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Propers 26 (Pentecost 24) Series C 2016

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Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – October 30

When I arrived in the Northwest District a long time ago, our district president was all over the Gospel passage which we will read this week, the story of Zacchaeus. Jesus' words at the end of this story in which he says he came to seek and save the lost was the District mission statement/motto. Our DP read it as the fundamental reason for the Church to exist. We were joining in the mission of Christ. It was why our parishes had been established and why Jesus kept them open.

What our editors have done with this passage, however, is to cast it in a very eschatological sense. The collect of the day and the other two readings are very focused on the end of the world. I think that does something good and bad to reading the Zacchaeus story. I remember our DP exegeting and preaching on this text to my colleagues and looking out on a room full of rather bored faces. We had heard this message before and frankly the demographic realities of our parishes and the pressures created by exploding health care costs, declining real revenue, congregational conflict, and societal changes served to distract us from what he was saying. By casting this into the realm of eschatology the mission of Christ takes on a renewed sense of urgency. The people who do not know Jesus, whose lives are not touched by his love, are in real danger! Blandly yawning and suggesting that we will get to that tomorrow is not really an option here.

On the other hand, when the eschaton is brought into the conversation, something frequently happens to us. My PhD dissertation explored how Thomas Aquinas used St. Augustine's works in his great *Summa Theologiae*. I won't bore you with all the details, but one of the features that made this interesting to me was that it was in a climate of an eschatological prophet among the Franciscans of the 13th century who was predicting the immanent end of the world. Lots of folks were stirred up and Aquinas understood that his mission was to calm things down. He really did not succeed, by the way. If you want to read or watch a depiction of how things looked a century later, check out *The Name of the Rose*. The book is by Umberto Eco and the film version stars Sean Connery.

It seems that when we bring up the end of the world discussion, we tend to turn the brains off and the emotions we put into overdrive. That often means we are far more certain of our rectitude than we should be and far less humble about our limitations than we should be. The man who stands on the corner with the sign indicating that the world's end is nigh probably has a list of appropriate responses that is far too narrow.

Jesus will help us with this today. Zacchaeus is a hated tax collector, yet, as the Lord tells his shocked audience, he is also a son of Abraham. I probably don't need to get people worked up about the end of the world. Jesus will do that in his own way. My job is to make sure that when their emotions run high, especially their fear, the name of Jesus is not a strange or unfamiliar

sound to them. Isaiah will also help us, but only if we take the time to read a little outside the lines here. Paul's second letter of the Thessalonians starts a brief look into that fascinating little letter.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, stir up the hearts of Your faithful people to welcome and joyfully receive Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, that He may find in us a fit dwelling place; who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I have always wondered about praying that God would stir up my heart. We do it in Advent as well. I don't like having my heart stirred up. It is really unpleasant, usually, and I am often under great stress, fear, anxiety, etc., when I say that my heart is stirred up. I suppose you could say my heart is stirred up when I am in love as well, but we don't usually use the term for those more enjoyable emotions. A stirred up heart is not what we usually seek. And yet, here we are praying for God do just that.

This stirring, however, will result in the joyful reception and welcome of Jesus and this stirring up results in our hearts being a fit dwelling place for him.

Isn't he there already? What is happening here? Who would not joyfully receive Christ? Is there a begrudging reception of Christ? He comes to visit but we throw a moldy crust of bread in front of him for dinner?

Here we have a wonderful place for that very Lutheran understanding of the Now and the Not Yet, the comfort which we derive in uncomfortable circumstances. All our important questions seem to have two answers. This being the season of the Reformation, we may want to preach on that. Am I saved? Yes, of course I am saved, right now and, yet, there is still salvation to come. Who am I? I am a sinner and a saint. Not half sinner and half saint but wholly sinner and wholly saint. I am perfectly free, slave of no one, and, at the same time, I am totally enslaved by Christ and the servant of all. Without this paradoxical reading, this prayer is simple nonsense. Jesus is here and yet to come. I am his precious child and yet still in need of serious reform, even rebirth.

