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Propers 23 (Pentecost 21) Series C 2016

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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – October 13

Does God notice me? That might seem like a silly question. Of course God notices me, Jesus himself says that God has counted the very hairs of our heads and notices when something as inconsequential as a sparrow dies in the forest. He bids us all not to worry on that account. But when I ask that question I am not talking about the omniscient, vast data storage that is God's mind. (How many terabytes are in his hard drive?) He fully knows every atom in the universe. He can tell you the precise number of electrons in the solar system, but there is a difference between being counted and being noticed. Does God notice me, or am I just another factotum in his vast intellect. Am I personally important to him?

We know the answer, at least if we have spent even a few days in Sunday School singing "Jesus Loves Me" or the like. But do we emotionally know this, has it sunk in, are we able to delight in and trust in the fact that God knows me and in thinking of me, he smiles. When I suffer, he grieves, when I rejoice, he too has joy.

Can a human being who knows this emotionally, who perceives this in the very fiber of their being, be anything less than profoundly thankful to God? Of course not. Yet, most of the time when we start to think about church attendance and participation in the common religious life of a congregation of people (I am thinking of serving as a Sunday School teacher or board member or making funeral lunches) don't we make this into a moral problem. It is as if the person has made a bad moral choice to skip church or chooses to do something else instead of serving inside this community.

But is that really a matter of morality? Or is it a matter of a faithful response to God's great and personal love shown to each one of us. I have long contended that if we believed that when we communed we were receiving the body and blood of Christ, that then all the division over which songs we might be singing or the speed of the organist or the limp handshake of the preacher would be forgotten. We could sing in Latin, off key, and 15 verse long hymns. You would still be there if you really believed that the very Author of Life was coming into you that way. I contend that the larger issue is not a moral issue of skipping church, but a faith issue. We don't truly believe that it does what it claims to do.

I have been re-reading Timothy Wengert's "Reading the Bible with Martin Luther" recently and was struck by the comparison he made between the Christian life and a married couple dancing. The couple who are on the dance floor might experience command as Gospel. If she says, "do whatever you want," it is not really an invitation to adultery, but an invite to another dance. The command in that situation is really a form of gospel. Do we only hear the invitation to worship as a command, should we hear it more like the partner on the dance floor?

Is part of the issue that when folks see us, they don't see a life transformed by Christ in the ones who are in Church? Do we fail to offer the evidence that Christ has come into us? Do we make it hard to believe? The consistent critique of Christianity by those outside is that the Christians of

NA are hypocrites. While often this is a convenient excuse, it is also is a serious and valid critique of the way many Christians live today.

We miss the boat if we address the decline of North American Christianity as a failure of morals, technique, or worship style. This is not a failure of those things, but it is a crisis of faith. Because it is that God-established relationship we call faith which considers that wafer in our hand to be the body of Christ. It is faith which contemplates the infinite and vast God and perceives that his smile is for me. In turn then it is Faith, moved by the Spirit of God himself, which not only attends Church and serves on the committee and teaches the class, but which desires these things. Faith sees the Sunday Service as God taking up the towel of service once more and washing my sins away and that means the whole of life is a thankful response to His act of mercy and compassion.

It is that compassion and mercy we preach today, so that men and women may have their lives transformed by Him into such lives of thankful service.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You show mercy to Your people in all their troubles. Grant us always to recognize Your goodness, give thanks for Your compassion, and praise your holy name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“Always” is the rub in this prayer. I can handle most of the time, but always? Even when my friend dies or my doctor uses the C word on me? What if my child gets really sick? Or I lose my job? Am I supposed to recognize God’s goodness even then and give thanks for his compassion, even then? How in the world can I do that? It is easy for the leper in our Gospel lesson today. He got healed of leprosy. He’s an ex-leper. What about the many lepers who happened to be one village over and did not get to see Jesus and be healed? I could remember to give thanks if I was a lucky one. I probably would be up there praising his name too. Or would I? Am I praising his name today for the goodness shown me? Am I really the unlucky leper in the next village over or am I really one of the nine wending my way home to my family?

