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## Propers 16 (Pentecost 14) Series C 2016

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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## **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 24**

*Just how hard is it to be saved? Or better, how do we talk about this? One hand we all confess that salvation is easy, easier than falling off a log. Jesus came to raise dead people so the only real qualification for heaven is dying, the one thing that all humans are really good at. Nobody fails at that one. On the other hand, the Bible also speaks of the difficulty of being saved. Even Paul, who wrote so passionately about the freedom of Grace, exhorts the people of Philippi to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12)*

*Perhaps the question needs to be reframed. When exactly do we officially enter the “saved” column in the ledger? Philip Cary argues that if you had asked Luther that question he would have responded that the person is only finally saved at death. Until that point the person is always in some jeopardy, he might make a shipwreck of his faith. Of course this is Luther’s own personal experience also plays into this. He lived on the razor edge of tension all the time and considered that this was essential to the Christian. We are sinner and saint and we are now and not-yet. The elements of the Eucharist are bread and body, blood and wine. He liked to talk this way.*

*Our culture, drawing heavily on Calvin and his followers, does not like to talk this way and often seeks to resolve these tensions. It seeks assurance of salvation, but unfortunately turns not to God and his promise but too often to a reflective faith. The presumption is that if you have faith then you are saved, so we need to inquire into your faith. Luther would have reminded us that all men are liars, including Luther. He refused to trust any attestation of his own faith, rather he insisted on trusting God’s promise and only God’s promise. That is why it was so important for him that Baptism was really the word of God’s promise made tangible and that the Supper was nothing less than Christ himself for our mouths to eat.*

*Luther was and remains a strange person in this regard. The ancient Christians might have looked at him oddly. They had a practice that when a person was ready to become a Christian they underwent a process called the “scrutinies.” It was for all intents and purposes a background check. They would discreetly inquire of neighbors about the character habits and other important facts of a person. The confession they were about to make as a Christian needed to be showing up in the life of the individual. The examination before the congregation or elders is a vestigial remnant of this practice. Do we have any standard we expect people to follow when joining a parish or are we so hungry for their presence and dollars that we will overlook just about anything? My guess is that we all fall somewhere between those two extremes. Luther might not have had any standard. We are all liars, after all, and hence anyone who came this moment for the Gospel needed it.*

*Jesus speaks of a narrow door to heaven today. What makes that door narrow for us? Throughout history, people have perceived different things making it narrow. When I served a parish in Utah, we had a young couple in the congregation who were rougher than most. He once declared that the only reason they had become Lutherans was because that way they could*

*smoke and drink. It wasn't quite the ethos I was hoping for. We were the vice church. But I had to admit that there were precious few rules that one could break and get kicked out. Sexual ethics wasn't one of them. I used to joke that the Utah Lutheran were simply serial polygamists who married multiple partners, just one at a time. Serving in the western part of the U. S., I rarely officiate at a wedding which involves two people who have different addresses before the ceremony. What sets us apart? What are the boundaries of being a Christian?*

*In Utah the LDS community was clearly delineated by dietary restrictions (no alcohol, no smoking, no coffee, etc.), strict observance of "No work on the Sabbath," and wearing special underwear. Everyone knew who the Mormons were and who were not, at least when it came to those who practiced their LDS faith. The door was narrowed by these practices, at least in the eyes of the LDS hierarchy and faithful. The Christians on the other hand had no such markers and one has to wonder if we did not suffer for it as much as they did. We had no distinctive dress and no distinctive, visible ethos. What was worse, sometimes we were only identified by our crass or boorish behavior. I had more than once been told about members who sat on their front porch to drink their beer for the specific purpose of annoying their neighbors. They thought that it was the Christian thing to do, to prove their freedom. The one thing which we did do that was distinctive was put a fish on the back of the car (Pentecostals often put a dove/cross combination). I found it most troubling that I was routinely cut off in traffic by cars boasting a fish on the trunk lid or rear bumper.*

*If the way to heaven is hard and the door is narrow, what makes it narrow, what makes it so hard? I firmly believe that Jesus loves all people and that he has freely given himself as a ransom for the sins of the whole world. There is not a thing we must do to be a Christian. In that sense the way is very broad. And yet, it is also quite narrow. There is only one name under heaven by which men may be saved and that name happens to be Jesus. The narrowness could be described as the scandal of particularity. While God loves the pagan too, he does not save through a faith which worships the efficacy of my works or my ability to climb some karmic ladder to Nirvana.*

*But it is also true that while God's love is not pre-conditional, it is "post-conditional." God's love does not leave us as we were. It does indeed work a change in the lives of the people who encounter the resurrected Christ in Word and Sacrament. To pretend that the living of life does not matter in fact presents a serious stumbling block to many and hinders the Gospel witness in profound ways.*

