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Propers 17 (Pentecost 15) Series C 2016

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 28

Today we return to the topic of pride which we visited just two weeks ago. C. S. Lewis noted that pride was the great mortal sin of the medieval period. This is in stark contrast to modern sensibilities which elevate the sexual sin to the chief of all sins. This is true even among the libertines among us who hold that homophobia and the denial of someone's sexual expression is not to be tolerated. Lewis would suggest that our focus on matters sexual is actually a form of Gnosticism. (I teach a class on Religion and Literature: Science Fiction and we use "That Hideous Strength" by Lewis. This idea permeates the book in ways that I had totally missed on my first read many years ago.) In the Screwtape Letters Lewis seems to argue that the whole sexual fixation is actually an attempt by Satan to distract us from the real problem: Pride.

Our culture does not consider pride to be a vice, indeed it has almost elevated it to a virtue, much as the ancient Roman culture did. Our football coaches scream at their losing team at half time to "have a little pride" and go out there and finish the game well, even if they know they are going to lose. We are encouraged to have "pride in our work" and many advertisers even market their product as "made with pride in the USA"

Two weeks ago we noted that there is a healthy or an appropriate pride and there is a sinful or destructive pride. Much of this is simply a matter of mislabeling and is in fact not pride. To do a good job and delight in one's work is not necessarily pride in the sinful sense, nor is the virtue of steadfast perseverance really pride. The problem here is that language has changed. A word which once was a good way to talk about sin has been so watered down that it is almost impossible to use for the preacher. As soon as you speak against pride the young men in your congregation are pitting you against their football coach. You won't fare well in that sort of a head-to-head competition. What is more, it is utterly unnecessary.

So what is pride, at least the sinful sort of pride? It has many manifestations, but it is often expressed in a grasping for something which does not belong to us. The first sin in the garden was really a sin of pride, as Adam and Eve strove for divinity. (I once heard a preacher describe the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as an "apostrophe tree." They had been God's, now they wanted to pluck the apostrophe out of the word and be "gods." Of course, Hebrew has no apostrophe so it only works in English, but it was clever.) The ancients would have called this "hubris" or the reaching for that which belongs to the gods.

The Christian today often considers salvation itself as a thing to be earned and possessed, even if the payment is faith. Yes, we can be proud of our faith! To receive God's favor as pure gift is a humbling experience which denies sinful pride. There is no payment we can make, not even a token we can give. It is pride that will not receive that gift as simple gift, pure gift, without any strings attached. It is not really a cynical or jaundiced eye which looks for the "catch" in salvation. It is pride, the pride that wants to make our own way and fulfill our own destiny, and all that other popular garbage that passes for wisdom these days.

Perhaps, however, the prideful denial of grace is only unmasking another issue. Does anyone actually think they need to be saved or do we believe that we are so autonomous that we will do it ourselves? To think that I don't need to be saved is really self-idolatrous. Do I need to be saved? From what? Our therapeutic culture has told us that we need to self-medicate/counsel and exercise our will to health. Our problems are really just a sickness which can be cured by thinking, knowing, technology, etc. But is that really true? Is this not self-idolatrous? Do we not often portray God as being with us, giving us courage to face the challenges of today, present with us on difficult days, and helpful to us when we are having a tough time? All those things are true, but they miss the point of the Gospel which does not help us cope with sin but which removes it. God has come to raise the dead, not pat the living on the head and say, "good try!"

The preacher's task is to bring God's word to bear on this. The word that is a hammer which breaks the prideful rock to pieces and which also creates the faith which does truly receive this gift. This is not a simple thing. The old stinker within each of us is loath to cede place and priority to anyone. He desperately grasps and no amount of logic will unclench his grip on our heart. The whole notion that we will argue someone into this is another form of that idolatry. We want to put our intellect into the spot where faith works, because intellect is ours, we control it. Faith is God's, He runs that and it makes us very uncomfortable. It is sometimes only by forcibly prying up his fingers one at a time that the old stinker is dislodged. The responsible preacher will realize that this is not something that one sermon will accomplish. Perhaps we will only dislodge one scaly claw today. God will be at work on this sinner the rest of the week. His lawful work through institutions and life will also be working toward that goal.

We must remember that we are likely one of the few places that the Gospel will be heard. The law surrounds us all the time. We will do well to use it, train it toward the purpose of Gospel. The confession is in fact an illustration/exercise in humility. "I have sinned in thought, word, and deed," is an act of humility. I cannot drink from the river of life which flows from Jesus without bending the stiff neck of my pride in confession!