But this little rant is missing the point isn’t it. It is all about God, not about me. He stands at the center of this universe, I don’t. He mercifully reigns supreme there. The prayer reflects a life which is not my own, but a life which is lived completely through and for Him, a life which is owned by God because of what He has done. The kingdom of His Son has broken into my life somehow, mercifully, and now all this life is changed for me. I am no longer the person I once was. In Paul’s Romans 12 language, my “nous” has been renewed and that now bears fruit in my life. (Our translators use the English word “mind” for nous – but that is a pale approximation of that word as Paul uses it.)

In the same way that we use the possessive language for the people that we love, and those relationships often define who we are, Jesus has come into the world laid claim to me. I say, “my child, my wife, my friend” and in the same way Jesus has said that same thing about me, “My child, my friend” or even in the bride of Christ image – My spouse. That claim defines me and my life from that point forward. I am no really my own person, I am always His.

Goodness – God is good. That gets hard to see when life weighs heavily down upon us. But it is often just as hard to see when things are going great. To our perception, on the day of our blessing, His goodness often fades into the background, eclipsed by our own transitory happiness.

Compassion – God is compassionate. One does not have compassion on the folks who are doing well. One has compassion on the downtrodden, the hurt, the lonely, and the person who has had a pretty rough go of it.

As I write these words, I am reminded of an excellent article written by my co-worker which appeared in the Lutheran Forum. Herb Hoefler writes of the Christians in India, who often undergo severe persecution from their Hindu neighbors. Many of the Christians are lower or no caste and so are already vulnerable. The government, which seeks to discourage such evangelization, makes them even more vulnerable. Upon converting to Christianity, the Dalit lose all the privileges which once pertained to their caste. Now they really are nobodies.

Yet Herb says they keep coming. Despite internal administrative failings of the Lutheran Church in India, the congregations are growing and thriving. Herb says that they come with a smile too. A person who has been there for a while can almost recognize the Christians he says. They walk with confidence, they hold their heads high. They are somebody because Christ has called them somebody and that makes a tremendous difference in the simple living of their life. Herb says that he witnessed a man who was baptized when 80 years old. When asked why an old man like himself would undergo this, he simply said “My king called, I could not say no.” Herb says the only explanation he has is that Christianity gives them hope. And that hope has made everything different for them.

Readings

Ruth 1:1-19a

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years,⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. *And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?”* ²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

I added a few verses to the end of this. Naomi is really hurting here, this is can also be found in the text we will read, but we see just how traumatized she really is by the verses which follow. It has changed her name, her very being. She is no longer Naomi, she is Mara – bitterness.

This text will be a challenge for the lay readers. If you are making use of lay people to read the OT, you may want to give them a heads up. Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon just don’t flow off the tongue like David, Ruth, or Joshua.

The story of Ruth is a great story, and this passage is often, perhaps too often, read at weddings, but even though it is spoken between two women, it is a pretty good sentiment for a marriage too.

What is most striking for the informed reader here is that Ruth is a Moabite. She is not of the people of God and yet she is held up as this extra-virtuous person. This should not be simply a matter at which we shrug and go on. If you want to see a little of Jewish opinions about the Moabites, just consider Isaiah 25:10-12. This is the conclusion of the chapter which we often read at funerals. After God has destroyed the sheet that covers all the people, swallowing up death forever and wiping away all the tears (vss 7-8) Moab is trampled down into the cesspool. He spreads his hands out like a swimmer in the fouled water of a latrine. Isaiah and his audience really did not like Moab.

This needs to occasion a few questions on our part. In a context in which Moab is loathed, what is this little book trying to say to us? First we want to ask what makes for such an action on Ruth's part. For the audience of Israelites, how is it that Ruth gets called righteous? How does she manage to get this right? What is the Bible saying by pointing to her? What is it not saying which we might think it says?

