is a wonderful flip of the OT logic that the nations would see the laws and behavior of the Israelites and come to faith. (Queen of Sheba!) Now, the Jews are watching the Gentiles and this will eventually bring them to faith. This then serves to make verse 1 of chapter 12 intensely missional. The bodily sacrifice of the Gentile Christians in Rome is the very instrument God is using to call the Jews who have rejected Christ. This is not just a matter of my personal obedience. Worked into the kingdom of God my life has become an instrument by which his kingdom is coming to others.

This confronts the narrative which the world has foisted upon us. Christianity is not about me. It is not about meeting my needs and satisfying my desires. There is no lone ranger Christian. We (corporately) believe in one Christian Church. We are put into a larger kingdom and our lives are placed within that much bigger narrative than the therapeutic or self-serving motives by which the world seems to be obsessed. I am not a Christian for myself – rather I am a tool in God's hands for the bringing of his kingdom to others and the sharing of Christ with others. That takes a huge burden off of me and gives me a completely different way to looking at this whole thing I call life. This is the renewal of the mind of which Paul speaks, this new way of seeing me, my life, my world, my family, everything. God is doing great things through me.

So often we focus on the negatives of Church and have lost sight of the beautiful thing that God has made, even within the LCMS for all its warts. It is so easy to join the culture of criticism and negative judgment. It feels like we are superior when we do that, it feels like we have detached ourselves from the problem, and we can look down upon it from a more noble height. But Paul, who would have had just as many reasons to adopt such a posture as any one, does not do so. He is hopeful and expectant. He looks forward to God's great things done through the Church.

This text comes at the end of the long text we printed off last week in which Paul marvels that even though God's people have rejected him and the salvation he has offered, God has turned their rejection into the salvation of the Gentiles. Now, Paul is also looking forward to how that Gentile movement will result in his Jewish brethren turning to the salvation as well. Perhaps, he ponders, they will be spurred on by their jealousy and come to the faith of Jesus.

At the end of this prayerful hope by Paul, we start today's text. Paul simply, in the words of Matthew Henry, sits at the brink of God's unfathomable mercy and wonders at it. He strings together some passages, one from Isaiah, another from Job, but puts them into verse form. It is a spontaneous hymn or perhaps a quotation of a hymn which the people of his congregation might

have already been singing. We know that Paul elsewhere quotes song material which must have been familiar to his readers. Think of someone saying “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Almost anyone who reads that has a tune in their head as soon as they get to the third or fourth word. Paul may have been doing that here with a song which is now lost to us. We know so little about the worship of God’s people in the first century. This of course does not stop NT theologians from writing whole books based on the scant knowledge that we do have. (see Larry Hurtado’s excellent work “Lord Jesus Christ” which was published in 2005 but be prepared for a fairly substantial read!)

Today Paul wants to draw some implications of that awesome grace for the Gentile and Jewish audience to which he is writing. What does all this mercy and grace mean for them? In the illustration of the Jewish/Gentile relationship Paul has established the pre-eminence of humility as a virtue for Christians. If we really confess that we are saved by grace, then we cannot give ourselves the credit, but we can boast in the Lord and his great work. Paul is unapologetic about such boasting, in fact sees the occasion for God to work jealousy in the hearts of the Jews so that they too may come to faith.

For Paul this means a total transformation of the person. The word Paul uses here for “mind” in Greek is “Nous.” This seems straightforward enough, but the modern understanding of “mind” and the ancient understanding of that same word are not at all the same. It was not used in the sense we usually do, in a dichotomy over against body. When Paul wants to speak that way, he usually uses the word “spirit.” This mind seems to be more akin to a governing principal or the whole self. I like to think that this Nous is the subject of the verb. It is the one who is actually doing things, it is simply “you.” If you want a technology metaphor, you might say that Paul is urging us to update our operating system.