Collect of the Day

O Lord of grace and mercy, teach us by Your Holy Spirit to follow the example of Your Son in true humility, that we may withstand the temptations of the devil and with pure hearts and minds avoid ungodly pride; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

When we see the two words in the ascription, we need to pause. Grace and Mercy are different things. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. God mercifully removes my sins. God graciously gives me the righteous obedience of Christ. Now, in place of that sin which has been removed, Christ's obedience, his faith, his love, his righteousness is at work in my life. Why do we find that difficult to preach? I wonder if we are so

afraid of a theology of Glory that we have become silent on this. Are we really preachers of Grace if we don't speak of the life that God has given us? It is hard to believe that we are at the same time sinner and saint, we don't have a problem with the sinner part, and a quick glance in the mirror shows us how wholly we are sinners. But the idea that I am wholly a saint is much harder. I cannot see it, but must believe it. But if I am a preacher of God's graciousness, I am calling God's people to believe that gift of God.

Do we simply need to see this from God's perspective? Yes we are sinful, Luther said if you think you have kept the Ten Commandments, you should simply reach up for the donkey ears that are undoubtedly growing out of your head. But God has seen me differently in Christ, and what is more, he has, in his holiness taken up his residence in my life. That holiness is expelling, and has in a very real sense already expelled my sin. I am right now his holy person. God sees me through the lens of his cross.

And thus we beg God to use the Holy Spirit to teach us to follow Jesus' example in true humility. The person who is casually praying that prayer, might just want to pause at this point and think about what they are saying. Jesus is usually shown to be truly humble when the Bible points to him on a cross. Perhaps here a word about humility is in order. Humility is not saying that you are nothing or at least less than your neighbor. It is not the assertion that I am a worm, nothing important. Humility is acknowledging that you are something, that you have a status or right, but that you will not exercise that right and you will serve the lower person.

*Think of it this way. I am a terrible basketball player. I can hardly make a shot when I am standing unopposed under the basket. For me to play basketball with my children is hardly an act of humility on my part, at least terms of the game. But if one of my basketball playing students were to stop by and play a pick game with my son, that would be an act of humility. The high stooping low to serve the lowly is humility. Jesus did not serve us by telling us he was a worm, but by owning the fact that he was the very Son of God, to him **belonged** the right of God's throne. Yet, he set that aside and was found in the form of a servant for the sake of the whole sinful world. That is Jesus' humility.*

To follow Jesus' example of humility is not an exercise in mealy mouthed self-deprecation, but it is owning who we really are, the very children of God, redeemed by his sacred blood, but rather than grasping some position and status, true humility spends our lives in the service of this sinful world as Jesus did. For those who attain the martyr's crown, that literally means spending their lives, shedding their blood as Christ did. For the rest of us, it is spending life in the service of the little, the weak, the least, and the lost.

This is only empowered by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. I can no more will myself to such humble service than I can will myself into an NBA career. My ancient enemy would do anything to keep me from this sort of humble service. He knows that when I am thus Christ-like, I am lost to him. He will be doing his utmost to ensnare me into one form of pride or another. He might even have me take a perverse pride in my own humility. I might lay claim to my heavenly

prerogative and look down my nose at the lost, or more likely, simply not care about them as long as I have my salvation. I could even go to Church every Sunday and be wallowing in a terrible pride.

The prayer exhorts us to avoid “ungodly” pride. The preacher will want to keep in mind that a godly pride is quite possible. Should the sailor or soldier be proud of his service to his country? Is that ungodly or godly? We thought it a godly pride. Likewise we might be proud of our children, proud of our status as God’s people, proud of our congregation. If Paul tells us that he is not ashamed of the Gospel, does that mean he is proud of it? What is the mark of ungodly pride? Paul speaks of thinking I am something when I am nothing. Do we recognize it by its fruit? Does ungodly pride lord it over others, looking down upon them? Does godly pride remove self from the middle of the picture and find instead God there? Does ungodly pride always put self into the middle of the picture and thereby fall victim again to the tempter’s old tricks which he has not abandoned since the days of Adam and Eve?