Ruth went beyond the call of duty. Her mother-in-law had released her from any duty which she may have felt toward Naomi. Orpah did no wrong here in turning back. Yet Ruth did go on with Naomi; she begged to come along. I suppose we could concoct some terrible situation for her back home, but that is completely missing the point. She loved her mother-in-law. Naomi has become like a mother to Ruth. This is not duty, this is not obedience to some commandment; it is a much higher and much more beautiful thing. It is love.

Did you read the final Harry Potter book or watch the movie? It is a very interesting study in the power of love over raw power/brute force. If you have read it, it might make some excellent illustration material this week. If you have not read it, I actually recommend it; although, if you have not read the earlier ones you will have some catching up to do. It is also not a brief book. Many have also seen the second volume to be a useful study of courage/goodness over evil.

This is the essential ingredient to the heart that finds God's goodness in everything and manages to croak out a word of praise even when things are looking pretty tough.

Another approach is to run to the end of the text. Is the gospel in all this really that they end up in Bethlehem? One could preach a pretty good sermon simply on the basis that Jesus is born of a family that has illegal aliens and terribly poor people in it. He has this sort of people, and yes they can be good people who are economic and political refugees from other places.

Several years ago Armenio had us see the wisdom of Elimelech. He has courage. He makes the right decisions and involves the right people at the right time. When there is a famine, he leaves, he brings the right folks with him. Within his culture, Elimelech looks like a pretty smart guy. Is that how we see the refugee?

One might also wonder about the nature of the famine. Is the famine one of a spiritual nature? Are they starving for the word of God? How will this discussion of Ruth and Naomi play in the immigrant community? Many have come by themselves, sending their hard won earnings back to

their families who have remained behind in another country. Will they empathize with this family who wants to stay together or will they feel guilty because they have not remained together?

Naomi returns, but Ruth doesn't have to. She makes the courageous decision to move forward with her mother-in-law. She also makes the right decision with the right people. She could have gone home, she does not. She risks all for the love she has for Naomi.

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!

The preacher who is interested in the psalm on this day will want to focus on the line in the first verse which says that the psalmist praises God with his whole heart. That wholeness of heart is the real issue throughout the readings today. We can be mostly on board with this, but wholly is just so hard.

The psalmist gets there by recounting what God has done. It is his work, even the wholeness of my heart. He provides food for those who fear him and remembers His covenant forever (vs. 5). He sent redemption to his people (vs. 9).

The result is that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and those who practice such fear, who walk in that relationship with God, have a good understanding, a good way of life. Therein might lie another challenge for us to preach. Does the world see any of that good understanding?

II Timothy 2:1-13

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.³ Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.⁵ An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.⁶ It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel,⁹ for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;

¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.

An athlete is not crowned unless competes according to the rules. As anyone who follows the travails of professional athletes, Tour de France competitors, or even Olympic athletes, one can gain the crown and have it ripped right off.

The first part of this text causes us no trouble. The whole idea that Timothy is to carry on with what he has heard continues here. Timothy is apparently to be diligent and hardworking, not expecting others to work for him, but he should work alongside of them. God that part, it makes sense. I think good pastors understand this well. Paul seems to be encouraging him to be a good, hardworking German fellow.

Then Paul goes into the second part of this passage where he quotes what sounds like a proverb or a poem. This is where things get interesting. What does he mean by that last phrase? I can certainly say what he says, but just what does he mean? This is a bit of a puzzle. Clearly, the early lines seem to suggest that dying with Christ has a personal effect. Enduring with Christ also has a personal effect, as does its opposite: denial. But now he surprises us, if we are faithless, God is faithful. This is either really bad news or really good news. I tend to opt for the latter interpretation on this, but it could go the other way. It certainly did for the children of

Israel. When they were faithless to the Old Covenant, God kept it; he sent them to Babylon just like he promised. That hurt! Is that what this means? If we turn our back on him, he will keep his word and destroy us in hell?

Or does this have another implication? Could it mean that we, who have made a real profession out of failure, do not depend upon our faith, but upon his faithfulness? He keeps promises, even when our well intentioned vows lie shattered on the steps of church, not even making it all the way home.