*And so we are, as Luther described us, still the drunk trying to mount a horse. If we don't fall off on the side of legalism, our over correction casts us over the other side into a libertine anti-nomianism. If we avoid the exclusive narrowness of the pious prig who looks down her nose at the girl with a tattoo, we become the indulgent fool who turns a blind eye toward the vice and lusts of our darkest corners. I live in Portland, Oregon, the city that boasts of hosting the*

*nation's largest naked bicycle parade and struggles with a terrible sex-trafficking problem. I wonder if the two are connected sometimes.*

*Is there a balance? I at times have a hard time discerning one. As I cast my eyes over Christendom both inside and out the LCMS, I occasionally get discouraged. I wonder if such a balance is possible. Is this balance perhaps the narrow road which Jesus preaches today? In fact, is heaven populated mostly with the prigs and the fools he picks up in the ditches of that narrow path?*

*Perhaps an illustration from the world of sports can help us here. When skiing through trees or bicycling on a mountain path through rocks, the key is to keep one's eyes on the path between the obstacles. If you look at the trees or the rocks, you will hit them. Our human nature often wants to focus on the obstacle and not the path between them. I distinctly remember teaching my daughter to ride her bike. We were in the middle of a large elementary school parking lot one summer evening. It was utterly empty except for one light post, right in the middle. We made the mistake of telling her not to hit it. So she starts finally balancing on her bike, and eyes firmly fixed on the lamp post she is not supposed to hit, she rams it. We laugh about it now, but it illustrates the point. We will go where we are looking.*

*Jesus says, "I am the Way" and "I am the gate/door," are these statements of his own peculiarity or singular nature? Is he the narrowness of the path? Is the message not to focus not on the thing that keeps us out but on the thing that lets us in?*

*But we also might wonder if this is also a matter of perception and perspective. Does our human nature tend to make constrictive what is not necessarily so? Do we impose automatically on every restriction the idea that this is a narrow path, when in fact it might be much more like a fence which surrounds some dangerous hazard, but which otherwise leaves the great expanse of our existence open and available? Does the command to marital fidelity constrict our lives or does it fence off a dangerous pit of emotional heartache and misery?*

*Some would suggest that the narrowness of the path is a moral rectitude, others, and often the Lutherans are in this camp, would suggest that it is doctrinal. Have you got your catechism right? But in fact, both of those answers start to divert the person's attention away from the "Author and Perfecter of Faith" and onto ourselves. In fact, if we are concerned about the narrowness of the way, are we in fact off the narrow way? The Narrow Way is Jesus. Keep your eyes on the Way, not the narrowness!*

*How do we preach to a culture which says "That's true for you"? The broadness of God is narrowness in a sense. So when the Buddhist says to me, "I love Jesus too" and it grates upon my ears, I can love them instead of launching into a doctrinal essay. When it comes to judgment, I let God be narrow, I don't have to be. I can let God define the boundaries, yes, bear witness to those boundaries, but I can love with the broadness of God. This means that I can be a failure too. The narrowness of the way is not that it excludes the screw-up, but the narrowness of the*

*way is that the answer to every screw-up is always that smiling Jesus guy who died for my sins and the sins of the whole world.*

### **Collect of the Day**

O Lord, You have called us to enter Your kingdom through the narrow door. Guide us by Your Word and Spirit, and lead us now and always into the feast of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever.

*If you have read the above notes, you know what to ask here. If we are to understand this prayer, we have to be able to identify the narrow door. Unlike the Calvinist, I am unwilling to make the redemption which Christ has earned anything less than for the sins of the whole world. It is not narrow, but what then is? I am not willing to join the Arminian (Methodist) either in assigning the narrowness of the door to the human will. (The saved are those making a decision for Jesus). With those two eliminated, what is left? Is it the narrow door which balances God's great love and our own human ability to turn that great love into a license? Is the narrow door simply the truth that God saves through faith alone? This is the usual Lutheran response, an intellectually narrow door. If you have the right catechism answer, then you are in. That is come under significant and I think well deserved criticism in recent generations. Is the narrow door something else altogether?*

*(I am certain that the editors of the Lutheran Pericope System who devised this prayer have not asked all these questions, but I am sure we should.)*

