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Propers 4 (Pentecost 2) Series C 2016

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Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4), June 2

Because the season of Easter floats around on a combination of a lunar and solar calendar, something needs to give way. The way our current system of pericopes compensates is by absorbing the first readings after Trinity. We pick things up at proper number 4 which always falls between May 29 and June 4. Because Easter was relatively early this year, this is actually an unusual pericope for us to experience.

That is too bad because these are some very good readings which the Church needs to hear and put into practice today. Solomon prays at the dedication of the temple in the first reading. It seems like a very parochial event, but deep into the prayer, he starts talking about the nations, the non-Jews, who would come to pray there. Our editors want us to focus on that part of the prayer and thus have given us a rather chopped up version of it. I have included the whole thing for us.

The Gospel reading is Luke's account of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant. As Luke tells this story, he emphasizes some very different things than does Matthew when he tells the story. Luke wants us to see this as a moment when old barriers are broken down, or at least a prophecy of such barriers broken down. Next week we will get the very next story in Luke – the rescue of the widow of Nain by resurrecting her son from death. Death is a serious barrier broken down. If we will confess the resurrection, as we have done, we also must confess the breaking down of these other barriers, the barriers of Jew-Gentile as Luke sees happening here, but also other barriers which impede the full realization of the Kingdom of God in this place.

Those barriers could be social, economic, sexual, traditional, or any other sort of barriers. Even within Christendom they exist. My grandmother was a devout Lutheran, pious and faithful, but if you asked her what it meant to be a Lutheran, I think her first answer would have been, "Not Catholic!" My guess is that this is not really an issue in most of our congregations, but there are barriers there too, barriers which these readings will call us to bridge into our communities so that the Gospel may come to all; and so that all may be brought to Christ. It is not enough simply to have Christ, but Luke and Solomon challenge us today to be the instruments God would use to bring that same Jesus to this benighted world.

Last time we discussed these pericopes, we wondered what barriers are we struggling to overcome in proclaiming the Gospel.

1. The models have all changed. We build a building and assume that this will be attractive in and of itself. It used to work, but does not anymore. We have a model which operates on the basis of attraction but the reality is people aren't exactly flocking in. Do we have a large barrier residing right inside ourselves and the way we see the church and the way we embody Christ in this community?
2. Many of our people are weary, elderly, and burned out. We have tried and failed and now we have a barrier of disappointment.

3. Some noted that we had a really entrenched unwillingness to try new things. #2 and #3 are pretty connected.
4. For many of us the church culture with which we are familiar is alien to the world to which we are sent? That is OK, we don't need to be "of the world" but sometimes it feels like we are talking a completely different language. My neighbor cannot fathom why I would even think divorce is a problem.
5. We are born into a Constantinian culture which makes some assumptions about the authority and role of the Church but the culture out there is beyond that (Post-Constantinian).
6. The volunteerism model upon which North American Christianity is built is really alien to our ecclesiology. We speak of a community which the Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies" but our neighbors see it as a place which they might elect to join or decide not to join.
7. Lutherans tend to be gloomy or at least have that reputation and we live in a culture in which people are not wanting to ask deep existential questions, but they want banal reality TV and cheerfulness. Lutherans are noted for teaching the Bible and that is appreciated, but it is not filling pews.
8. More? Can we add to this list on Tuesday?

I am putting out a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians as well and that will come as a separate attachment.

Collect of the Day

O God, by Your almighty Word You set in order all things in heaven and on earth. Put away from us all things hurtful, and give us those things that are beneficial for us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The first Sundays after Trinity have us revisit some of the basics of our faith. The collect seems to bring us back to the first article of the Creed in which we confess that God is the creator of heaven and earth. It is a good thing to revisit and it has some real implications for today, but they are somewhat tangential to the readings, or at least they will seem that way to anyone who has engaged in much of the First Article debate that swirls around the public and Christian blogosphere and other public venues.

At the expense of the Christian witness, Christians have largely allowed the debate over creation to devolve into a question of how creation happened and as a result we have forgotten the real story here: that it happened. If you ask many North American Christians today they will tell you that they have defended this article of the creed by insisting on a recent (less than 10,000 yrs ago) creation event which transpired over six literal days. This includes a fair number of LCMS

Lutherans; indeed, the founders of this very modern movement included some LCMS Lutherans as well as American Evangelicals and Seventh Day Adventists.