I remember a story told by a preacher friend of mine of a young woman who had dabbled in drugs and considerable alcohol in her youth. Christ came to her and called her out of that darkness and into his marvelous light. She started going to Church. Her old friends from the party circuit saw her one day and asked what she was up to. “I’m going to Church,” she said. “Why do you want to do that?” they wondered. “Those folks in church don’t have any fun. Why don’t you come out and join our party tonight?” “No,” she responded, “my wisher has changed.” It wasn’t that she was judgmental of her old friends and their life, but what she wanted to do had changed. She did not hear the admonition not to carouse as a burden, but it simply was the way she now lived. This is the transformation of the self that Paul is talking about. It is not the constraint of the old sinner by some exterior force so much as the replacement of the old with something new.

For Paul, the first place this is evidenced is in the lack of jealousy and the vicious spiritual competition between the members of the faith. They serve as they are given to serve, each one delighting in his or her gifts, and not worried about the others except to delight in their gifts with them. This is a radically different world than that of the first century Roman political and civil

society. First century Rome was all about boasting in self and was fiercely competitive. If the other man succeeded it drew the attention of his neighbors who all started to conspire to bring him down. Alliances were forged and broken based not on any principal other than personal advancement. A reading of the letters of Horace or Cicero or the works of Julius Caesar from the century prior or the more contemporary works of Seneca, Seutonius and Tacitus reveal a culture which is getting more and more competitive. If you want a good feel for this sometime, I highly recommend a book entitled Rubicon Tom Holland (ISBN 1400078970) and published by Anchor Books. It is a good readable history of the last years of the Roman Republic and gives some excellent background for anyone who is reading the book of Romans and the other letters of Paul which are directed to citizens of that culture, especially Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians.

Paul is being counter-cultural in his admonition to selfless and complementary service. His illustration of a body and its cooperative work was at odds with the way the Roman culture thought things worked. They saw conflict as providing the energy which brought about real progress. In this sense they were much more Hegelian. Georg Hegel was a 19th century philosopher/theologian who suggested that this conflict was absolutely essential to real progress in human society and knowledge. Hegel has established himself as the operative norm for today as well. In this sense American culture is very much like ancient Roman culture. I think we can see this in everyday life. If the neighbor gets a new television, don't we have the urge to suggest that a better deal could have been had at the big box store on the other side of town or to point out that Consumer Reports reviewed this model and said that Samsung's unit was better? We cannot seem to just rejoice in his new purchase with him.

This spirit of the age is especially vicious when it comes into the Church. It corrodes the true community which Christ's love would engender in us. Most often this is self-inflicted. We compare ourselves to someone else and find ourselves lacking. I have found many women who will beat themselves up about their failings as mothers, church members, etc. I don't know if guys are just more loutish about this or what, but I have heard many women who have made these self-comparisons. This is really caustic for the unity of the body and for the person. God is not making these judgments of us. He is not asking us to be what he has not made us to be. He is calling out a new person, he is not demanding that you somehow exert your will and create that new person.

The Kingdom of God needs and values the folks who are the mighty spiritual warriors but also the Christian whose service is to sweep the floor or hold the little child in her arms. God's kingdom extends to the whole of life. The woman who is hardly in church or serves on no committees may be the glue that holds her little neighborhood together or the presence of Christ for the children who walk home from school every day past her home.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Last week we saw Jesus and the strange conversation with the Canaanite woman, but now we jump into chapter 16. In the intervening verses, Jesus has been busy. Immediately after the encounter with the Canaanite woman he is portrayed healing many and the crowds wonder and glorify God. Then he feeds the four thousand with seven loaves and few fish. Again there are more leftovers than we started with here. There are crumbs enough for even the Canaanites, even for me.

As chapter 16 breaks, the Pharisees are demanding a sign. Jesus suggests that they are better at predicting the weather than they are at reading the signs of the times. The only sign they will see is the sign of Jonah. Not the answer they were looking for nor an answer seemingly designed to give a whole lot of clarity to anyone on the event of the resurrection. But the reader of Matthew who is on this side of the resurrection it is one of those “Aha!” moments. In the belly of the fish for three days, Jonah does indeed look like Jesus. It is a sign not for them as much as it is a sign for us.