*We pray for guidance in Word and Spirit. That is a really good place to go when one is totally flummoxed by what the text says. And then it prays that God will lead us to the feast of Jesus. That too is a good thing to pray for, but it may not be as comforting as knowing just what the narrow door is. Which leads me to believe that the narrow door is not quite as cut and dried as the question itself would presume. Perhaps the narrow door for folks of Jesus day was more about letting gentiles in. For us perhaps the narrowness is found in having any self-discipline. Perhaps for another generation it will be something else. Does that sound as loose and problematic to you as it does to me?*

*Perhaps we need to make this simpler not more complex. Jesus is the narrow way – it is not a way to him, but he is simply the Way. When we understand or believe that the way is something that leads to him, we take our eyes off of the author and perfecter of our faith and stumble. Jesus is the Way – he is the one who brings us there.*

*The baseball player who watches the ball as he sprints to first base will find himself in the dugout if he is not careful. He needs to fix his eyes on the base and the coach who is standing there telling him whether to hold up or turn toward the next base.*

*Another way to do this is with a dowel or better a peacock feather. Have a young person hold it on their finger and look at their finger. They will never be able to balance that. But if you have them look to the top of the feather, three feed up in the air, they will naturally move their finger under the center of balance and be able to keep that feather balanced and erect.*

*Waiters know that when you look at the drinks on the tray, you will spill them. Look at the table to which you are walking and you will walk right there without spilling a drop.*

Isaiah 66:18-23

<sup>17</sup> *“Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD.*

<sup>18</sup> *“For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, <sup>19</sup> and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. <sup>20</sup> And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. <sup>21</sup> And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.*

<sup>22</sup> *“For as the new heavens and the new earth  
that I make  
shall remain before me, says the LORD,  
so shall your offspring and your name remain.*

<sup>23</sup> *From new moon to new moon,  
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,  
all flesh shall come to worship before me,  
declares the LORD.*

<sup>24</sup> *“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”*

*These are some of the last words of Isaiah. If you consider this text the “fifth Gospel” in the Bible, that might just be significant. These ancient authors often saved their punch line for the end of their books.*

*The editors of the pericope system obviously want us to be thinking in terms of inclusion, which is not a bad place for us to be, but the context here is really interesting and I think might offend*

*many of those who push inclusion as a virtue unto itself. In the verses right before this text, God is not terribly inclusive of those who violate the covenant. And in the final verses it really looks like there are some folks who are most decidedly not included.*

*But I am not sure that our congregations are stumbling over issues of inclusion. Most of us don't see rampant racism keeping folks out, perhaps more subtly we do, but is that issue really what makes us stumble or diverts us away from the narrow door? It could be. As I said above, it seems that we are more likely falling off the other side of the horse today. We are so eager to expand the kingdom of God that we have relaxed the standards to the point of scandal? Many African Christians are appalled at the laxity they find in the American Church. The Anglican Communion is finding that to be true and the ELCA is hemorrhaging members over this issue as we speak. We like to think of ourselves as more conservative and hence more "tight" on these matters than those two bodies, but what would an ancient Christian say about us? In some ancient parishes the penitent adulterer might have been asked to stand outside the door of the parish every Sunday for weeks or months in sackcloth and ashes, begging the worshipers to pray for him or her when they worshiped.*

*Notice in Isaiah's message that the effect of the exile is to spread the people of God throughout the nations so that they can be a sign among them. The far off peoples who have not heard of God's fame or seen his glory will marvel. The Glory of God will be declared among the nations. Isaiah's people are already scattered when he writes this and that scattering will happen for the next several centuries.*

*The really interesting question is just who is chosen to be priests? Does Isaiah mean that from the returning exiles there will be priests or from those nations that are now streaming to Zion. One thing is not in dispute, this message, these children, this salvation, includes all people, not just the children of Israel. There is a good sermon in simply proclaiming this reality and marveling with your parish at the amazing things that God is doing right now.*

*Notice how the discipline of God against the people of Israel, however, is to serve a larger purpose of spreading the fame of God. This will show up again in the Epistle lesson and surely in the description of the Church in Acts. It will be because Saul persecutes the Christians that they scatter from Jerusalem and the message is brought to Samaritans and Ethiopia. Being part of God's every expanding kingdom does not mean comfort, sometimes it happens when refugees flee persecution and in great hardship bring that message even to their enemies and their sermons are written in their own blood.*

*Isaiah's audience seemed to think that they were the only ones whom God could love. Does that sound familiar to LCMS ears? Do we do the same thing? Do we set up a boundary in front of people which effectively means that they have to be like me before they can be a member of my parish? Do we say we believe in grace but act as if works were what saves us? That is a way to make the way narrow but which is contravening God's narrowness?*

Psalm 50:1-15

*A Psalm of Asaph*

The Mighty One, God the LORD,  
speaks and summons the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

<sup>2</sup> Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.