So we are given to ask in what ways we still need to be made fit for Christ's indwelling; while at the same time we confess the complete presence of Christ – whole and perfect within us. We ask what impedes the joy which we might feel at his coming and what makes our welcome less than sincere – despite the fact that we are baptized children of God.

Is your head spinning yet? I hope so; it is the only proper response in the face of this. Like a dizzy child we can fall into the loving arms of our Father. You don't have to understand all this but it is helpful to realize that this prayer is not reflecting the whole story. There is more to say about the presence of Christ right now.

Isaiah 1:10-18 *I have taken the liberty of printing the entire chapter. In this case I think it is absolutely necessary to situate this prophecy of Isaiah inside its context.*

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

² *Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:*

*“Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.*

³ *The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”*

⁴ *Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.*

⁵ *Why will you still be struck down?
Why will you continue to rebel?*

*The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.*

⁶ *From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up
or softened with oil.*

⁷ *Your country lies desolate;
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
foreigners devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.*

⁸ *And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.*

⁹ *If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.*

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Give ear to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² “When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.

¹⁸ “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,

they shall become like wool.

¹⁹ *If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;*

²⁰ *but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

²¹ *How the faithful city
has become a whore,
she who was full of justice!*

*Righteousness lodged in her,
but now murderers.*

²² *Your silver has become dross,
your best wine mixed with water.*

²³ *Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.*

*Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.*

*They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.*

²⁴ *Therefore the Lord declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel:*

*“Ah, I will get relief from my enemies
and avenge myself on my foes.*

²⁵ *I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.*

²⁶ *And I will restore your judges as at the first,
and your counselors as at the beginning.*

*Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city.”*

²⁷ *Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.*

²⁸ *But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.*

²⁹ *For they shall be ashamed of the oaks
that you desired;*

*and you shall blush for the gardens
that you have chosen.*

³⁰ *For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.*

³¹ *And the strong shall become tinder,
and his work a spark,
and both of them shall burn together,
with none to quench them.*

Here the context is vitally important. If you just read this by itself, excised from its place in the first chapter of Isaiah, you will be convinced by the words of the text that God has it in for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and knowing a little biblical history, you will be imagining God's holy wrath being poured out on the next gay pride parade in your home town. But the very verse which precedes this pericope tells us that we are Sodom and Gomorrah, the people who are "making the sacrifices" and observing the "festivals." Isaiah is not talking to the people of a long destroyed pair of cities which we read about in Genesis, he is talking to the hearers of these words, both in the 8th century BC and the 21st century AD. He is likening us to those two wicked communities upon which God rained sulfur and fire.

Has that got your attention yet? I hope so. God might just detest the worship of our parishes, he clearly does in Isaiah's day. They were following the properly produced and approved synodical materials. They had carefully screened the songs for even the slightest indication that works-righteousness might be creeping in or some abominable Pentecostal formulation. And God hated it. Their hands were stained with blood, but not the blood of a holy sacrifice, but the blood of iniquity, violence, and oppression. God's worship leads to a life which reflects his values and holy desires for people. So he urges them to cease from their evil deeds, do good, rebuke the oppressor, take up the case of the fatherless and the widow. These are not new ideas, but have been enshrined in the Torah of God's people since the days of Moses, when he urged them to leave a little wheat at the edge of the field for the poor man and to use an honest scale because YHWH is holy.

The final verse is pure sweetness. God has not given up on his loathsome people. "Come, let us reason together," he urges. He has the ability and the desire to cleanse us of our stains.

So what does this text suggest to us? this would be a great passage to preach to a congregation which is very inwardly focused or which has completely lost sight of its Gospel mission and purpose. Such parishes regularly imagine that their purpose is to praise God and often forget that the function of a parish is to be a light to their community, a light of Jesus love. That light shines best when we are taking care of folks in need, when we love the outcast or the otherwise unlovable. Remember, Jesus hung around with sinners, tax collectors, and ne'er-do-wells on a regular basis. He got dinged for it and if we are not getting dinged by our neighbors for it, we might just wonder if we have not missed something.