In truth this current creation debate is not so much a debate about Creation as it is a debate about how to read the Bible masquerading as a debate about Creation. This state of affairs has served only to weaken the Christian witness to Christ in this time, because this hermeneutical debate has largely obscured the witness to the genuine content of Creation theology which is not dependent on a six day, recent creation event.

The Bible actually talks about Creation on many occasions outside of Genesis 1 (Job 38-41, Psalm 104, John 1, Proverbs 8, Romans 8, etc.,) and when the Bible talks about Creation it doesn't get into the whole question of when or how God did it, but it is very insistent that God did it. Shall we read Genesis 1 literally? Perhaps we should, perhaps we should not, that is a question which Lutherans can debate and which can in fact be open. After all, on the other end of the Bible is a book we almost all consider to be best read in a more symbolic fashion, contrary to many who insist it must be read literally.

But what is not up for debate, what is not an open question for us is the fact of the creation and what that means for us. God made this world. He therefore exercises all the rights of ownership. He gets to make the rules for how it shall behave and be used. He gets to set limits and expectations for it. When those limits and expectations are not met or transgressed, he can determine what the punishment is and ultimately it will be clearly within his rights to destroy it.

But what is also wrapped into that Creation theology is God's great love for his Creation. Because we have gotten our undies so tightly wound into bunches about when and how God did this, we have too often failed to proclaim God's love for his creation. That is what I mean above about this state of affairs hindering the Christian witness. The elements of the collect which follow make sense, indeed only make sense, in light of the fact that God loves his creation. If God's action on our behalf is not motivated by love, then we are left with the pagan gods who must be "bought" with sacrifice and gift in order to benefit the people. Or we are talking about a deist God who does not care?

This brings up what I think this the real meat of this collect. The prayer assumes that God is active in the lives of his people. He is keeping us from the things which are hurtful and giving us things which are beneficial. That is not just an end of the world, go to heaven, sort of activity on God's part but something which intersects with our lives right now.

Does this present one of the barriers we need to overcome? We are making a first article assumption here. We are often dealing with a people who assert something very different about the first article/creation. This means when we come to have the second article/Jesus/Cross with them, we are unable to have the conversation because we are starting from totally different places.

Readings

I Kings 8:22-24, 27-29, 41-43 *This is the prayer Solomon spoke at the dedication of the temple. I have included the whole of the prayer so you can see how our excised portions play into the whole passage.*

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, ²³ and said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; ²⁴ you have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. ²⁵ Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, ‘You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.’ ²⁶ Now therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you have spoken to your servant David my father.

²⁷ “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! ²⁸ Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, ²⁹ that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. ³⁰ And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

³¹ “If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house, ³² then hear in heaven and act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness.

³³ “When your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you, and if they turn again to you and acknowledge your name and pray and plead with you in this house, ³⁴ then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them again to the land that you gave to their fathers.

³⁵ “When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, ³⁶ then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.

³⁷ “If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, ³⁸ whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, ³⁹ then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), ⁴⁰ that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.

⁴¹ “Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake ⁴² (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³ hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

⁴⁴ “If your people go out to battle against their enemy, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to the LORD toward the city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name, ⁴⁵ then hear in heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause.

⁴⁶ “If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near, ⁴⁷ yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,’ ⁴⁸ if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, ⁴⁹ then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause ⁵⁰ and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them ⁵¹ (for they are your people, and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace). ⁵² Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant and to the plea of your people Israel, giving ear to them whenever they call to you. ⁵³ For you separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be your heritage, as you declared through Moses your servant, when you brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD.”

This readings is almost as interesting for what is cut out as for what is included. The editors clearly want us to focus on the inclusion of the gentiles here, but they achieve that by excising the other material which is so strong as to overwhelm the inclusion motif. The words on the

repentance and forgiveness for the people are strong and the preacher needs to keep them in mind as he considers the inclusion element. If for no other reason than the humility which must pervade any Christian discussion of the "other." We are all grafted in, according to Paul. No one is here because we deserve it. That means that the temple, the ancient place where God caused his name to dwell and the One who claimed to be the real temple (John 2:19-21 et al.), is for the whole world.