<sup>3</sup> Our God comes; he does not keep silence;  
before him is a devouring fire,  
around him a mighty tempest.

<sup>4</sup> He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:

<sup>5</sup> “Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”

<sup>6</sup> The heavens declare his righteousness,  
for God himself is judge! Selah

<sup>7</sup> “Hear, O my people, and I will speak;  
O Israel, I will testify against you.  
I am God, your God.

<sup>8</sup> Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;  
your burnt offerings are continually before me.

<sup>9</sup> I will not accept a bull from your house  
or goats from your folds.

<sup>10</sup> For every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.

<sup>11</sup> I know all the birds of the hills,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.

<sup>12</sup> “If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and its fullness are mine.

<sup>13</sup> Do I eat the flesh of bulls  
or drink the blood of goats?

<sup>14</sup> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and perform your vows to the Most High,

<sup>15</sup> and call upon me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

<sup>16</sup> *But to the wicked God says:  
“What right have you to recite my statutes  
or take my covenant on your lips?*

<sup>17</sup> *For you hate discipline,  
and you cast my words behind you.*

<sup>18</sup> *If you see a thief, you are pleased with him,  
and you keep company with adulterers.*

*Again, while I see what the editors are doing, the immediate context of these verses seems to suggest that this is a far more complicated issue than we are getting here. The Psalm does not suggest that the inclusiveness of all people is at the expense of God’s wrath or judgment. He remains that same terrifying and awesome God throughout. How will we preach this without making him into some sort of softie in the sky?*

Hebrews 12:4-24 (25-29) *I have included the verses which precede our text – especially noting the description of Jesus found there.*

*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 reprovved by him.*

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

<sup>7</sup> *It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

<sup>12</sup> *Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble,*

and by it many become defiled; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

<sup>18</sup> For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” <sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

<sup>25</sup> See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. <sup>26</sup> At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” <sup>27</sup> This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup> Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> for our God is a consuming fire.

*So many sermons in this passage. Here were a few we thought might work:*

1. <sup>15</sup> See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; *The urgency of the imperative to preach, teach, and witness is strong here. The writer to the Hebrews sees that everyone needs this Gospel. He doesn't want anything to hinder it.*
2. <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. *A description of worship? What do we do when we come together? This is one of the sermons we develop below.*
3. <sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. *What a wonderful picture of the community. We lift the drooping hands and strengthen the knees. This is what fear does to us. This is a call for a community to have courage and to boldly minister in a context when it is not easy. Sounds like our context.*
4. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. *This seemed like a message tailored for a conflicted congregation or a congregation which has lost its zeal. Our unforgiven and unresolved conflict is a serious impediment to our service.*

5. <sup>28</sup>Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our God is a consuming fire. *A kingdom that cannot be shaken – is this the love which Paul wrote about in I Corinthians 13?*
6. God is treating you as sons. *Who enjoys it when our world falls apart? No one! But the writer to the Hebrews is suggesting that there is another way to think about a life that has gone south. The pain and suffering could also be seen as a discipline from God, a blessing from him. He is using this to forge me. His hammer blows and heat are making something new. Contra the prosperity Gospel crowd.*

*We pick up right where we left off last week, and since many of us were thinking of preaching the Epistle lesson last week, we would do well to keep that material in mind. The audience of the writer to the Hebrews was undergoing some sort persecution. We don't know what sort and to what extent, but they were wavering, thinking of abandoning the faith. Here in the penultimate chapter of his sermon (and that is really what this "letter" is) he address the immediate problem.*

*The writer to the Hebrews touches on some serious stuff here. Discipline is not a sign of God's disfavor but of his love. The toddler finds that a hard one to hear when sitting in time out, but it is true. The adult likewise doesn't take that well. His readers were undergoing difficult times for their faith. That is good news, according to the author of Hebrews. Can we see it that way? How would we preach that to our people who reaction to the slightest pain is to reach for the pharmaceutical solution?*

*What is remarkable is his attempt at the balance we discussed in the opening essay of these notes. It is not to be found in the fear, but in the redemption and joy that it creates. We do not come to the old Covenant with its Sinai mountain filled with thunder and lightning, making us afraid. We have come to a festival, a joyful occasion, we take our place with singing angels and are numbered among the first born of heaven. We are the righteous whom God has made perfect by Jesus himself through the mediated new covenant. This gives us occasion, in his logic, to the things he speaks about earlier in the paragraph. We lift our drooping hands and we encourage one another. Sexual immorality and bitter strife are conquered, not coped with, not accepted. They are fought tooth and nail, and yet they still exist. The whole of life is seen through the lens of this new Sinai experience we have in Jesus' death and resurrection. The good things, the bad things, the sins, and the virtues, all of it, every moment of every day and night, are now strained through that cruciform experience.*