We could be proud of our congregations in a Godly way and in an ungodly way. It would be godly if we see this as a way to reach into this community with the love of Christ for all people. Godly pride wants to share. It would be ungodly if we start to compare, as if our big building or active program over against another parish was somehow a measure of God’s blessing or our success. Ungodly pride will invite others but only do so in order to self-aggrandize or institutionally aggrandize. When we hear our people express a desire for “more young people” or “more families” do they do so because they love these folks or because they are trying to build this parochial kingdom?

Readings

Proverbs 25:2-10

¹ *These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.*

² *It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out.*

³ *As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth,
so the heart of kings is unsearchable.*

⁴ *Take away the dross from the silver,
and the smith has material for a vessel;*

⁵ *take away the wicked from the presence of the king,
and his throne will be established in righteousness.*

⁶ *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great,*

⁷ *for it is better to be told, “Come up here,”
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

What your eyes have seen
⁸ do not hastily bring into court,
 for what will you do in the end,
 when your neighbor puts you to shame?
⁹ Argue your case with your neighbor himself,
 and do not reveal another's secret,
¹⁰ lest he who hears you bring shame upon you,
 and your ill repute have no end.

¹¹ A word fitly spoken
 is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.
¹² Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold
 is a wise reprover to a listening ear.
¹³ Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest
 is a faithful messenger to those who send him;
 he refreshes the soul of his masters.
¹⁴ Like clouds and wind without rain
 is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.

This text is firmly located in the tradition of the Old Testament which we call "Wisdom." This category entailed all sorts of things we would normally give another name. Wisdom included science, history, and other disciplines you might find in a college or university. Wisdom also included what we might call "common sense." And most importantly, wisdom was rooted in faith, the relationship with God. The trick when reading or preaching on these things is to figure out which of the many English words we have is most appropriate for the wisdom Solomon addresses here. The first place to look is usually to the word Faith as understood in a Christian context.

The book of Proverbs seems to have been the advice which was passed along to the next generation of nobles in Jerusalem for centuries. You will notice from the first verse which I included that these are words of wisdom ascribed to Solomon but written down at the time of Hezekiah nearly two hundred years later. At times, to the casual reader, the book borders on cookbook theology – do this and that and you will be blessed. However, when you drill a little deeper it gets much more profound. This is one of those places where a little more attention can yield much. However, it will yield even more if you spend the time to read the sections which precede and follow this. Proverbs is one of those books which needs more attention.

Our tendency is to read the words of Proverbs as a moralizing text, as if it is just passing along some common sense. It looks like advice for the courtier or the supplicant who is showing up in the king's court to make a request. "Don't push the issue too hard, it will come back and bite you" seems to be the advice from the king. Powerful people can be dangerous. It is good advice; but the preacher will not want to leave things there.

In truth this is a passage which has something to say about the relationship to the King of kings, and the admonition seems to be to leave the things to God which belong to him. Solomon who has been on a life-long quest to seek out things, has this truth which God has “hidden.” It is not obvious, perhaps, but God is the One who does the calling, not us. It is better to be summoned up to the king than it is to have him send you away. Both men might be in the presence of the king, but one is there in a much better fashion than the other.

For the preacher, this is a message about humility. It is pride which grasps the presence of God for personal gain or some sort right or privilege. Humility is not a denial of the relationship but a frank acknowledgment of who God is and who I am, and then a turning toward the task which God has put before us, which Jesus so eloquently summarized with simply “Love one another.” To assert one’s relationship with God as a privilege or right, may in fact be a form of taking God at his promise. Indeed, we are the children of God. But to think that this somehow entitles me, means that my Lord is in a position first to discipline me and put me in place.

This is a distinction of pride vs humility. It is pride which hears the promises of God and believes that gives me the right to shout “unfair!” to the heavens when we are confronted with the ugliness of this life, even when it might truly seem to be unfair. The whole point of Job, another wisdom text, was that God really does not owe you and me an answer for the elements of life which are simply unfair.

In a much more condensed version of this, Solomon seems to be suggesting to us that the promises of God that we are His children and the apple of his eye means for us that we are given the opportunity to look like the King, the king who wore that crown of thorns, humble in service, obedient to brutal and unfair death.

As the psalmist says below, our hope is in the Lord. Like a weaned child, we know disappointment and discipline, but our hope is in the Lord.

Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
³ O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.

The psalmist again is best read as someone who has read the OT and Gospel lesson and taken it to heart. These are the words of Christ given to the Christian to say as well. He is content with the gift of God. But notice that his humility does not suggest that he is nothing. His contentment is the contentment of a child in its mother's arms. That is a pretty bold claim for anyone to make in relationship to God. But then again, Jesus did encourage us to pray, "Our Father..."