To really get the whole impact of this prayer one has to remember what happened in II Samuel 7 and the promise which God made to David there. David was contemplating the construction of a temple at that time. God said he would not build it, but his son would build it. You can see from the excised portion of the prayer that Solomon clearly thinks he is the fulfillment of that promise, and indeed he is. But there is yet a fuller-fulfillment of that prophecy. Paul seems to develop this in Ephesians 2 at the end of the chapter in which he asserts that Jesus is the cornerstone of God's real temple which is made of living stones, people, including the very gentiles mentioned in this prayer by Solomon.

It is not the case that Solomon was mistaken. He was indeed fulfilling the prophecy, but there was more to the story, Jesus. Indeed, from our perspective, John has intimated that there is more from our perspective in the 21st century after Christ. The new heaven and the new earth are the very temple of God which John saw in the concluding chapters of Revelation. The Lamb is the very lamp and sun of that place. Is this the fullest-fulfillment of this prophecy? I think so. This sort of understanding of prophecy is called proleptic. It is not literal, at least not in the modern sense of that word. A modern literalist would insist that there can be but one referent to the son of David, Solomon must be either right or wrong to claim that he is the fulfillment, he cannot be both the fulfillment and not the fulfillment. Here I think the literal interpretation of the text, as modernity has construed literalism, fails us.

But what is the implication for the hearer today? I think it lies in the words which the pericope editors have highlighted by including them – the temple was for the entire world's people. Any attempt to exclude must be condemned as contrary to the long established will and purposes of God. Of course if you preach such a message, you will find lots of folks who will solemnly nod with you and assure you that you are right, but if you look out over the faces staring back at you, you will surely notice that they are not being honest with you. It will likely be a lily white assembly. Or, if it is an Hispanic crowd or an African American crowd, there will be hardly a blond head in the bunch. There is almost no place in North America more segregated than Sunday mornings. We nod when the preacher says Jesus died for all, but it doesn't seem to get much further than that. We continue to gather with, associate with, and worship with people who racially and socio-economically look like us.

This all transpires despite the fact that we live in one of the most racially diverse and open places on earth. The block on which I live includes a family from the Caribbean, a man and his son from Japan, another family from Ethiopia, an African American, and at least one Hispanic family in addition to two Italians, a Dane, us Germans, and other Anglo-Saxon types. If I go a little further, there is a Hmong congregation within walking distance and sizeable populations of several ethnic minorities. None of them get into the same car to share a ride to church.

Jesus is calling and his call is heard. His praises are sung in multiple languages and by a rich diversity of people. The Gospel is getting through to all sorts of folks and we can rejoice about that, but we also have to wonder why the vision Paul had for the Jewish/Gentile Church of the first century has really not reached fruition. He imagined that the Jews and Gentiles were being built into one Temple, a single dwelling place for God's Spirit. Solomon also seems to envision a single place to which all would come, as does Isaiah in much of his writing, but still we see the "dividing walls" which Paul said Jesus broke down separating the folk of Christ.

Sin is stubborn, and we need to be equally relentless in proclaiming the Law. But even more importantly, the Gospel is potent. Jesus is breaking down those barriers and uniting his people. The preacher will want also to look for the places and events in which this is happening differently. Trinity around the corner from my house has a healthy population of Latino's and a few African Americans who attend, including at least one Latino fellow who is an elder of the parish. Ascension in east Portland also will see Anglos and Latinos worshipping side by side. The parish I attend on Sunday has a substantial contingent of developmentally disabled folks who are warmly welcomed into that assembly. It is not that this is not happening, but is it a now and not-yet sort of thing? Most likely.

Psalm 96:1-9

Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!

² Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.

³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!

⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.

⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!

⁹ Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.”

If you are preaching the first text with its inclusion motif, you may want to draw the attention of the hearer to this psalm. It seems to be the realization of Solomon’s prayer as the psalmist is calling to the nations to ascribe their praise to the LORD.

Of particular interest will be the things for which these foreigners are being called upon to praise God. His “salvation” is to be praised from day to day (vs. 2). His position over against the other gods is established by his creation of the heavens (vs. 5). His holiness causes all the earth to tremble before him (vs. 9). Among the nations it is to be said that the Lord reigns, the world is established, and he judges the nations with equity (vs. 10). That last verse actually sums up the whole thing. The reign of God both establishes the world and it speaks to his judgment, rendered in Christ.