This is clearly the climactic point of this little saying. By switching from the expected, in an oral and aural culture, this would have been very memorable. Paul wants to focus on the faithfulness of God here; that is clear. What is not so clear is just what it means. I tend to read this in the sense of Paul's radical incarnational theology. Because Jesus has come into the flesh, because we have been united with him in Baptism, because we are the body of Christ, Christ cannot deny us, he would be denying his very self.

The verses that follow offer some very practical advice about attention to Scripture, reminding people of the promises that God has made, and a little comparison of the church to a house which contains all sorts of vessels, gold, silver, wood, and some for humble and even profane purposes. God has a place for everyone in his kingdom, even the screw-ups. He who made a good promise in our baptism and has never forgotten our name, he remembers us, even when we have forgotten him. For parents of children who have left the church and active Christianity, this can be a very helpful verse.

I think when they read the next section which exhorts Timothy and us to working on their behalf, it gets even better.

Luke 17:11-19

¹⁰ *So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*

¹¹ *On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."*

I have included the last verse of last week's Gospel which immediately proceeds this reading. There the servant is told to simply do his duty, expect no praise, just serve. I wonder if perhaps

the commanded, slavish work which was not noticed at the end of last week's lesson was being contrasted with the praise of this Samaritan, who should be ignored by Jesus but is noticed and commended. He is saved. Is the good news of the kingdom that God really does notice us? Why does Luke juxtapose these two readings? That is always a good questions to ask.

This text traditionally has shown up on Thanksgiving Day and I think has become something of a club with which we have beaten up those who did come to church on that day. The tirade runs something like this: "Look, all those slackers who are not here, but are home watching some parade or football on television, you are like this Samaritan ex-leper. They are the ungrateful other nine!"

But I don't think that this sermon really gets at what this text is trying to say to us. I think that Luke has Jesus notice this man's thanksgiving because it is not the slavish obedience of command that is purposefully not noticed in the prior lesson. Presumably the other nine are obeying the rules, bringing the proper sacrifice to the proper authorities so they may be admitted to society once more. They are doing what Jesus told them to do! I suppose in the prior lesson even the hard stuff like forgiveness and perpetual care for the little ones could be understood to be simply commands to be obeyed. But now, the overwhelming love of Jesus displayed in this foreigner, this Samaritan, has reaped a harvest of praise. Jesus notices that. Yes, of course we have all heard the commanded to praise God, but obedience to a commandment is not what brought the Samaritan man to Jesus feet that day. The others in fact were, in obedience to the command, going to the priest. They too would offer a thank offering, as commanded in the Torah. But this fellow is obeying no command. His is the earnest and delightful response of a heart that has been set free from a burden. His is a life made whole and responding to his Savior and Healer.

Two other points you might consider worthy to make here. Both of them are textual/literal. The men cry out, "Jesus, Kyrie, have mercy upon us." That is an important point because it is exactly the cry we make in the Kyrie at the beginning of a service or any time we say "Lord, have mercy." I bring that up because we are given to say those words regularly. When we do, we are putting ourselves into that great mass of humanity, behind the lepers, the lame, the blind, the sick, the broken and sinful in the Gospels and we are adding our voices to theirs. It is too easy for us to think that these are stories about other people. They are not, this is our story.

The other point is more linguistic in nature. The verbs for what happens to this leper progress throughout the gospel in a most interesting fashion.

- 1. In vs 14 the men on their way to the priest are "cleansed" (Katharizo – from which we get the word "catharsis")*
- 2. The one who eventually returns notices that he is "healed" (iao – This is a stronger word than cleansed in a sense. This is the traditional word for health and in fact is*

the root of words like pediatrics or geriatric. The “ia” in those words mean healing or wholeness.

3. *The last word could be considered to be mis-translated here. Jesus tells the man that his faith has “made him well.” When in fact the word in Greek is “save,” (sozo).*

This little progression can actually make for a whole sermon here. The problem (leprosy) can be taken away, but there is still a healing/wholeness which must happen. Poor people, who win the lottery, often are not rich for very long. The very practices which impoverished them before they won the lottery simply reassert themselves more powerfully when they have lots of money. Soon they where they started out, perhaps worse off. There is another healing that needs to happen. They have to get a handle on their relationship to money before they can manage a lot of money or a little money well.