In the next verses, the disciples are once more portrayed as thick headed. Jesus tells them to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees, and they think it is because they forgot lunch. Jesus upbraids them once more for little faith and reminds them of the miracles of the loaves and fishes, now twice done, and they finally get it. Of course, the reader is smarter than they are, at least that seems to be what Matthew is looking to tell us. With the gift of Spirit, can we say that we have greater faith? Peter walked on water with his little faith. The disciples have fed the multitudes with a little faith. Remember, it is not about how much faith you have but who is working through it.

Then we get this text. Jesus queries his disciples with a question that just so modern. “Who do people say that I am?” It sounds like something that a starlet might say, or a politician checking the polls. But this is different. Jesus is not looking for information here, he is giving information. The disciples have not been faring well lately; their faith has been called little on more than one occasion. The Canaanites have better faith than they do, for Pete’s sake! Jesus is about to tell them something really good. After telling them what they are hearing, Peter gives his unforgettable confession. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

No more about small faith here. Peter is blessed, but this is not of Peter, it is a gift from God. Here is the rock on which the Church is built, the church against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail, for this church is armed not with swords and spears, the might of armies, but rather with the power of forgiveness. The sins forgiven are forgiven in heaven and what happens there is real. Hell cannot withstand that army, or that power, and it is in every absolution spoken by a baptized Christian anywhere in this world. Those little words, strike fear in the heart of our enemy for they would undo all his nefarious work. The absolution we speak, is a performative utterance. It accomplishes what we say. The debt which the devil deals in has been forgiven, taken away. His power over us and other sinners is eviscerated, he must withdraw before that cross on which Christ died. The old movies which portray the powers of darkness retreating before an upheld cross were onto a real truth.

Immediately after these words Jesus predicts his own death and calls upon his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. Taking up that cross, yes, of course it means suffering with Christ, but it also means taking up everything that this cross means. It means that cross now shapes our words and our deeds. We can, because of that cross, forgive our neighbor. We take up the cross when we absolve the sins which should destroy a relationship and reduce us to some barbaric world of getting even or the psychological hell of being tough. But we have a better way, a real way of dealing with problems. We can forgive them, empowered by events of that strange Friday which we call Good and that glorious Sunday which followed it.

There is, of course, another point Jesus makes here. He is building a Church. It is easy for us to get frustrated with the institution it has become, but we must be careful, this thing called the Church is God's own creation. He loves it, despite its failings, just as he loves us despite our failings. Being a part of this is not really optional for us. It is through this collection of stinkers and misfits that God works his mighty warfare against Satan and Hell. Throwing up our hands and declaring the place to be full of hypocrites or unworthy of us is dangerous indeed. This is the place where Christ exercises the sacraments and absolves sins. While we might think it more pure to rely upon the spiritual comfort we derive from just Jesus and me, the truth is that faith comes from hearing, forgiving myself is a bit of modern psychobabble, baptism cannot be practiced on myself, and I really cannot honestly say to myself "take and eat." All of this takes community and there is a very good chance that the "other" will be as great of a disappointment to me as I am to them.

The gates of hell shall not prevail against this. Perhaps it was a failure of my upbringing, but I grew up thinking that the gates of hell were somehow attacking the church and of course failing whenever I read this passage. I simply did not get it that I had this backward until I was an adult. It is the church assailing the very gates of Hell and prevailing over them. I wonder why? Was it because my ethos was on the defensive? Jesus came into Satan's domain and snatched people out of it. We too are breaking down the very gates of hell and releasing its prisoners when we baptize, absolve, commune, and love with Christ's love. Do I, do we really believe that? If we do,

how can we be so passive about our witnessing? How can we turn to the solutions offered up by psychology to resolve conflict and not the sweet forgiveness which Christ gives us? How can I not be beating down my neighbor's door to get him and his family baptized?