Hebrews 13:1-17

¹ Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?"

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

¹⁸ *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.* ¹⁹ *I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.*

²⁰ *Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,* ²¹ *equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

²² *I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.*
²³ *You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.* ²⁴ *Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.* ²⁵ *Grace be with all of you.*

These words of the writer to the Hebrews come at the end of his sermon. I have included the last few verses for you here. What you find here reads something like a grab bag of admonitions which bear some closer scrutiny.

1. *“Let brotherly love continue, show hospitality, some have entertained angels.” It appears that the early church, from this passage and other descriptions of the church, seemed to practice a radical form of hospitality. In the ancient world, especially this era, travel was surprisingly easy. Rome was known for its roads. Christians, it seems, never needed to make a reservation at first century equivalent of a Motel 6, they counted on the hospitality of fellow Christians. One has to remember that at this time a house was a very different sort of thing, really just four walls with a roof. There was no plumbing, perhaps a food bill to pay, some oil for light, etc., but no bathroom to clean. What is more, many houses had empty rooms where a guest could throw a robe on the floor and spend a night with little impact on the host or more likely hostess. It may also have been the case that wealthy Christians had homes which were essentially dedicated to this.*

The medieval Christians tried to resurrect this and the monastic communities succeeded in large part as they opened their monasteries to travelers. Some of them, Benedictines in particular, continue to practice this sort of a hospitality, welcoming travelers to spend the night. The angel reference suggests that already in the first century when this was written this was starting to break down. He would not exhort them to continue if it was chugging along. But he also makes a plea that this act of service to another might have a very divine component, and we will have to come back to that idea.

2. *“Remember those in prison... those mistreated for you also are in the body” This probably is a reference to people persecuted, not to the criminals who are in prison; although, the Romans at various times did try to criminalize Christianity. While I am all for prison ministries, I am not sure that this passage is talking about a ministry to the criminal element. Rather, it seems to me, this is about Christians remembering and caring for their fellow Christians who have been seized and thrown in jail or who have been beaten or otherwise tortured because they are Christians. Again, notice that ending to this exhortation, “you are also in the body.” We must come back to that.*
3. *Then an appeal to sexual purity, especially that the marriage bed be held sacred. It seems that public figures and sexual infidelity regularly headlines our local paper. When someone in the public eye has an affair there is much hand wringing and talk that he or*

she should not have had a relationship of this sort with a staff member over whom he exercises authority. There is much discussion of whether her department was favored in the budgeting process. But there is little or no discussion of the fact that he betrayed the trust of his wife. This is not a moral problem but a problem of power and authority and proper exercise thereof. How do we preach this to this generation?

4. *Then, an exhortation to avoid the love of money and to express a sense of contentment based in the promise of Jesus to provide for us and that gives us confidence in tough times. It should be remembered that the earliest Christians seem to have been drawn from the very bottom of society, both politically and economically. These were desperately poor folks, most likely.*
5. *Then he exhorts them to remember their leaders and how things turned out for them. They are worshipping the same Lord Jesus, he does not change, so they can logically expect the same thing for themselves. Depending on what happened to those leaders, this could be good news or bad news. If a persecution has really broken out, it might not be that these guys had such an easy time of it.*
6. *Don't be led astray by teachings which apparently revolve around food. This is most likely a Jewish thing because the next line speaks of those who serve the tent. We think this is the tabernacle, or the old Jewish rites. The Jews, remember, were pretty picky about what they ate.*
7. *The next part suggests that the original audience of this seems to have been somehow enduring some persecution from the Jews themselves. The old covenant sacrifices were burned outside the city wall, Jesus was sacrificed outside the city walls, we ought to be willing to follow him outside the same wall, enduring the scorn those guys heaped upon and him and us. They have kicked us out, but we are citizens of a better city.*
But that means our sacrifices are not those of animals on an altar, but sacrifices of praise of God and love for one another. This is acceptable worship to God, not the old tent crowd.
8. *Then he returns to the topic of leadership. Their service should be a joy, not a burden. This bit speaks loudly to anyone who has served in leadership in a congregation, and for no one more so than the preachers, deacons, council members, elders, and pastors. One doesn't have to think too long before you remember a moment or two of groaning. The good news is that the Apostles of old had those moments too. That is not our failure, but has been a part of ministry from the beginning.*