But what makes this text so useful for such a situation is that at the end of the passage God invites a new beginning, today. A parish which has been selfishly inward in its focus also has a

powerful ally in the necessary change. God really wants our community to be his community. God really wants this assembly to reflect his love and grace, both in worship and in our deeds.

Palm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

This is one of the great penitential psalms of the Bible and regularly shows up in the Advent season. We get it because this is the beginning of a brief time which is dedicated to the last things, but this brief psalm would make a fantastic outline for a sermon. Read a verse, preach it, read another verse, preach it – etc.

II Thessalonians 1:1-5 (6-10) 11-12

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore

we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This passage begins a three week semi-continuous reading of Paul's second letter to the people of Thessalonica. The history of this letter is important and really helps the reader. Paul's second missionary journey saw him make the leap into the European continent. Luke records it for us in Acts 16 with the vision of the Macedonian man begging Paul to come.

In Thessalonica, one of the major towns on the main road, Paul met ferocious opposition from the Jewish leadership of the synagogue in which he preached. After just three weeks they chased him out of town. When he went down the road to Berea, he received a much more reasonable welcome, but the Thessalonian Jews pursued him and the brothers sent him to Athens because he had become a lightning rod of sorts. Before he left, he dispatched Timothy to check up on the little community he had gathered in Thessalonica, imagining that they too have been persecuted and perhaps even driven out of existence. To Timothy's and Paul's surprise and delight, this little knot of Christians were doing well, thriving even. But, because Paul had not been there long, they had questions for the Apostle and Timothy relates them to Paul in Athens. It is in response to those questions that Paul wrote I Thessalonians. In that letter Paul expresses his delight that they are even still there and he addresses their questions which seem to have revolved around the subject of the world's end and the second coming of Christ. It appears that the letter was misunderstood because upon Timothy's return from delivering the first letter, Paul immediately dashes off this second letter, which is more strident and sharp than the first letter. It too will revolve around matters eschatological, but it really helps to read and digest the first letter to see how they seem to have misunderstood Paul.

The primary misunderstanding is already hinted at in this prayer: end of the world induced sloth. It appears that there were some who heard that Jesus was coming soon and so they simply stopped going to work. They thought that since they were not of the world, they did not need to contribute to it any more. This misunderstanding of the End seems to have been common. Many

have suggested that the Jerusalem community had a similar problem and had tried to live communally because perhaps they thought the return of Jesus was at hand. The hunger and poverty of that community would be the impetus for Paul's third missionary journey some years after he wrote this letter.

This is clearest at the end of this passage where Paul prays that their resolve to do good and every good work may be fulfilled with power to the glory of Jesus. In this letter, which I have always found very congenial to my hard-working German/Saxon upbringing Paul will encourage his people to work hard, but the motives for that work are different and it is embedded in a very different narrative. It is actually a good sermon series on the theology of work. Work is a good thing and blessed by God. Anyone up for a Reformation sermon series on Vocation?

Luke 19:1-10 (Jesus and Zacchaeus)

He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

What do you do with this text, or more importantly perhaps, what do you do with the song? We have all heard it, you either work with it or not, but it will be running through the minds of all your former Sunday School teachers, so be aware of it. Expect that some children will be under the impression that Zacchaeus was something under 12 inches tall.

Jesus is passing through Jericho. The people of Israel passed through too, many years before. It is a gateway to Israel still from the area of the Dead Sea. Jesus had set his face to Jerusalem some chapters before and now he is on the final legs of that journey. Luke wants you to know about that journey that Jesus is the one who initiates and is the master of all these things. The world will cast him as a helpless victim, but Luke reminds us that this is God's Son, pushing buttons, pulling strings, and the one behind all of this.