Some have proposed that the "gates of hell" is actually a reference to a pagan worship site which bore that name near Caesarea Philippi. It was a frightening place for the folk of the time. Many believed that the local deities of fertility and weather would descend through this spot to the underworld to spend the winter, leaving the upper realms lifeless and dying. What are the gates of hell for us? Are they the sins which ensnare and entrap us? Is it Las Vegas? I am not sure that this insight doesn't lend to the idea that this was simply a superstition of a bygone era. In the post-enlightenment age in which we live, we don't really have the fear of the demonic in quite the same way. If you want to pursue this, you can find more at <http://www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=2065> this link comes once more courtesy of Phil Bohlken. He recommends that you look at the five links in the beige box.

What is the rock on which the church is built? Our friends in Rome suggest that it is Peter himself, which has some grammatical merit. A simple reading of the text lends itself to this, but Catholicism's interpretation of this piece has long been problematic and since the Reformation it has only hardened so that today they will assert that real Christians must be in some sort of a relationship with the man who sits on the throne of St. Peter in Rome.

Do we assert something else? What? In the past we have considered that it was the confession which Peter spoke, and yet more than that. The rock on which the Church is built, the corner stone of its existence (Eph 2) is nothing other than the Christ whom Peter had just confessed. It is the truth of Peter's statement which is actually the rock on which the church is built? It is not the confession or the confessor, but the one confessed who is the rock. Whether Peter had said it or not at this juncture, that would still be true.

In past discussions, we wondered about Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom in vs 19. Does God really entrust this sort of thing to sinful people like us? He seems sometimes to have done this with the prophets in the OT. Early in his ministry, Elisha seems to have been horrified by the death of the 42 youths when he cursed them. Was he surprised at the power of his own curse?

- 1. We thought our confusion/concern could be a linguistic problem. The binding and loosing could be simply reflective of the heavenly binding and loosing. It is not that our binding and loosing causes the heavenly binding and loosing, but God is binding and loosing and our binding and loosing reflects that. This keeps it a divine thing, but seems to take the energy out of it.*
- 2. We also wondered if this was not in fact about the first century issues facing the Church. The Disciples had recently said that kosher and other ceremonial laws were not required of the Gentiles or the Jews for that matter. (See Galatians) Is this simply Matthew telling his audience that Jesus had given this authority to his disciples? When they said it was*

OK to eat ham sandwiches that was backed up by God and done with Jesus' blessing and authority.

3. *We also, looking at parallel sorts of passages in the Gospels, wondered what this had to do with excommunication and Church discipline. Do we need to bind a few things? Have we watered down the Law to such an extent that the loosing is meaningless?*
4. *We were also troubled by the idea that some in the Christian churches around us seem to be quick to loose and never would bind the passions, libido, or baser desires of the human beings around us. We say greed and sexual immorality is "OK," a reasonable expression of our true selves. Do we ever bind anything?*

Law

1. We are so easily discouraged. In a situation in which we perceive our church is shrinking and our ranks are growing more gray and feeble with every passing year, we so quickly conclude that God has abandoned us or that somehow we are doing something wrong. When the roller coaster is pointing down, our gaze is firmly fixed on the ground, not on the new heights to which the track will lead us, even when we have ridden the ride many times before.
2. Our church is shrinking, Christianity is not growing in North America. The observation is true. In some measure this is because we have divided ourselves and seen one another altogether too competitively. We have not lived out the vision for the Church which Paul lays out for us in Romans. Has the stubborn resistance of the Jews and post-moderns to our message in part been because we have often thought too highly of ourselves and resisted the spirit-driven impulse to selfless joy in the gifts of God wherever they may be found?
3. We can look at the church as it is and forget to see it as Christ does. Yes, the world sees our sins and our foibles and sometimes turns away in disgust. But to us is given another view and another perspective. Our failure to see the situation through Christ's eyes leaves us demoralized and hopeless.
4. That demoralization and hopelessness has often left us with our mouths closed when opportunity has presented itself. Looking only at the sin and problems, we have been neglectful of the good news we have been given.
5. Realizing that the message is not getting out and looking at the problems instead of God's solutions, we succumb to the temptation to build the church on some other rock than the one God has in mind. If only we had enough parking, the right praise music, or a good youth program our congregation would grow. We confuse the kingdom with our own institution and consider the institutional growth to equate with kingdom growth. What is more, we rely upon ourselves instead of Christ. If we grow as a result, who gets the praise and the thanks?