What is the thread that holds all this together? From earlier in the letter to the Hebrews, especially chapters 9 and 10, I think the point of contact for all this is the physicality of Christ, or better said, his incarnation. Because Jesus has come into the flesh of humanity, because he has entered his creation and taken to himself the physical nature of humanity, now all these

things have become much more important. It is hard for us in a very materialistic age to see this, but for the first century Christians the temptation was to say that this physical world, the suffering, the joy, the pleasures, and the work of it really did not matter that much. What mattered was all the spiritual reality, the heavenly reality. We would call this today a form of Gnosticism. The writer to the Hebrews seems to have something like this in mind, and so as he concludes his sermon he reminds them of some very physical, concrete things which are important, and those which some use wrongly to exclude other people. Thus we are encouraged to show hospitality, share our good, care for our leaders, etc. Food is no longer a divider because it is not the sign of some heavenly reality as the Hellenized Jews of the first century saw it, but it is simply that, food, a gift from God. Real worship is found in the things we say and the deeds we do.

I think that our faithful Christians still struggle with this idea, oddly enough, especially those who have sat in the pews for a very long time. I think much of Christian literature and preaching has focused their attention on heaven, when in fact Jesus came to this earth because this earth is really, really important to him. He cares about out of work fishermen along the Gulf Coast, flood victims in Pakistan, fires in the West part of the U.S., and your doctor's appointment tomorrow. Yes, we want to do the liturgy well today, but if the altar guild lady messed up and hung the wrong paraments, Jesus cares about her more than he does about the aesthetic of a ritual.

Luke 14:1-14

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.² And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy.³ And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?"⁴ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away.⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?"⁶ And they could not reply to these things.

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them,⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him,⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the

blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

What do we learn about God in this text?

- 1. God is concerned about people more than rule-keeping. Rules are a good idea, the Sabbath was given to us for good reasons and it is a good idea to keep it, but he does not consider the rule-keeping to be more important than the rule keeper. The son or even an ox who has fallen into a well should be pulled out. Jesus not only puts the welfare of this man above the rule keeping, but even above his own well-being. Jesus will be killed because of this sort of thing. He puts the sinner, broken and foolish before his own self.*
- 2. God's kingdom works through some strange mechanisms – contrary to the ways of the world. While the world is jockeying for position and status, God would have his kingdom people invite the helpless, poor, and outcasts to dinner. But this invite is not because you can get something out of them, as they had undoubtedly brought in the dropsy fellow with the idea of trapping Jesus. He had something they needed, in this case a visible ailment. Jesus suggests inviting only the folks who cannot pay us back.*
- 3. The other strange element of God's kingdom is the humility which makes such invitations. It is willing to put matters into the hands of the host, rather than taking matters into our own hands.*

What do we learn about ourselves in this text?

- 1. The Pharisees are fundamentally out step with God. Our human nature thinks it is about keeping the rules, as if keeping the rules satisfies God somehow. Does God love us more or less because we have not bought into the current zeitgeist?*
- 2. We believe ourselves to be in a position of power – testing God himself, demanding that he prove himself to us. We might even set up occasions for God to come through and demonstrate to our satisfaction that he even exists.*
- 3. We often major in the minors, concerned about morality for morality's sake and forgetting that God cares about the human being. We encourage the keeping of the Ten Commandments not because of our or even God's holiness but because it is good for people to live this way.*
- 4. We are not only out of step with God, we are at times directly contradictory to him – We would put ourselves in his place.*

When reading any of the three synoptic gospels, it is important to notice just where you are in the book. The tension between Jesus and the religious authorities builds. We are in the second half of Luke and things are starting to get a much tenser. Here we see the Pharisees setting a trap for Jesus. This whole conversation has an edge to it, and the preacher will want to keep that

in mind as you listen to what Jesus says. Remember that he is in something of a fight as he says these things and think about how that affects any conversation.

Jesus is eating a meal on the Sabbath. He is a religious figure and a leader of the Pharisees has invited him for dinner, but this is a test, this is trial. In a sense, Jesus is on the menu. They place a man opposite him who has a disease: dropsy. This is a disease we more often call edema. It is the accumulation of fluid which causes swelling, often incapacitating, or painful. This disease is very visible, one cannot help but notice dropsy. Of course, before modern medicine, it was also largely incurable and often a sign of God's disfavor in the eyes of many.