There is this strange encounter with Zacchaeus, a short little tax collector, a chief tax collector whom Luke notes was wealthy. He wanted to see Jesus but comically cannot see over the crowd and because he is naturally despised no one will step aside to let the little man see. So he elects to increase his elevation – he climbs a tree. To his surprise and the surprise of every other good,

messiah-expecting, pious Jew, Jesus stops at the foot of that tree and commands Zacchaeus to come down. Jesus is coming to his house this day.

Here we must return to the subject of table fellowship in the ancient world. We have already seen this. Jesus has been repeatedly dinged by the Pharisees and Scribes for “eating with sinners.” In a world in which inviting a stranger to sit by you in the cafeteria is not unthinkable, we often don’t hear this. In the ancient world to share a meal was a sign of great intimacy and something which one only did after carefully vetting the other. All sorts of standards might be employed. Citizens would not eat with slaves or freedmen for that matter. A member of the nobility would not eat with a merchant. Rabbis did not eat with morally suspect people. This was not just a Jewish issue either; although, the Jewish kosher laws and peculiar policies on clean/unclean meant that they were hyper vigilant.

Jesus just ignores all that, or perhaps he is paying even closer attention to it. He deliberately seeks out Zacchaeus, calls him by name and invites himself to the man’s house for dinner. Since he is wealthy, this will likely be a good lunch. But more importantly, Jesus has a point to make about his mission and purpose – why he ascends the dusty road to Jerusalem and the brutal path to Golgotha with a cross on his back. He goes to seek and save lost people.

Jesus’ amazing act of radical fellowship with a sinner has an effect. The love of God is never pre-conditioned, but it is always post-conditional, it changes the recipient. Zacchaeus reforms – goes beyond what the law requires and becomes positively philanthropic. I have always imagined him as a little troll of a fellow, counting his money, friendless, and sad. It seems that Jesus offers him so much in this request to be a luncheon guest. He offers him what all the money could not buy, a real friend who saw him through another lens, the lens of God’s love and promise.

I have always wondered what happened to Zacchaeus after this fateful day. Did he join the new Christian community which would flourish in Judea after Jesus resurrection? I really hope he did. Did he keep his promises? I would imagine. What did that do to him? Did it bankrupt him or was this really just petty cash for a wealthy man? Do you suppose he reapplied for the tax collecting contract with the Romans in the next tax cycle? Did he open a tax preparation booth in the Jericho market and thereby serve as a strange forerunner to H & R Block?

The real story of this pericope is of course Jesus and his mission. My former DP, happily retired from the external need to exegete this passage but seemingly compelled to do so whenever I see him, still talks this way. I respect him for that. Jesus has come to seek and save the lost. Is that our job too? If it is his job, what does that mean for me? If it is my job, what does that mean for him, especially as he might show up in my life? Of course the same thing can be said for the parish in which I worship and serve. I am thinking that this passage is nicely paired with that OT lesson in which God hates the worship of his people. Is this the key to God loving our songs?