Gospel

1. God creates from nothing and until I am nothing, he makes nothing of me. We are never beyond the help of God. In fact, he has an amazing track record of pulling victory from the jaws of defeat, all the way from the time of the cross when our Lord Jesus hung in utter defeat and humiliation.
2. The renewal which we need is a gift from God. Peter, the man with the little faith, is given a brilliant confession, not of flesh and blood, but a gift from the Father in heaven. God loves to give this gift.
3. Christ never looks at the church as our human eyes behold her. She is his bride, the precious and beloved. His blood has washed her clean and she is the instrument through which he is saving the world today. He continues to do amazing things through her, feeding the multitudes, welcoming the penitent sinners, delighting in those confessions we speak every Sunday, perhaps every day.
4. With the eyes of Christ, suddenly what the world cynically calls worthless suddenly becomes valuable. The healing, the food on our table, the ability to sew a quilt, the couch I am sitting on as I write these words, they are all gifts from God to his people. My life is filled with gifts, I have no cause for jealousy and so now my gifts and your gifts are no longer in competition. Together they can work for the common goal which Christ has established for his people.
5. Our problems are not a lack of gifts, but a lack of vision to see and rely upon them. This is easily changed. Christ works in our lives daily and sometimes quite obviously. Our prayers are answered, our bodies fed, our lives are saved, and we are given multiple reasons to say thank you to God and to sing his praises among our neighbors and friends.

Sermon Themes:

1. I believe in one holy, catholic/Christian Church... (Gospel/OT/Epistle That the Spirit of God would define the Church for the hearer, empowering his/her witness and evangelism.)

[These notes have rather morphed into two different sermons – you might want to do some serious editing here or choose one strand and wait three years to do the next one.](#)

[When we confess the creed we are standing with arms locked with Peter. We are making his confession about Christ and he is putting us on that rock which he establishes. The preacher will want to assume and work off this assumed fact. You will want to say it, but](#)

don't argue for it, assert it. We are the church, God has created it, and He does all this through/in the confession of Christ.

Since this in the creed, we might try something today. Have the folks who are speaking the creed turn to face one another. The creed is really spoken to one another as much as it is God. We are confessing our faith before God and before one another and this whole world. God already knows what you believe, he delights in hearing it. But we need to hear one another confess too. It is good for us. For this sermon we are focusing on one line in that creed which is critical to that "facing one another" sort of confession. We are one church.

Just what is happening when we join in Peter's confession that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Jesus commends the words we speak today in this creed and he calls it a miracle, an act of God. Despite what the ecumenical movement might attempt, we do not establish unity in the Church. Christ did with his blood. Everyone who clings to that cross and who confesses Christ is a member. Denominations don't determine that. Jesus determines the mission and unites us in that mission. We thought this might be a point where one could mash in sermon #3 below.

It might not feel like a miracle because we have done it so often that we forget that it does not come naturally to us. Every person in church today is another miracle. Some two billion folks around the world confess Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that number grows every day. God loves his church and is taking marvelous care of it. Peter was a man of little faith and God created this marvelous confession in him. God is still out there working that great miracle today in us and in countless other Christians around the world.

Instead of the exhortation "you've gotta have faith." We need to recognize that we "gotta have Jesus." The really good thing about this that we can give Jesus! I cannot give faith, but I can give Christ to a friend or a neighbor in word and deed. Stick out your hand on Sunday morning while kneeling at the rail and I am liable to put Jesus in there.