*Last of all, this passage directs us to hope. The kingdom we have received is not shaken, though the whole world will be shaken, this kingdom will not. The promises upon which we rest will stand on the judgment day when every other bulwark of man will fail. No money will avail us on that day, no power, no strength, no influence, only the love of God and the salvation which*

*Christ has wrought. The door is narrow. There is no other name under heaven by which men might be saved.*

*Hymn suggestion: “Glory Be to Jesus” picks up verse 24 beautifully. If you want to play with that, you can mention that an 18<sup>th</sup> century Pope was so enamored of this hymn that he declared anyone who sang it would get 100 days off of purgatory. How’s that for a motive to worship?*

*Luke 13:22-30 Context seems to be the theme today – the verses immediately prior and after this reading provide important insights into reading this material.*

*<sup>18</sup> He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? <sup>19</sup> It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”*

*<sup>20</sup> And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? <sup>21</sup> It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”*

*<sup>22</sup> He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.*

*<sup>23</sup> And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them,*

*<sup>24</sup> “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup> When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ <sup>26</sup> Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ <sup>27</sup> But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ <sup>28</sup> In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. <sup>29</sup> And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup> And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”*

*<sup>31</sup> At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” <sup>32</sup> And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’*

*Preachers have long looked at this passage and struggled. Where is the Gospel in this? Is it that God called folks from the north, including my Saxon forebears to hear and believe and be welcomed into this kingdom? Is it the great reversal in the last verse? The folks who imagine that their sins have excluded them find that the blood of Jesus forgives all, but the folks who imagine that their righteousness has earned them a place find that it is inadequate. Is the narrow door Jesus – is that the Good News – He is the narrow door?*

*The words of this reading are hard, but I think that the two parables which immediately precede them help us substantively. The kingdom of God is compared to seemingly impotent but*

*dramatically successful things. A mustard seed looks so useless when you throw it in the ground. Yeast is smelly awful stuff you put into flour and water. Yet, both of them are amazingly successful. The seed sprouts and grows into this large plant and the yeast causes even three measures of flour to rise. (Three measures would be about 100 pounds, this is bread making on an industrial scale, more dough than you or I could probably lift. The yeast can do it, however.)*

*It is in that context of impossibility that Jesus now speaks the words of our text. Is this text really the Law driving me to the merciful Jesus? Is he telling me that I am impossibly weak and helpless to bring about my change, in much the same way that a seed or yeast look so worthless? The ancients ascribed to seed germination and yeast function a divine cause. In many pantheons there was a goddess of germination and another who oversaw the yeast's duty to make bread rise. The monotheist of the first century probably ascribed all these things to the same God. Is my life not really in my hands, is that what Jesus is driving at, pushing my human predilection to self-reliance to its logical and absurd extreme? If we have our eyes on ourselves and what we do, must we despair? But if we have our eyes on Jesus, this text does indeed have merciful Gospel for us.*

*This text has a terror for the Christian. We have served on the Altar Guild, we have partaken of the Sacrament every first and third Sunday for the past 35 years. I was an Elder! How can God not know me? Jesus points to a terrifying reality, a future in which we are on the outside looking in at the very broken sinners we disdained sitting in the seat I assumed was reserved for me in that heavenly feast.*

*But there is also a sweetness in here. This text drives us back to the center of the Gospel, we are not worthy to sit at that table. Take your eyes off your own life and your own self, and fix them on that author and perfecter of the faith: Jesus. He has this strange penchant for inviting the most despicable folks to his table, and that also includes us, even me. Don't imagine that your presence or mine is on the basis of merit. We are all there as a gift, the murderer, the adulterer, the altar guild servant, and the church council member. Remember that even on our best of days, when we go to church, contribute to the special appeal, teach Sunday School, and sing loudly, even those days are days which are completely corrupted by sin and desperately in need of Jesus' love and forgiveness.*

*The preacher who develops this text needs to be aware that this is really, really potent law, addressing a fear every human being has probably buried deeply under their veneer of Christianity. Once surfaced they likely won't quite know what to do with it. The preacher has to be ready to let the law do its crushing work, but needs also to be right there with the balm of the Gospel.*

*It is critical for the preacher to be absolutely authentic in this. You have to preach it to yourself before you ever attempt to preach this to a congregation of folks. If you think you are preaching to "them" it is likely they will pick up stones or worse, they will ignore you.*