Galatians 1:1-12

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

¹⁰For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

This begins a series of readings which will take us through Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Lutheran who is thinking about preaching this may well want to pick up Luther's commentary on the book (1535 – he also lectured on this in 1519 – make sure you get the 1535 edition. It is considered the classic.) It is free on Kindle, but there are also many editions in print if you prefer that medium.

Paul's opening paragraphs are unique among the 13 letters we have from his pen. In the other 12 he always begins with a prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of the reader. He prays for God to help them, strengthen them, etc., but not here. Paul launches right into the subject and does so forcefully. Our English translations tend to make this tamer than it really is. The word he uses at the end of verse 8 and repeats at the end of verse 9 would better be translated "let 'em go to Hell!" The word is so strong we have actually made it into an English word which we rarely use: anathematize.

This harsh language shows up again and again in the book. Even in chapter 5 Paul can wish that the circumcision party would go all the way and cut the whole thing off! (5:12) This is not a verse which shows up in many Sunday morning readings.

The preacher who is taking up Paul's letter will likely want to address this passion head on. Verse 10 seems to be a key here. Paul insists that the whole of this letter and the whole of the Christian proclamation is oriented toward Christ and not toward man – not toward pleasing human beings, not toward what makes sense to our broken, sinful minds, not toward anything of our humanity, but toward Christ.

Just compare this to Corinthians. Paul had a difficult situation there. From reading the first letter to the Corinthians we learn that they were morally really problematic, they were struggling under serious misbelief regarding something as basic as the resurrection, the fellowship and unity of the congregation were seriously fractured, their Lord's Suppers were not the Lord's Supper, etc. Yet, there Paul never uses this strong language. What has gotten him so riled up this time? I would argue that it is the very challenge which is being made to the Gospel itself. The Judaizers, scholars debate exactly who they were and what they said but some of this is fairly clear, are suggesting that the Gentile Christians must be circumcised to be real Christians. They are suggesting that one must culturally become a Jew before they can really be one of the beloved people of God, or at least not a second class citizen of heaven.

Paul erupts at this. You can start to see why Luther thought this letter one of the best books in the entire Bible. This passionate defense of the Gospel of Grace would empower Luther to stand up to the Popes and Bishops of the Reformation era. Paul's passion suggests to all who read this text that this is absolutely central to the Christian.

We are often afraid of passion and with some good reason. We remember the times we got angry and were sorry for what we did. We remember the times we felt strongly about someone or something and quite often that got us in trouble. But passion is important. One learns a great deal about someone when you see them angry or when you think about what makes them angry. A man or woman who gets angry about missing a television show, especially in this day and age of reruns on the internet, is really a small person. A man or woman who gets angry about some large tragedy, say hunger or abuse, on the other hand, might be a noble person.

It is really Buddhism which says that all passion is to be purged from the human life. Christianity has never said that. Jesus in righteous and zealous anger drives out the money changers who had turned his Father's house into a den of thieves. Aged Abraham arms 318 of his servants and leads them into battle to rescue his nephew Lot. David wept bitterly at the death of his son. Athanasius was passionately adamant in his pursuit of Trinitarian truth. Of course, as we know, passion has a down side. Cyril of Alexandria could get quite uptight with his Nestorian opponents in the development of the Christology of Chalcedon and, if you have ever read about him, Cyril could go over the top. David of course also had his moments of passionate sin.

A close look at your "passion" can give insight. This works for parishes as well. What makes us angry is often a statement about our values. Look at your parish. What have you fought about for the last ten years? That will say something about your values. If you have fought most intensely about the building, is that really your value? Do you ever fight about evangelism? Do you ever fight about how to love people? I think this has its limits, but quite often our stated values and our real values are often very different. Another good measure of values, of course, is to look at what you spend money upon.