Faith is not something that one healthily asks, "Do I have it?" God asks that question, I don't. We are better off to keep our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith, that is Jesus, and that, by the way, is the act of faith itself. The question is not do I have faith or even worse "enough faith." But the question is always "has Jesus died for this situation? Does he care for this?" the glorious answer we always have is, "Yes!"

This Jesus is the way, truth and life this situation needs, no matter in what situation I find myself. My relationships with others have been transformed. I can attack the gates of hell, forgiving one person this week who is in Satan's clutches and knowing that God works through those words and deeds to open gates and in my words the very doors of heavens open.

But it transforms my whole life, not conformed to this age but transformed by the mind of Christ. I can look at the garbage of this world, big and little things, and react to them differently, react to them with Christ's love, with Christ's graciousness, and with Christ's powerful forgiveness. He looked on the crowds with compassion and upon the sinners with gracious love. When my neighbor dumps his garbage over the fence into my yard, what will I do? What way does Jesus present in this situation? What truth does he speak? What life does he offer? We should be prepared to endure much in this assault on the gates of hell. Hell's gates are foul, stinky things. They have a way of swinging shut when we are not looking and perhaps trapping us inside. Thank God that Jesus is out there with his wrecking ball, perhaps wielded by a friend who forgives me today.

We also are freed to take a very confident approach when it comes to dealing with other Christians. Sometimes it is too easy to be jealous or afraid of the Christian body which is not like us. I don't want to minimize or make light of the real differences between denominations. These also have a place. But we also can glad when someone tells me he or she is a Baptist and goes to church every Sunday. We don't have to invent the wheel and do what another Christian is doing. If they are feeding thousands on Thanksgiving, let's help them. We don't have to compete. I can rejoice in all the good that Jesus is doing through all the Christians in this city/county/place. If there are errors, Jesus will ultimately sort that all out. I don't have to take all that to myself. This is not doctrinal laxity, it is in truth being rigorous about a very real doctrine of the church. It is bigger than me and my perception of it. Jesus works through broken and erring people, including me.

This is the Church. The place, the people, the relationships, the worship, in which God brings about his gracious kingdom of salvation. He doesn't do that through the state, through the economic world, or through the consumerist driven media. He does it through people like you and me, gathered (ecclesia) around these seemingly weak things of Word and Sacrament. The world scoffs at these things and we have to admit there are times when it seems pretty scoff-worthy. Like a mustard seed cast into the ground, it doesn't look like much. But it is much.

Considering the events of the past days, we might want to stress the "catholic" nature of the church, its universal presence and application. The church is for everyone who gathered in Charlottesville on the day of the riot last week. We are a nation seeking some unity, something which can bring us together instead of driving us apart. The Enlightenment said that religion was the problem and it drove men to war against one another. But they got that wrong. The post-religion world has made just as much and more war as the religiously driven world. It has dealt in just as much death and carnage. Perhaps it is time to rethink this.

Jesus was accused of hanging around with all the wrong sorts of people. Simon the Zealot, if that name is accurate, was a terrorist in the first century. Matthew the tax collector would have been a one percenter, part of the elite who were taking advantage of the poor. Peter was a fisherman, a blue collar sort of guy. John had connections to the high priestly family. Mary Magdalene was a prostitute and demoniac. Jesus, through his church, is for everyone. Of course, this means he is also for the people I am uncomfortable with as well, even the moral reprobates, ultra-liberals, alt-righters, the racists, the crystal carrying Wiccan feminists and the Moslems as well. We start with the mind transforming reality that he died for them all.

2. Riding the rollercoaster (Gospel: That the Spirit of God would give hopeful confidence to the hearer, despite the vagaries of the Church.)

Our parish and Christianity in North America may seem like it is on a down turn, it is true. But Christ has a long track record of working blessing within the direst of circumstances. This is a message of hope. Christ once took a small band of disciples and changed the world. He once took a shepherd boy and defeated a giant. He once took the misfits who lived in this town and founded this congregation. My first parish was less than 40 years old and the members who had been there at the beginning still told stories about some of the strange characters who founded it.