Jesus looks at the man, suffering, and he turned to those who had set the trap and sets a trap for them: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" They have laid a none-too-subtle trap and Jesus has called them on it. He has surfaced the whole issue and now put before everyone present the real conundrum. They don't think he should do anything on the Sabbath, but Jesus points out that the Sabbath was made for people, not the other way around.

Then he shames them. None of them would leave a sheep or a calf in a well on the Sabbath. It would die, that would cost money. How can they criticize him for simply pulling a human being out of suffering, even on the Sabbath? He puts them in a terrible position. It is clear that they are wrong, but they cannot admit it without jeopardizing their whole Sabbath regime. You can imagine Jesus looking at them with disgust. He takes the sick man, heals him and sends him away, out of the tension, out of the fight, out of the role of being their pawn. What I find interesting is that the sick man had probably been complicit in all this, and a fascinating sermon might be to tell this story from his point of view. Yes, he was likely aware that he was a trap. But was the man with dropsy desperately hoping this itinerant healer would break the law and heal him on the Sabbath? Was this his only chance to see Jesus? Did he agree to be the bait on the off chance that Jesus would heal him? How did he hear Jesus' words?

Jesus has left the Pharisees embarrassed and angry, so he makes matters worse and tells them a parable, insinuating that they don't know basic etiquette. At least he is portraying a situation which would be terribly embarrassing to anyone of them. It is as if he sees them embarrassed and he wants to make the most of it. You get the idea that Jesus is pushing their buttons and it seems to me that he is. He pushes these guys hard enough that they start plotting his death. Of course, he wants them to start plotting his death, he wants that cross. It is his mission.

The parable or the axiom is fairly simple. It is better to be moved up the guest list than down. However, we know that this is not how it works at all. We know from several ancient societies that the competition for the best seats was ferocious and there was considerable jockeying for these sorts of positions. Jesus is speaking of what must have seemed like a fantasy world to them. Only Lutherans, with their thoroughly ingrained self-deprecation, would think this was a normal way to live.

Then, in the last paragraph, Jesus turns the world on its head one more time. Now, we are not the guest but the host, but we are inviting not the folks whose presence will lend us status and prestige, but the homeless, the lame, the cripples, the folks who cannot pay us back at all.

Jesus speaks to the arrogant Pharisees a message of a true humility. It is the course he has taken. God invites the miserable sinners to his banquet, they cannot pay him back. Jesus exhorts us to be his children, to follow his example.

Of course, they will kill him for that.

Some years ago we heard about a congregation that had taken to doing reverse potlucks, taking food out of the church to the homeless and hungry in his community. It would be pretty easy for us to turn that into a matter of “look how humble I am,” and thereby subvert the very act of service. The truth of that event is that the folks who are heading out with the food for the hungry are sinners, and that old stinker will try to claim that deed for his own prideful purpose. But this is also a Jesus event. He mercifully removes my guilt and gives me his own loving obedient humility. Jesus will win that contest. The preacher might look at such a thing and admit that we get it wrong, especially when we think about it, but Jesus, who lives in us, who works through us, always gets it right. He loves to feed hungry people, and even when the wretched Pharisees brought the poor man into the room for all the wrong reasons, he still healed him. If our hearts would pridefully serve, he will still serve through us. Rejoice in the fact that he has claimed our loving deeds, no matter what is in our hearts as we head out to give that food away. He claims it and sanctifies it! We cannot get it right, but He gets our deeds right!

Law and Gospel

1. I have eaten of the apostrophe tree, my old Adam loathes the idea that I am not God and not in charge. I would take his place and his prerogative for my life. But God still walks in the garden and seeks his children. He knows who I am and yet he calls after me. God has come in Christ to rescue every arrogant sinner.
2. I am so easily tempted this way. Even when I acknowledge the presence of God and rejoice in his presence, I am still bedeviled by temptation. Now, I am tempted to say that I have mine, and when I get around to it, I will help my neighbor who still wallows in sins cesspools. But Jesus leads the way for me. He goes to lunch with the very men who would trap him, he uses their hatred to be the mechanism of the salvation of the world.
3. I love the idea of heaven; it seems to be so sweet. Can't I just go now? Why do I have to wait? God has not called me to wait passively, but to be a waiter. I am here purposefully and as part of his in-breaking kingdom. He cares about his creation and I am given to be part of his love for it. I know that I am not all of it, but by my baptism and his ministry in my life, I am certainly part of it. I don't have to wait for heaven's day to experience his

kingdom. It might be as near as that little child down the street who needs a friend or the old woman in the apartment down the hall who has no one else.