The one leper who returned had another different gift given to him. Yes he was cleansed, but he was also made well. This is the gift of faith. The others were obedient to the command, they went to the priest. I am sure that their families received them back into their homes with thanksgiving. The one who returned on the other hand, had a different sort of thing done for him, or at least it took in his case. He has been made whole. The broken life that once manifested in the terrible disease under which he suffered now has been restored. That life knows its Savior and Lord. That life delights in Jesus. He doesn’t run to the temple to praise God, he runs to the One who is the temple on earth. He returns to praise because it is simply in his new nature to do so.

This redeemed life, this faith expressed in praise and worship; this is what Jesus has wrought. He is saved, rescued, not only from the dreadful death he would have died with this disease, but now from eternal death as well.

Law

1. We have too often followed the other nine in obedience to a command instead of the one leper whose heart drove him to the praise of Christ. The nine did no wrong, in fact they did exactly what Jesus said, yet they get no notice here. This is not about duty and obedience, it is about another principle which moves in our life – the love of Christ to us and by us.
2. Too often our lives have sought safety and security in our own resources and strength. Our fear of loss or shame has held us back from really serving God. Ruth left all. The Leper hurled himself to the ground. Paul would follow Christ to jail, trial, and finally into death. Our lives sometimes bear poor witness to the faith we share with these people.

3. Or is it really our fear of loss and shame? Are we perhaps afraid – afraid that God when he sees us is not smiling; rather, we expect the stern countenance of a judge who has seen our guilt?
4. Praise and thanksgiving are every day sorts of things which mark the faith of a Christian. They are just as easily forgotten by us on days of blessing as they are on days of trouble.
5. Praise and thanksgiving are also expressed in the confident and joyful living of life. This is not just a Sunday morning sort of thing. Do our neighbors know that we rejoice in the Lord? Is that a private thing? How can it be? Christ has given his life for me. Shall I shirk from the embarrassment of rejoicing in front of my neighbors?
6. Praise and thanksgiving are also expressed in the way we make use of our resources and our gifts. Do we give the gifts first or last? Does our heart rejoice to support the ministry of God's Church? If it doesn't, should we even give the gift?

Gospel

1. Ruth would meet Boaz, have a son, and from that descendent would come David and finally the Lord himself. God blessed her love with an amazing and completely unforeseen gift. She was totally welcomed into the covenant that God had made with Abraham.
2. Paul's hopes would not disappoint him. Yes, prison and death awaited him, but I cannot imagine Paul shrinking from that, can you? His poured out life blood was another service he rendered to the Jesus who met him on a road many years before and in whose service Paul had spent the rest of his life. Even the worst that the emperors could do to him could not overwhelm the love of God.
3. God has made a great promise to us. Our sins have been laid on Christ. When he looks at us today, he does not see them except as the things for which his Son willingly and joyfully died. We are the very treasures of God, the things for which he has paid an unimaginable price, and he is glad to have us, as a man who seeks some treasure rejoices when he finds it and does not begrudge the price.
4. Jesus may not have healed my leprosy, but he has made me whole again. He has said the same words to me that he said to the leper. "Your faith has saved you." Because I am in that sweet relationship with Christ, I am no longer an outcast, but I am a real somebody. I am Jesus' person.

5. Christ notices the service which I render to him for His sake. The obedience is simply due, but the praise of the leper, the service of the joyful heart, the gift of the simple joy in Christ, this is precious to him and is received by him with delight.
6. This joy at being noticed by Jesus is infectious. It changes the way that I drive my car, it changes the way that I walk through the doors at work in the morning and the way I leave in the evening. This reality of serving Jesus and expecting his smile makes even the hard things lighter. They are done for him. If I blow it, he will still love me, perhaps even use my mistake to make something really good out of it. My good work will be encouraged and praised and cherished by him.