*This is a very good time to remember our contextual rule. These passages are not best read as pericopes but as parts of much larger narrative units within the Gospels. These words of Jesus fall in the very complex chapter 13. Chapters 11 and 12 recounted the sermon on the plain, which is the Lucan version of the Sermon on the Mount. The purpose of much of this is to destroy our self-reliance. As we saw last week, even the best parts of our life, the familial relationships which are precious to us also need to be torn apart. They too are subject to sin.*

*Chapter 13 begins with a question about why bad things happen to good people. Jesus' answer is most troubling. He wonders if anyone is good and why such things don't happen to us all. Then he is in conflict with the Pharisees over keeping the Sabbath. Even going to church is in need of redemption. He heals woman whose body had been doubled up for 18 years and gets upbraided by the synagogue ruler. He calls them all hypocrites for being willing to rescue an animal but not a person. He then launches into the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. The kingdom of God is not what anyone expects. It contravenes our perception, the little are the great, the big is small, the small is big. The real work of the kingdom is done by the stinky brown stuff (yeast). It looks awful, it doesn't conform to anyone's expectation of something Godly, and yet it is the very agent of God which changes the whole lump (world).*

*It is then that he launches into this text we have today. These words are set in the midst of conflict and Christ confronting the religious authorities over the real purpose of the church and the kingdom of God.*

*The narrowness of the door, then seems to be more centered on the narrowness of their thinking and their attitudes toward people. These words of Jesus seem to be addressed to an alien world, a world in which people are earnestly striving to enter the kingdom but their own piety has led them to the cardinal sin of piety, a sneering sort of pride that draws the line of salvation just beyond us so as to exclude as many of "them" as possible. Is this still possible? Yes, of course it is and in much of evangelicalism today it is rampant. The whole holiness movement in North America today is entering a generational phase in which it will increasingly be given over to just this sort of attitude.*

*But I am not so sure that this is the problem among us, our first audience. It could be and you need to know your own situation, but I am thinking that we have a different sort of congregation in front of us. For many of us the problem is not that we are excluding the neighbor, our problem is that we desperately want them inside, yet they will not come. We have offered every enticement, our services are seeker friendly, our standards are low, and our smiles are forcibly in place. Yet, they do not come. Could it be that the very things we are doing to attract them are driving them away? Are they waiting for us to start acting like the holy people of God once more? Are we and our own eagerness to compromise, to meet them halfway, the problem here? Yes, Paul said he became all things to all people so that he might win some. But I have a hard time imagining that he would have countenanced some of the things that pass for Christian foolishness that I have seen and all of us have read about.*

*At the end of this passage Jesus seems to be talking about a surprise. There will be those whom we might not expect to see in that great feast with Abraham and there are those who are not there whom we might think should be. Perhaps one way to look at this will be to ask whom will we be surprised to see on that last day. Whose salvation will amaze and surprise us? I have always enjoyed Lewis' "Great Divorce" for his treatment of this issue. You might consider reading it – it is brief.*

## **Law and Gospel**

1. Jesus says that the way to heaven is narrow and that makes me afraid. As the old song says, my soul is apt to stray. Praise God that he is the one who keeps me on the straight and narrow. I am a miserable navigator, but God has created the way and keeps me on it.
2. But if this is Jesus' job, I have to lose control of it. That means that while I of course want him to save me, I am not entirely sure about you. He has a penchant for saving the most miserable people, the stinkers I think are beyond the pale and it bothers me. Praise God for his stubborn insistence that He is in control of this. If he listened to my ideas, I would surely end up excluding even myself.
3. The narrowness of the road often bites me hard. Persecution happens. I would like to go to heaven first class, with comfy chairs, an easy stroll, but that is simply not the way it works. Our enemy throws everything he can against us and batters us on every side. But God is also at work here. It might often feel that I am abandoned by God or he is punishing me, but faith tells me otherwise. He transforms even the terrible moments into his loving discipline. He shapes and conforms me through times of trial because he loves me. Nothing Satan does can ultimately subvert God's plans.
4. I don't like narrowness, I live in a culture in which broadness, tolerance, and inclusiveness are the virtues of the day. Jesus' words seem out of step with my world and it makes me uncomfortable. But the narrowness may in fact not be what I think of, indeed, it might be excluding the very intolerance and exclusiveness which I abhor. But it also must be said that Jesus has a narrowness, an exclusiveness which precludes others. This sounds harsh to my ears, but it is also gracious to say. The stainless-steel, adamant and otherwise impervious wall which separates me from God has an aperture, cross shaped, Jesus stamped, and gracious.
5. The discipline of God, the narrowness of this way, often makes God seem distant and forbidding to me. But I have not come to a mountain that is dark and terrible, but to Jesus. God has crossed the boundaries, he has made himself present to my sinful self in a way that hides his terrible wrath and reveals his unshakeable, forgiving love.