Law and Gospel

1. What does it take to make God happy? That is a really scary question to ask and I would rather avoid it, but it just keeps coming back in different ways. God's standards are high and my performance has failed to measure up. Even when I get something right, it gets twisted and turned into something cheap and ugly. I can sing beautifully and immediately notice that my neighbor is a little off key. I can put my check into the plate and the old stinker within is hoping that someone, preferably God, will notice my generosity and there will be some reward. I cannot even give a gift without turning it into an attempt to purchase something. But God seeks me out of my dark holes, my moral morass, and my stubborn rejection of him. He looks up in the trees and finds me within the branches and invites himself into my life.
2. I know that Jesus is coming again and the Bible speaks of God's wrath on that day. It is an unpopular topic but God does not speak idly. When I start to think about this my heart can really get going with fear. I am stirred up like a boiling pot. Isaiah's words, Paul's words, even Jesus' self-invite into my home could be scary. Was Zacchaeus a little afraid to clamber down that tree? God speaks gentle and calm words to me. He would reason with me – and forgive my sins. He wants my life to reflect his goodness and empowers that to blossom and bear fruit. The wrath of God is not directed at me now.
3. But my life too often reflects the old and dying world which experiences the wrath of God. My greed, my participation in oppression, my pride, my anger, and much more all serve to alienate me from God. I am always up in that stupid tree! Even when I go to church I am liable to do this. God is patient with his people. He sent Isaiah, he sent Paul to write that second letter. He will come again and again to my tree and call me down.
4. And that calling of Jesus is transformative of my life. I really can cease to do the evil, advocate for the weak and oppressed, call for justice, and make things better by acts of generosity. God is at work in me now, not just me. I will perpetually screw this up, I know that. But God can and does take even my deeds and turn them into moments for his kingdom. He empowers real and positive change within me which in turn reflects his mission to seek and save the lost.

Sermon Ideas

1. Come let us reason together.... (OT and Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would redirect the vision of the inwardly focused congregant to the values and mission of God.)

This sermon, as we intimated above, is really for the parish which is struggling with its mission and purpose. Our old human nature will turn even something like church into a country club, an institution which will serve its members and their needs exclusively. Now it needs to be noted that we are not against serving the needs of members. Potlucks and Bible Studies are all good things, but ultimately all the fellowship events are part of a larger mission for God's people. He has come to seek and save the lost.

What is hard for us to get our heads around is that even when we are doing the right thing, like going to Church, it can be loathsome to God. Isaiah's folks were going to church. It appears they were regular, but their worship ended at the door of the temple and their lives reflected a set of values which were utterly alien to what God had told them in the Torah. Contrary to what God had said, they lived as though the poor were for exploiting, the weak were for using, and justice was a nice idea but utterly impractical. Nice guys finished last in their world, so don't be nice.

But Isaiah also saw a solution, a divine solution, in which God wiped away the stains and a new person arose. Jesus lives that out in the Gospel lesson today as he encounters a real stinker and leaves a saint behind.

Just because we are in church today does not mean that we are on the right side, just as your neighbor's absence from Church today does not mean Jesus loves them less than he loves you. God has planted this congregation because his Kingdom comes and quite frequently it comes through flawed and broken folks just like us.

There is mercy in those words- God did not reject the people of Israel for their failure to get this. He does not reject us either.

There is hope in these words – Jesus transformed the life of a man whom the religious of his day had completely written off. No one thought much of Zacchaeus except Jesus.

God has empowered our community and life together with the same mercy and hope. We have failed to be the parish which he would have us be. Mercy is upon us. We have a wonderful opportunity before us today. God has filled us with hope.

2. Worthy of His Calling (Epistle – That the Spirit of God would infuse every aspect of the hearer's life, rendering all of it holy and pleasing to God.)

This sermon is really a theology of work. Paul speaks of a life which is filled with good intentions and good and faithful work. First of all, let's just clear the air about this. God is interested in more than just your soul. He made your body and values your physical being as much as he does your spiritual being. Genesis tells us that he looked over all that he

had made and called it very good. That is why he shed real, red, sticky blood on that cross outside of Jerusalem. He died to save your body and whole life.

That means that when you walk out these doors to the workaday world in which you work, play, go to school, sleep, eat, etc., he is there with you and would render all that life holy, including your vocation as a member of that community. It is not the case that he just died for this hour on Sunday but he has laid a claim over every moment and in laying that claim he has also blessed the whole thing too.

This means we can come to work from a very different place, a much better place, and a place from which Jesus is glorified, and we are glorified in him, and his kingdom comes to us and through us, yes, at work too.

The preacher will want to think about how that works in your situation. One can always be a person of charity, kindness, and graciousness and speak of how that reveals and represents Christ. But excellence, devotion, duty, and perseverance also reflect him.