Sermon Ideas

1. Love (OT, Epistle, and Gospel – That the Holy Spirit of God would call forth extraordinary love from the hearer)

There is something that binds all the readings today: Surprising and Extraordinary Love. Naomi on her way back to the last hope she has for home and the marginal security of a penniless widow among distant relatives is confronted with the amazing and sacrificial love of her Moabitess daughter-in-law. Not only is she a Moabitess, but she is also a daughter-in-law. There are so many prejudices and stereotypical opportunities for Ruth to walk away from her mother-in-law. Yet, over Naomi's clear-sighted reasons and direct command, this young woman will not abandon her. Love does that sort of thing. It doesn't calculate the cost and the risk in any way that our banker, financial advisor, attorney, or even our Thrivent agent would recognize. For a young Moabitess to enter Israel with no one but her aging mother-in-law for connection is more than just foolish, it is risking an impoverished death among hostile enemies.

The Gospel lesson offers another similar story. Jesus heals 10 but it is only one who comes back. Leprosy had united the lepers into a community which apparently did not recognize the niceties of Jewish and Samaritan differences which were so important to the people of that time. Jews hated Samaritans and Samaritans were happy to reciprocate. The horrors of the disease, however, brought even enemies together.

Healed of their affliction, however, it was the Leper who saw that he was made whole and returned to Jesus, the hated Jew, to praise and worship. He obeyed the command to bring his sacrifice to the temple, but love gave him a new lens to see that temple and the sacrifice of his praise. It belonged not in some building but to the God-man who had made him whole.

The preacher will likely want to end this with the Epistle lesson. Paul recounts the amazing love of God for people – for us. God who is faithful even in the face of our faithlessness emboldens us to be the people who run the risks and break down the barriers because we love with his love. Ruth did not squint her eyes, grit her teeth, and make some decision to love Naomi. The leper did not calculate his next move when he realized that his leprosy was not merely cleansed but he was whole. The love shown them simply compelled this action of them. Being loved they were lovers.

The Holy Spirit of God, poured out in our baptism and infusing this Word, seizes us and turns us from leprous Moabites into the children of God who belong here with him. But that belonging to God also means we are now the very expression of that love to this world.

2. Naomi (OT That the Holy Spirit would encourage the hearer and open his/her eyes to see life and ministry through the eyes of Christ’s strange, upside-down kingdom.)

This sermon is for the small and struggling parish whose people are feeling like they cannot do much, they are small, they are, in the eyes of the world, worthless.

Naomi felt like her life was over. Like a congregation who sits in a room too large for it and remembers years ago when the Sunday School was full and the pews were active with children and families, Naomi was dwelling on the past. She could not see the future. When she returned to Bethlehem she asked them to change her name to “Mara” which means bitterness. She felt like her life was over. She felt like a failure. But God never saw her that way.

Through her God was reaching to one very important person, her Moabite daughter-in-law. It was a very unlikely partnership. She was after all of the people of Moab, traditional enemies of the Israelites. Naomi had only come there because of famine and hardship. She was a refugee taken in by her enemies. Her son married this woman, and when all her sons and her husband had died, Naomi was heading home. She wanted a clean break. She was going home to die and realized it was going to be as a widow. In the ancient world widows were pretty marginalized.

But, while there are countless successful folk in the nation of Israel at this time, God has his eyes on this little woman. She is bringing Ruth with her. And God has plans for Ruth. She will be no less than the ancestor of Christ, the great-grandmother of King David.

It would be easy for us to imagine that our days are done and our value in the kingdom of God is a thing of the past. Do not think this. God can do monumental things through the little old ladies who gather after church. Some child brought to VBS, some neighbor loved, some person whom you have fed or clothed or helped in some way may be the very one whom God has in mind to do great things.

The world wants to value us by the numbers, but God does not. God values us in his strange and upside-down kingdom in which widows get the stories in the Bible and powerful folks, the ones whom the newspapers and the world notice, they get ignored. How many folks from Ruth's generation in Israel can you name? I would guess not a one. God knew them all, but he tells us this story of this little woman named Naomi, her illegal alien daughter-in-law, and the second marriage which produced a son who would have a son, who would have a son who would be the king.