God can still use us to do mighty things. It may mean that we need to submit ourselves to his vision for us. Remember this is Jesus' church, not our own. But for those who have taken up a cross to follow him, he promises life eternal and his presence right now. This is a mustard seed/yeast sort of message in which God uses small things to confound the big things. You might want to read the opening chapters of I Corinthians again.

The temptation for us as Christians is that when the rollercoaster is going down, we look at the ground. But today God calls us to turn our eyes upward and to look to him. He will prevent the crash, not us. The scary thing is, that he might prevent a crash in his kingdom, but that doesn't mean that this institution which we call "St John's Lutheran Church" will thrive. It might fail, but the kingdom of God will not. His word will be proclaimed, his gifts given. (You might just use the example from the opening essay about the Crystal Cathedral, but skip my Schadenfreude bit.)

3. Assaulting the Gates of Hell (Gospel: That the Holy Spirit would embolden and equip the hearer to assault the gates of hell and free, through the power of Christ's Word, those whom our enemy had claimed.)

We too often have understood that the gates of hell are on the offensive and we are defending against them. But gates are not offensive weapons. They are defensive positions. Jesus is not calling us to hunker down behind the walls of our church here, but

he is sending us out on a seek and liberate mission. We are on the offensive here. He gives us the office the keys, the ability to forgive sins, the authoritative word to call something a sin, a God problem, to bind a person. And in the exercise of this baptismal gift, we are assaulting the very gates of hell.

When we forgive someone, when we share Christ with them, the gates of hell are cracking open and God, through our words and deeds, is snatching another life from the clutches of Satan, our foe. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the very word of God. This may be what Luther had in mind in “A Mighty Fortress” when he said that one little word can fell him. (There are other suggestions.)

We smash the gates of hell whenever we put the words of Christ on our lips and apply them to the lives of sinful and broken people. This the priesthood of all believers. We have an authority from God to forgive sins. The forgiveness we speak, we are speaking with a divine authority.

It is critical for the preacher and the hearer to remember in this that it is Jesus who is building the church here, it is Jesus’ power which pervades our words, it is not ours. Just as Peter’s confession, for all its rectitude, was not really his own. It was a revelation of God to him, not of flesh and blood, likewise our assault on the gates of hell does not derive its power because we get it right or because of our will, but because we have a solemn promise from God here that what we bind is bound in heaven, what we loose, is loosed in heaven.

4. By the renewal of our minds (Epistle – that God builds positive things in his people because the reign of Christ has come!)

This sermon is aimed at the congregation which needs be called back to the essence or core of what it means to be a Christian assembly. [The preacher might want to dig out that congregational mission statement. If you don’t have it in the bulletin every week, put it there.](#) Paul exhorts them to a renewal of the mind/life/being, [but this renewal is not to a kingdom which is now established, but to a life which God has been working for a very long time \(refer to OT reading.\)](#) We will take vss. 3-8 to be the good and perfect will of God to which he is exhorting them to discernment and action. [But we also want to look at how this fits into the missional purpose of the life which is transformed. Remember Paul has a missional purpose behind his exhortation to this righteousness. His fellow Jews are watching and they will be driven into Christ’s arms this way.](#)

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

This starts with humility. We love to grab the apostrophe from that tree in the garden, seizing what does not belong to us. (We were god’s people, now we just want to be gods

– plucking the apostrophe) But Christ has come, God has humbled himself to be born of a virgin. He walked the dusty roads of Palestine and the watery paths of the Sea of Galilee. This humility empowers ministry. Sober judgment suggests that we are all sinners, more like than unlike the terrible people we are tempted to condemn. The truth is, we all need this same Jesus and we get him. We can deny him to none and we dare not think he is only for us.