Paul's passionate letter to Galatians forcefully asserts the absolute grace of God. If you would deal with God as if he reacts to anything that you are doing, you invite Paul's wrath here. This is good red meat for a Lutheran, but what we often don't realize is just how easily we slip into this very subtle trap. The woman who has attended church for seventy years feels slighted when the drunkard is welcomed. She feels that her many years of service and worship should be acknowledged and his years of dissolute living ought to be at least mentioned, if not censured on a regular basis. In one sense she is right. Her life is a much better witness and certainly a better model but it is so easy for us to translate that secondary truth into the primary truth. She is balking at the truth that God loves the drunkard every bit as much as he loves her. God's love is a scandalous love.

I have heard many a good Lutheran say that sinful people need to repent. It is true, sinners need to repent, but God does not start loving them when they repent, and a proclamation which

suggests as much would set Paul's teeth on edge because it would imply that somehow God is reacting to our repentance. Our repentance is us reacting to God, not the other way around.

This is the fundamental problem that Paul has with the Judaizers of his day and our day. They get the traffic backwards. They imagine that somehow we are doing something to which God will react, even if our deeds are a reaction to God. God's love has no on/off switch which we can turn on or off by getting something right or wrong. It just is.

Paul asserts that this Gospel is not from some human origin. If it were, he would not be a servant of Christ. I think he means here that if he were doing this for some self-serving, human reason his behavior would be stupid. Remember he regularly gets beat to a pulp for this. But also he is insisting that this comes from heaven itself. His opponents are accusing him of pandering to the Gentiles, a first century form of grade inflation. The Pharisees have been making the road to heaven steeper but Paul seems to be saying that the road to heaven has no incline at all, or if it does, God has walked up that steep hill with a cross on his back.

This matters to Paul. It matters a great deal.

We will get a chance to unpack this gracious love of God in the coming weeks. This week, I would focus on the fact of Paul's anger. This subject is worth getting angry about.

Luke 7:1-10

After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³ When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." ⁶ And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. ⁷ Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

Sometimes a comparison is the best way to get something out of a text and I think this might be one of those moments. Both Matthew and Luke tell this story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant. Matthew's version is in chapter 8 of his Gospel account. The two stories are told very differently; although, the pertinent details remain the same and the stories in no way conflict. Matthew has us see the centurion simply as that: A Roman soldier. He has a servant who is sick, he comes to Jesus for help, and surprises them all, including Jesus, by exhibiting a greater faith

than any other in Israel. This story is then put into a sort of parallel with the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Peter also brings her need to Jesus, but Jesus goes in to raise her from her fevered and just in case you did not pick up on the comparison, Matthew tells you that she served Jesus and the disciples upon being healed. Peter and the centurion needed the same Jesus and got the same Jesus, but the centurion's faith was remarkable. Peter did not ask Jesus to do this from afar. He still needed Jesus to come to her.

Luke's telling emphasizes some very different points. First of all, he wants you see the centurion sympathetically. The centurion is a good guy. The appeal is made through the Jewish leadership, and that leadership pleads for Jesus to do this miracle because "he is worthy..." I liken this to seeing the pictures of American GI's handing out candy to kids on the streets of some Iraqi or Afghani city. It is an image which is designed to bolster our faith and confidence in those young men and women and which is supposed to engender supportive attitudes and good feelings about the whole project. Luke seems to be doing something like that. He wants us to see that this Roman centurion is a good guy.

This is breaking the stereotypes of Roman centurions in the ancient world, both the stereotypes held by Jewish folks and those held by the Gentiles. Centurions were the guys in the Roman army who got things done. In this sense they were a little like sergeants in contemporary armies. They commanded more men than a sergeant does, but they were the highest ranking non-commissioned officer. As such, they had a reputation for being hard men who had little patience for civilians and their affairs. They were the backbone of the Roman army which enforced imperial power throughout the Mediterranean basin. As the name implies, the centurion had up to a hundred legionaries under his command and he was charged with making sure those men were in order and on task. This was done through brutal discipline. The English term "decimate" comes from the Roman army. A century or a cohort which was deemed underperforming might be decimated, one in ten soldiers being summarily slaughtered. It was a brutal order from the general and a lesson which the centurion would make sure was carried out.

This centurion is a nice guy.