4. But is that really heaven? It seems to be so mundane and simple. Does God really get his hands that dirty? It seems like this world is too profane to be any sort of a place God would be found. But this is where we are terribly wrong. God does love this whole world. It is a great mystery. By all rights he should have just thrown the whole thing away and us with it and started over. But he did not. Jesus walked the dusty roads, died the brutal death, rose and bears a human body to this day. He really cares about it, he is involved, we are his involvement.

Sermon Ideas

1. True Humility (From the Gospel/OT lessons – that the hearer would own his or her status before God, His Child! And that inspired by the Holy Spirit and that faith which He bestows, the hearer would be moved to a true humility expressed in loving service toward this broken world and its people.)

This true humility will be contrasted with ungodly pride. Ungodly pride will only see others for what they have to offer me. True humility will see the other as an opportunity for me to give to them.

This sermon needs to start from the truth that the invitation to the blind, lame, crippled, and poor is the invitation which Christ extends to us. That invitation is an invitation to fellowship with God himself, calling us up from a low place to the very highest place of all. We are broken and sinful, we don't belong there, but he has given us this great honor. We are the children of God, we are his dear ones who have the joy and privilege of dining at his table.

Real humility will begin with owning up to that truth. Yes, I am a sinner, a worm of sorts. There is nothing about me that makes me more lovable to God than any sinner. But I am also a redeemed child of God, a prince of heaven itself. I am a person in whom God dwells richly. God has entered into my life and that is a truth which I can believe and trust because God has said it.

You will want to look again at the opening essay and the notes on the collect for this. Jesus both exemplifies and lives out this sort of humility to which we are called. He also gives it to us. Those who sought to trap him, would have him be absolutely subject to the Law. Jesus obeyed the Law, but he never forgot who he was, indeed that he has written the Law himself. These fools thought to catch him in it, when he had authored it. He knew that the purpose of the Sabbath was to keep us from working ourselves to death, not to keep a suffering man from being healed. He refused to be boxed in, he is the Lord of heaven and earth. Notice that Jesus healed the man who was intended to be a trap for him. He graciously gave health to the man who was a weapon pointed at him.

But he did not consider his place as the Son of God as something to be grasped or clutched himself (Philippians 2:1-11), but he was found one Sabbath day eating lunch with enemies and friends alike. When confronted with a suffering man, he healed him and so continued on a path which ultimately led him to his suffering, crucifixion, and death upon a cross. And in this suffering death he did serve the whole of humanity. He did not insist that he was not God, but rather he insisted that he was God, God come to save the world.

This same Jesus has spoken powerful words about us and over us. In our Baptism he has given us his name. At this table he has said that he dwells within us potently and physically. We are his children, we are his body, we are his hands and feet, we are his lips and eyes, we are his people. We have a place in His kingdom, not as some serf or groundskeeper toiling way on Heaven's back forty, but we are united with the one who sits on the throne.

But what does that mean? The One whose blood we share, whose name we bear walked a path of humble service and today he calls us to that same path. This is not the mealy-mouthed faux humility of pietism. We do not serve him with humility when we go around and tell everyone what a worm we are, we serve with true humility when we acknowledge that we are God's children, and that means we lift the heaviest burdens, we have calloused knees as we have stooped to serve the lowest of beings. To lay claim to the relationship we have with God means that we claim that life which Jesus lived and to which he calls us.

2. The sacrifices pleasing to God (Epistle – That the hearer would embrace this sinful world as the thing which matters so much to God that he entered it and redeemed it. This embrace will involve active engagement in the messiness of life, confident that Jesus is also working to this same end and he has equipped us with hope.)

This sermon addresses the latent Gnosticism which operates at the subconscious level of much of North American Protestantism. For our parent's generation, it was the idea that if one simply said yes to the Catechism, one was a good Christian. That proved rather empty, but did we actually replace it with anything better? Some are focused on an otherworldly sort of salvation, heaven. In its extreme form, this takes a sort of radical isolationism, withdrawing from the concerns of the world. There is actually much to respect in the monastic tradition which has sought this path, but most of us are too lazy for that. We pull off a much more comfortable half measure. We really don't care too much about what happens here, as long as my 401k and other matters of security are accounted for.