But we also dare not think that this humility means we do nothing. We have been given faith in measure. To deny that is another form of arrogant pride. Gifted by God we are called to be his people in this place. We have nothing of our own to offer, but all belongs to him and is put at his disposal. *We are always both sinner and saint, both elements of that formula require sober judgment, faithful hearing of God’s judgment and promise.*

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

This humility leads to another good thing. We don’t have to all be the same and we don’t have to play the spiritual competition sort of game. We can live in a different sort of harmony. *We are comfortable with differences. We value the one who does the simple and complex. The fellow sweeping and the woman teaching are both serving God. We don’t have to make those sorts of judgments anymore.*

⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Here the preacher can simply run through the list of things which the Apostle describes and which every congregation does. Pay attention the adjectives/descriptors which describe the services rendered. The prophet is measured by faith. The servant owns the service. It is “our serving.” Giving done generously. Leadership requires zeal. Acts of mercy require cheer.

5. Knowing the Son (Collect and the Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would give the hearer to know the Son and live it as Paul sees it in the Church.

The preacher has a wealth of opportunities here. The Gospel and OT lesson also are great examples here. Paul’s positive vision for the Church, however is what we are thinking about in this. He sees so much good happening.

6. Look to heaven and earth – God’s righteous will not be dismayed. (OT That the hearer would trust that God’s solutions are much larger than our problems.)

The world wants us to look at heaven and earth and fear, for this is all we got. But God points to the heavens and earth and says that this is going away. But God's righteousness and his salvation are eternal, steadfast, and not bound by the vagaries of this life. They show up in this life, but they transcend it too.

The world wants us to measure our success by the things of this world. That is all we have, after all, unless we believe. God asks us to measure with a different yardstick. For the diminishing or dwindling congregation this can be especially helpful. The world looks at budgets and attendance numbers and membership decline and it passes a judgement based on that data: Dying congregation.

God however offers another word. Look to Abraham and Sarah. All the measures of the world will pass away. God took these two old people, a couple the world had written off as too old and unable to have children and he made them into a great nation. The world says a virgin cannot have a baby. The world says you cannot change the world with a dozen fishermen, tax collectors, and other ne'er-do-wells. But Jesus did. The kingdom is like that. We dare not measure our congregation and its ministry by the measure of this world. God calls us to a new measurement.

This sermon would challenge the narrative of this world that says that we are just products of natural forces. God carved us from the quarry, he turns the desert in to Eden's garden. God has solutions which are far more than simply restoring what we have lost. God's solutions, where mercy and justice come together, in Christ, give the hearer freedom, courage, hope, confidence, and joy. We are free to proclaim and demonstrate the mercies of God. That takes courage sometimes, they are done in the hopeful expectation of God's goodness. We are confident in his blessing. And this is true joy.

The preacher will want to be realistic in one sense with people. Remember, if we don't use the world's measurement, we use God's and his measurement may not be just like mine. I would love to see this congregation prosper, but perhaps God sees a mustard seed being planting. The seed does not survive that process. It is broken, dying in a sense, so that something else can grow and take its place and produce many more seeds. We will have to let go of our confusion of this institution with the kingdom of God. Our parish is not God's kingdom, it is a corner of God's much larger kingdom. He loves it and he works through it and millions of other little corners in this world. His word bears its fruit (Isaiah 55) but ultimately he gets to define that fruitfulness and he gets to decide when it is ready for rebirth. Not me. He prunes the vines to make them fruitful (John 15).

The preacher will want some illustrations. A bell choir conductor who was fired and it hurt and it seemed like the whole ministry was dead – here a few years later music is being made and it is beautiful. It felt like it was the end. It was not. A congregation which lost almost all its leadership in one month – only to find that God had other leaders at the ready who had not stepped forward while the “old guard” were in charge. Sometimes it

really does feel like all is over, but God has something amazing in mind. Sometimes congregations do need to wrap it up so that something else that God has in mind can flourish in that spot. That might be hard to hear. But the preacher can direct the folks to the fact that God has things in mind. I bet a 90 year old Sarah was both delighted and terrified to be carrying a child at her age when she discovered that she was pregnant. Can you imagine going through labor at that age? Did she pray for another miracle as her due date approached?