3. Us and Them (OT and Gospel – That the Holy Spirit of God would open the eyes of the hearer to see humans with the vision of God.)

The preacher may be tempted to stay above the political fray in this election year. There is much to loathe in this year's manifestation of the democratic process. We need to be careful of endorsing candidates and the like. There are pastoral concerns here. On the day after the election we need to be the shepherds of those who voted for the winning and the losing candidates.

That said, the readings today bring up a subject which is playing a large role in this election cycle and the preacher who ignores this subject is liable to the charge of dereliction of duty. There is currently a hot discussion of wall building and emigration. People raise legitimate fears about terrorists among the refugees who are streaming out of Syria and in tenuous economic times we are afraid of what many millions of Latino emigrants will do to job security and opportunity for the citizens of our nation. Those are real concerns which political processes will need to answer and deal with.

But too often the political discourse, both on the public and the personal level, is descending into a demonization of the "other." For Christians this is simply unacceptable. Jesus comes from a family which included Ruth the Moabitess. Our Lord was the product of refugees. When he fled the cruel massacre of infants in Bethlehem, he was a refugee himself. That is not an accident but an important reality of Christ and his kingdom.

Jesus' received the worship of the Magi as an infant. The Magi were from the region of northern Iraq and Syria today. They were Kurds. In today's readings Jesus receives the worship of a Samaritan. He doesn't ask if he has renounced his Samaritan ways before commending him. He first loves the human being who is before him through healing him and then hears his loud praise.

All this leads us to an important point. God has a long track record of bringing the outsiders inside and in so doing has created a people of hospitality and gentleness when it comes to strangers and others. Politics will have to decide how we arrange our society and how we deal with the influx of refugees from all quarters. God is not asking us to be foolish or blind to those realities, but Christ's love for us means we as individuals cannot subscribe to a rhetoric which dehumanizes the other. We cannot read one story of a

terrorist and assume that all Syrians are like that. We dare not join in the rhetoric which would lump all of “them” into a category of dangerous and evil. It is easy to do and tempting. We are afraid and have reason to be afraid, that is the very nature of terrorism. But Bonaventura ventured into the woods of Europe a long time ago because he was convinced that the Lord Jesus had died for the barbarous Saxons who were raping and pillaging throughout central Europe. Praise God that he did for through him and brave men like him, my ancestors came to believe in and love Jesus.

The readings today gave people of long ago and today a glimpse into the heart of God. All the human differences which make so much difference to us, don’t really make that much difference to God and his people. He sees woman for whom Jesus died, the child whom he created, the man whose praise he longs to hear.

The preacher who chooses this sermon will want to spend a little time in the second half of the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:11-22). There Paul simply says that in Christ God has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. You might also point to Colossians 3:11. The Scythians to whom Paul refers there are fierce warriors of whom the Romans were more than a little afraid in the first century.

4. Beyond the Call of Duty (Gospel Lesson: That the hearer would experience the love of God for him/her and respond to that love with a life of thankful praise and service.)

The sermon title might suggest that retelling the story of a medal of honor winner would be a good idea. There are some excellent resources on this. consider this website which is the official website which reports the exact wording of those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. <http://www.cmohs.org/>

This sermon would really seek to capture the whole of the Christian’s life into the dynamic of response to the Gospel. It might be heroic, it might be far more mundane, but all of it is animated by something which is external to ourselves. In a sense, this is a vocation sermon. The trick is that if we just preach vocation, we will turn this blessing into another work of the law. That is not what we want to do with this. We want to keep this as a joyful response, not a duty.

Thus the preacher will want to focus on the gracious act of God in Christ. I have found it helpful to work through the verb changes with folks which I discussed earlier, because it leaves you with the saved verb. Most of us have not been healed of leprosy, which makes the leper unlike us. But all of us, in our baptism, in this supper, in this absolution, all of us have been saved. That makes us very like this Leper and notices that we are unlike the other nine, who keep the rules, but miss out on the thing to which this text draws our attention, that is the life which rejoices in the love of Christ shown to all of us in Christ.