## Sermon Ideas

1. You have come to...(based on Hebrews 12:22-24 – that the hearer would believe that he/she has come this morning to encounter the gracious and forgiving Christ and His Kingdom)

In a sense, this sermon could really be about worship and the experience of the Church. I think too often we are apologetic for Church as some sort of a necessary evil, a tradition which we have inherited but don't really like doing anymore. It is for old people and strange folks who actually enjoy sermons. This sermon would challenge the hearer to believe what they are already doing and saying in Worship. When they sing with angels and archangels, it really happens. When they voice the "Lord, have mercy!" they are joining the long line of beggars and lepers whom Jesus has healed.

If we are preaching in a small assembly this can be particularly potent. Often when we are in a large building and a small assembly of people, Sunday morning can feel like a failure, like a depressing reminder of how little we have accomplished. The preacher might want to remind them that when we gather around this altar we are in the company of innumerable angels in festal garments. This is a holy thing.

Of course, when we look, with worldly eyes we don't see that, but the eyes of faith do. So we will have to challenge that sight of the world. But what if something really did happen at Church? What if this was a portal to another dimension, to a divine place? What if the preacher really did put the body of God in your hands at this rail and he came inside you? Of course, we confess it, our catechism says it, but do we really believe it? The writer to the Hebrews seems to have dealt with some folks who had stopped coming to Church (see chapter 10), but he was preaching to folks who were there. He was really given them a way to understand worship as an approach to the mercy of God, and who could skip that? It seems lots do manage to find something better to do on Sundays. The unshakable kingdom at the end of the passage might be a good place to go. When God shakes up the created world and the sky "rolls up like a scroll" and the stars fall from the sky, what will be left? This will be left. This is the unshakable kingdom. God's love to us and through us. That is unshakable.

But more than just worship I think this sermon would be better as a way of understanding the whole of life. The writer to the Hebrews is trying to reduce fear, especially as they have endured persecution and trials. He is not trying to make them feel guilty, but he is bestowing hope on a discouraged and frightened group of people. As we look about us there is much to make us afraid, in the world, in our church, in our communities, and more. Isn't Al Gore a prophet of ecological eschatology? The world is coming to an end and he thinks you really should be afraid of that. The elections seem to present us with unpalatable choices.

The writer to the Hebrews wants to re-couch our whole experience with God. It is not like it was with Moses, when the people could not dare to touch the mountain. We have come to the victory party, to the hosts of heaven in party mode, to the blood which cries out a much better message than that of Abel's blood which called for vengeance. This blood calls for our forgiveness and God's mercy upon us, and upon our whole life.

That reality changes the way we see everything, including the tough times we may now be enduring or those we are simply afraid we will endure (often the fear is much worse than the real thing). We have one hand on that table of heaven. We sing with angels. We have come to that Zion, that new Jerusalem. Nothing can take that away from us, not even Satan for all he can do this life I now live.

That little congregation might find it hard to believe that they can do anything. They are afraid of failure. But if they are worshipping with angels and have come to this Zion, they walk out the door now as the very instruments of God's presence to do good in this world. Yes, we can all bring our gifts to bear on problems. But God gives us a gift which transcends all of those today, he gives himself to us. The world cannot see the angels and it cannot see the glow with which we glow because we have eaten and worshiped and heard here. But God can see it. The demons fear it. Jesus loves it.

2. Via the Narrow Way (based on the Gospel lesson – that the hearer would believe and rejoice that the Holy Spirit has kept them in the true faith and is leading them on the narrow path toward that feast with Abraham and all the saints.)

Consider the collect of the day as well.

Jesus speaks to us today – we would like to think that our years of service, our correctness of doctrine, our office or place, our membership and resolute suffering for the Gospel means that we are somehow privileged for heaven. But Jesus speaks a very difficult thing for us. He says that none of those things really count. The Jews of the first century were sure that their descent from Abraham, their circumcision, their keeping of the Torah covenant meant that they were kingdom-bound if not already the kingdom of God. But Jesus tells them that the master of heaven's feast will hear them knocking and not recognize them.

If we think we have somehow a better claim on heaven's feast than they do, we are sadly deceived. They really were the children of Abraham, they worked much harder on their faithful keeping of all things godly than we do. Yet Jesus says they are not good enough.