On the other extreme one finds the thoroughgoing materialist. These have said that this physical world is all there is, so make the best of it. These folks have completely lost any transcendent connection of the divine to this sinful world, and if you would suggest otherwise, the problem of evil and its presence seems to them to preclude the caring activity of a loving and just God.

The writer to the Hebrews embodies another life entirely, a way which has profound implications for the way we are able to live. Jesus loves this world, the whole thing. He has come into the flesh of humanity, become incarnately present, even here today in his body the Church, in this sacrament, in this Word which we proclaim. He did this because he loves his whole creation, the entirety of it. That means the little things of life are important, and the big ones too. The way we greet a stranger is rich with spiritual possibility. The marriage bed is a God place too. The constitutions and bylaws of our congregations, the committee meetings, the food bank, and the council meetings are all places which are on Jesus' radar. But it is not just church, it is everything. The PTA, the guy who patches holes in the asphalt street, the trees in the park. He loves this place. He regrets the sin, he died for it. But that does not mean he has turned his back on this world, far from it, his death bears witness to the fact that he loves it. His resurrection from the dead with a physical body which the disciples could touch and which ate fish and bread with them, suggests that he has not disengaged from the things of this world, but remains very interested in them.

The trick here will be to identify your audience, and my guess is that you will have both sorts of semi-Gnosticism operating among your people. Some will say that "goin' to heaven" is really the Gospel. Others will have compartmentalized their faith to such an extent that God and his favor has nothing to do with the world they will encounter when they walk through your doors. In fact, the things that happen in church are not terribly real to them. We pretend to eat a meal that is Styrofoam bread and a tiny cup of bad wine. Communion feels much more like we are sitting with a little girl at a make believe tea party along with her stuffed animals than it feels like a meal of cosmic significance. Church is pretend – the real world is out there.

The answer to them both is the love of God for his whole creation and his gracious action on its behalf. It doesn't make sense of floods in Louisiana or the cancer which has struck the wife of your elder, or the heart attack suffered by old Grandma Schmidt last week, but it does say that God is interested in these things, much more so than he is interested in how right we are, or how pious we are. Just look at Jesus in the Gospel lesson to see this.

3. He even healed me (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to trust and faith – God has used and will use his/her life to be an instrument of His kingdom.)

The law of this sermon is that we often misbelieve, holding that we have to be pure in motive and effort before God can use our service or even listen to my worship. God does

not simply require that purity of us, he gives it. He will certainly even heal this misbelief – indeed this is the goal of the sermon. But this misbelief cripples our service. We imagine that we are not good enough to be the children and servants of God. We are thus crippled, it is true, but God has come to heal and restore what sin has broken and crushed.

This sermon begins by telling the Gospel story from the perspective of the man with dropsy in the text. Know your abilities here, but if you think you can pull it off, you might just want to narrate it from his perspective, in the first person. He was likely an outcast, never invited to the Pharisee's home, until that is, the itinerant preacher from Nazareth showed up and they wanted to test him. How better to trap this heretic than to set up a meal on the Sabbath and put a man with a very visible ailment right in front of him.

Let's assume this fellow is aware of his role. He is the bait in a trap. But is he also not hoping that this Jesus is the real thing? He may have heard something about him. He might have come to that day with very mixed emotions. Is he afraid Jesus will heal him? Is he longing for Jesus to heal him? His presence that day is not pure by any stretch. Yet Jesus heals him.

The Pharisees lay their trap and Jesus knowingly springs it upon himself. He heals the man, shames the Pharisees, and pushes their buttons until they seethe with rage against him. Eventually, in order to heal this whole world of its brokenness he will suffer the consequences of this sort of behavior. Jesus will die because his healing on the Sabbath and other "crimes" upset the status quo of folks in ancient Jerusalem. But today, in this text, he has his eyes fixed firmly on this suffering man and his salvation.

He has those same eyes fixed on us. We have come this day with mixed emotions and intent. Like the Pharisee who offered him the ingratiating invitation to his house, we sing his praises, but are we not also looking over our shoulders to see if anyone noticed. Don't we think at least God should notice? What sort of worship do we really bring? When we serve it is the same thing. Never have we been able to put together a wholly pure motive for even our best deeds. It is always mixed. But Jesus has his eyes fixed squarely on the same thing. He takes our filthy offerings and our self-centered praise, our service and the rest of us and makes it into his own. He makes it holy.

We decided this sermon might actually fold into either one of the earlier two. Critical would be the technique of seeing this through the eyes of the man with Dropsy.