But the real trick is to get a potent illustration of this with which your people can identify. This illustration should distinguish between the perfunctory doing of duty and the work

of love. The parent who gets up in the middle of the night to feed, change, and comfort a fussing infant would much rather stay in bed, and you probably could not pay that person enough money to do a job like this, but here they are doing it for free, in fact, they are buying the diapers, the food, the whole lot. They will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on that child by the time he or she graduates from college. That parent in the middle of the night is not thinking of what he or she will get from that child. The parent just loves that baby. That is why they are in the dark, singing little songs to their daughter.

Even better is if you can find a way to illustrate this with another sort of story. Do you remember a time when you did something extraordinary without really thinking about it, just because you did it? Can you point to a time when you went the extra mile without someone prodding you or dangling some reward in front of you? That is the sort of thing you may want to draw upon.

It will be important for the preacher to remember that the motive is really the gospel here. God sees us and delights. Your law development may in fact want to focus on point #3 above in the Law/Gospel analysis. Just what Jesus do we see looking at us from the pages of Scripture, from the altar and font? Do we stubbornly hang onto our guilt and imagine that he is begrudgingly paying the price for us? Have we so ingrained into ourselves the idea that we are worthless that we have become blinded to the joy which God has in our forgiveness?

This sort of a view of God the dour and stingy giver devours our joy in serving him. We are afraid, and left hoping he doesn't notice us or that he somehow looks past the huge price he paid for our redemption. But God has said something very different. He loves the praise, even of the Samaritan. It was the joy set before him that he endured the Cross. You are the joy set before him!

This would tie in very well with the Ruth story. She doesn't have to follow her mother-in-law. She is steadfast, she is solid in her love for Naomi. Orpah obeys, Ruth's irrepressible love goes beyond the command to the worshipful service.

What kind of Jesus do we see and hear? Too often we find a joyless Jesus in there. Does it not bring us joy that Jesus has come today to serve us, to bring us body and blood that I may be his own, and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting innocence, righteousness and blessedness. Notice the contrast with the first article of the creed where it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey God. The difference between the first and second article is that Jesus has died for me, purchased and won me from sin, death, and the power of the devil with his holy precious blood as the price.

5. Strong in Grace (Epistle reading: That the hearer would derive strength to face challenges from the gracious love of Christ Jesus)

Paul is addressing his young friend and realizes that he won't be there to answer the questions and solve the problems for Tim. But Paul is not worried. The same Jesus who met him on a road long ago, who journeyed with him across stormy seas, tumultuous trials, bandit infested highways, and prison cells, this Jesus will be with Timothy and with us as well.

He speaks of athletes and soldiers and farmers. These are great images and metaphors of the Christian life, the soldier is part of the unit, suffering with his comrades and focused on the collective goal, the athlete competes according to the rules, the farmer labors mightily in the harvest. All of these things could be viewed as our contribution to this endeavor, but read in this context, they seem to be the work of Christ in and through us. Even the heavy burden of suffering which Paul currently endures is a divine moment. Nothing is beyond our Lord's experience of this life and nothing is beyond the reach of his redemptive act.

I would take the clincher from the last phrase as I discussed in the notes above, in which Paul's little poem surprises us. We screw this up, God never does. Jesus remains faithful to us, because he is really being faithful to himself. So closely has he identified himself with us, that to see us is to see himself.

You might want to remember here that when Jesus first met Paul on that road to Damascus, he asked him why Saul was persecuting "me." Saul was throwing Christians in jail, even killing some, but still Jesus sees that persecution as a persecution of himself. Jesus has so identified himself with us that when we suffer, he suffers.

But this is not only limited to suffering. Paul today exhorts his friend and protégé to active, courageous, and vigorous service. It will not be Timothy who accomplishes those laudable goals. This will be Jesus himself.