I might have been an elder for 40 years like my grandfather, I might have served on the Altar guild, taught Sunday School, and occupied this pew for the last 75 years, but Jesus paints the picture of us also knocking on heaven's door and not being recognized. Yes, we too have eaten and drunk with him every first and third Sunday of the month, and he might say to us, "who are you? I don't know where you come from?" "But I am a

member of the LCMS” we protest! Will Jesus still not know us? Membership doesn’t make me a Christian. Jesus does.

This gets particularly difficult when I cast my eyes to the neighbor and I see them mired in some error of doctrine, an immoral mess, the depths of addiction or dallying with some other religion. I can look to them and think that I at least got this right. I at least am on God’s team. But Jesus chastises me in this moment. When I think this way I am missing the fundamental point of the kingdom and am indeed in danger of missing it altogether.

Jesus is the Narrow Way, but his narrowness is defined by the broadness of his love for sinners, not by my getting something right. I may well get much right when I am on Jesus, who is the narrow way, but my getting my life in order, doing the right thing, feeding the hungry, etc., is not the narrow way. That life is the reflection of the narrow way who is Jesus.

Look at the OT lesson today. God is looking forward to the day when all flesh will glorify his name. Jesus is the Narrow Way, he is the Way, the Truth and the Life for all sinners. The problem with Jesus folks and us today is that we too often think that somehow God notices me and my service and responds to it. As if my service, doctrinal rectitude, or church membership somehow buys me a spot at the feast, a ticket punched, my name engraved on a heavenly nameplate as surely as it is engraved on this pew.

But that is missing the narrow way. The Narrowness is really that God the Father, in his love, sent his only-begotten Son into the flesh of humanity. Jesus sends his servants out to compel the folks from the highways and byways. Jesus calls for people from all flesh to his feast. Last week we were exhorted to keep our eyes on Jesus, not on ourselves. Jesus wants us to be certain of our place in heaven, but that certainty is not located in our deeds, membership, service or something like that. It is located in the fact that he loves us, often despite us.

So what does this mean? For the Christian this has some rather interesting and strange implications. The narrowness of the way involves God’s incredibly broad love. The one who is the Narrow Way has led me to heaven’s feast, not because he found something worthy in me, but because he loves sinners, all of them. So, should I find myself sitting next to some unbeliever, the first thing I remember about them is not that I am right and they are wrong, that I have somehow gotten this right while they have not, but that the same Narrow Way who died for me, died for them too. I don’t need to argue them into his kingdom on my terms, but I can simply love them. When the LDS kid shows up on your door step with a white shirt, black slacks, and name tag, don’t get into a theological argument with him. Invite him in, don’t talk religion, and give him a sandwich. He is 18, on a bike all day, he is probably starved. Let him know that not all Christians slam doors in his face, some care about him, his family, and what he is. Don’t be “right” at the expense being Jesus-like to him.

The Narrow Way I am called to walk is nothing less than Jesus. As he has loved me, so too I am given to love the other, the unbeliever, the immoral, the addict, and the stranger. And thus the narrowness is in fact a tremendous broadness. It is when I would define the heavenly way on my terms, and likely quite narrow, that I am in fact off the path. The narrow way is God's loving way, a way that he has loved me, even my self-congratulating, self-centered, muddle-headed me.

Post communion collect – “foretaste of the feast to come”

3. And many will come from east and west (Gospel - That the Spirit of God would fill the hearer with joy at the fulfillment of this promise – God is filling his kingdom with people from every nation and people under the sun.)

The Law of this sermon is really the sense of discouragement which many of us experience, especially right after an LCMS convention. Politics, bylaws, and all the power-plays of conventions do little to encourage the faithful Christian. God's kingdom is not found there. It is found, however, in the proclamation of the Gospel and the strange fact that some folks actually believe it.

Today, all over the world, the Christian movement is growing. That may be hard to see in the United States, and this sermon may want to address some of that, but don't do so in such a way that you lose sight of the real Gospel here. God is about his work and people all over the globe are being transformed by his gracious love. You will want to tell your folks that they are part of this.

Don't think that you can simply say it, either. I mentioned earlier that I started out my ministry in Utah. My young people were convinced that Mormons ran the whole world. It was worth all the fundraising and effort expended when we walked into the stadium of the National Youth Gathering and saw 25,000 other Lutheran youth. I had told them that there were lots of Lutherans, but until that day they did not really believe me. They needed to experience it. You might see if you can find a Lutheran Hour Ministry video of people from other cultures relating their story, or better yet, bring in someone from the local Ethiopian or Sudanese or Vietnamese or other emigrant community. Have them come and share their story.

The goal of this sermon is to address the too frequent malaise to which North American Christians are too often subject. But you cannot just scowl at them and tell them to be happy, you have to proclaim the reason for the joy and then expect/articulate the joy.