Luke wants to put us off our balance here. He is asking us to look at people whom we think we understand, people whom we are sure we have figured out, and to see them with fresh eyes. It is as if Luke says: Forget everything you have ever learned about a centurion, I want to tell you about this one. Of course the effect is somewhat lost on us, since I may have just told you more about a centurion than you had hitherto known in the prior paragraph. What would do this for us? Should we see a tall, bearded, dark skinned, blue turbaned, dagger wielding Sikh gently stooping over to pick up a child and gently carry it to safety? Would your stereotype breaking vision involve a tattooed and pierced young man weeping at the grave of a friend or feeding a homeless man, or slipping into the pew next to you? Would your world be turned completely upside down to learn that a used car salesman is an honest fellow?

What we also have to acknowledge here is that we are not entirely certain which stereotype is being undone. This involves some ambiguity about Luke's audience. Does Luke mean for his Christian reader to think differently about the Roman soldiers and the whole Roman Empire? This would imply that there is some hostility toward the Romans in the Christian community. After the Neronian persecution and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, you can imagine why this might be. This would jibe well with the story of another centurion, Cornelius, which we read a few weeks ago in Acts. On the other hand, we might wonder whether this is actually directed to a Roman audience. Have they heard that these Christians are a subversive cult? Is Luke trying to portray Jesus interacting with a Roman military officer and helping him? Does he want to upend the stereotype which is developing among the non-Christians regarding this new Jesus movement among them? There are several other passages in Luke which would support this reading as well, including the story of Gallio in Acts 18. Is it possible that Luke has both audiences in mind when he writes this?

The story of Cornelius mentioned above, highlights another important feature of reading and preaching about Luke. He wrote both Luke and Acts as a single volume with an interesting structure. They seem to be in some ways mirror images of each other. There is a remarkable symmetry to these two volumes of the same work. The miracles of Jesus are largely mirrored in the book of Acts. He gives a hint of this in the prologue to the book when he says that in the first book he told Theophilus of the things which Jesus "began to do." The grammar and content of that phrase suggests that Jesus is not done doing things. We have suggested earlier in our treatment of Acts during Easter that Luke seems to be saying that Jesus is to be found in the words and deeds of his disciples. They do the same miracles, they suffer at the hands of the Sanhedrin, they speak powerful words, and when they die, the words of Jesus are on their lips. For me the real kicker is that when he confronts Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, Jesus asks "Why are you persecuting me?" He does not say "my people" but "me." When Saul imprisons a Christian, Jesus goes to jail.

The wise preacher will look through the stories of Acts and find a similar story and really see that Acts account as a sort of commentary on the Gospel account. Luke tells us what Jesus did and Acts will tell us how that same Jesus does the same things through his people today. This means that the Cornelius account in Acts is really a commentary by Luke on the meaning of this encounter with another centurion in Luke. Luke seems to be saying with the Cornelius account what the Luke 7:1-10 account means for the Church. And the message in Cornelius' account seems pretty clear. Jesus is breaking down barriers which divide but are really part of that old creation. The new has come, and the new sees the world through new eyes and through a new lens. Luke thought this so important that he told the Cornelius story twice, once as a narrative and again in Peter's defense of his actions in Jerusalem. When he repeats a story like that, it is important.

The preacher may also want to spend a little time in Ephesians as well. Especially in chapter 2 of that book, starting at verse 11, Paul speaks of the great issue which defined his ministry, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Paul says that the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down in the death and resurrection of Christ. We were all dead in sins, equal. We are all also and equally made alive in Christ. The old distinctions of the sinful life should no longer apply to us.

Law and Gospel

1. I have heard the Easter message of resurrection, the Pentecost message of an outpoured Spirit, and the Trinity message of a right doctrine, and yet I look around me and see a dying world, including myself. I see a listless Christianity which seemingly has no Spirit, and I see doctrine dividing us far more than it unites us. I am discouraged. But this is the very way that God works. He doesn't use the successful and obvious, but the broken and the foolish (I Cor. 1!) Just because Christianity doesn't fit my expectations, does not mean that God has abandoned it or left it. Solomon was a broken vessel and yet the fulfillment of a promise. Jesus gives and works in places which don't make sense to me. Divisive doctrine or tolerant indifference is a false alternative. God's love loves truth.
2. I look around me and see that the Christian faith has made such a small impact on the lives of the people that I know, especially the guy who is staring back at me from the mirror. He doesn't seem to be working here, not now, and not that I can see. My congregation is listless and my own life is too busy with the things which don't really matter. But God knows this, and loves me still. His great gifts are not doled out in some reaction to me getting this right. They just are given.
3. The old sinful Adam clings so tightly to us. Even when I get to church he is there. He divides us along all sorts of lines, none of which Christ would recognize. How can I shake this reality? It seems to be too hard for me. Perhaps I should just acquiesce and admit that I am a failure at this Christian thing. It is too hard for me, but that is why Jesus came. The centurion, for being a nice guy, could not solve his problem. That is what Jesus did. He also will free us from this body of death (Rom 7) and build us into a single temple in which the Spirit of God dwells (Eph 2). The centurion is not an isolated incident. Look at what God did to the first century church which thought the love of God was limited to Kosher folk or look at what he is doing in Africa or Asia today.
4. But I like my church just the way it is. If we let in all these other folks it will change and make me uncomfortable. This is true, but it is also exciting. God calls us to an adventure, an exciting adventure of following Christ. He claims his church, and it is his. This both good and bad news. It is bad news for me when I want to own my church, but it is really

good news when it comes to making the church succeed. He also takes that responsibility. We are afraid of change, but sometimes change really can be improvement.

Sermon Ideas

1. Not even in Israel (Gospel and OT – That the Holy Spirit would open the eyes and heart of the hearer in order to see their neighbors with Jesus’ vision and act upon that vision. *{If the congregation has a particular vision or mission statement for this, I would simply insert it right here}*)

This sermon is a vision casting sort of sermon, but don’t let it just set this. A vision which is never acted upon and which just sits there is not really a vision. It is a dream perhaps, but just as ephemeral as a dream. This sermon will want to connect the vision to the actual life to which Christ is calling the hearer.

The sermon first wants to stand with Jesus in awe of faith in an unexpected place. One of my missionary friends said that he had to learn the hard way that Jesus had always beat him to the mission field. He might have proclaimed the Gospel for the first time in that place, but Jesus had been there all along and was working good in the lives of the people before they ever heard the message.

Here is a nice centurion, that is a little like walking into a local preschool and discovering that the teacher is a massive African-American man with tattoos and dreadlocks. For most of us, this just doesn’t seem to fit. But in Jesus eyes, the stereotypes and assumptions we bring to every conversation and situation are being thrown out the window. The Centurion, a man who was synonymous with brutality and raw force, becomes Jesus’ model of faith for his Jewish disciples.

Where do we find our models of faith? What do they look like? Do they all have the same color skin as we do? Are you are aware that Athanasius, the architect of the doctrine we call Trinity was known in his own life time as the Black Dwarf? He lived in Africa. We recite his words every time we confess the Nicene Creed. What would happen if a short black man slipped into the pew next to you some Sunday? He has slipped into the pages of our worship. Have we just become too comfortable with a segregated Christianity in which we all head to a church made up of people who look just like me? Jesus is in the business of turning the world upside down. Jesus himself was Middle Eastern man, not a blond Viking or Saxon like my Sunday School art depicted him.

More importantly for us, is it time to confess the barriers to fellowship, worship, and our Church which we have unconsciously erected? Jesus through Luke challenged his first century church to overcome the Jewish/Gentile divide. But he had this in mind already. We read in Solomon’s prayer for the ancient temple that God had inspired him with this vision a millennia before Jesus was born. But that vision is hard to catch and the old

stinker of a sinner clings tightly to us, wanting to retain and make anew the distinctions which Jesus has erased.

We get stressed about transgender bathrooms and matters of sexuality and homosexuality. I am not trying to say that these things are matters of indifference, but if we are so reactionary that we cannot see that God loves them or that God works even in these places, we are missing something. We might find that the homosexual who cares for his neighbor is very gracious. Can we see that?

But simply saying I am sorry for this is hardly the end of the story. This sermon will also want to put the ministry of this congregation into the context of the penitent vow, not trying to earn some favor, but an earnest attempt to make amends. Here you will need to talk about the bridges you are building into your community. Are you operating a preschool? Are you feeding the hungry? Are you serving the elderly? Do you have a new ministry you are starting?

The goal of this is to energize this ministry and service. This is Jesus afoot in our midst, the Holy Spirit blowing among us. He is breaking down the barriers which divide, and he is doing it through us. Within a generation of Luke's writing the Jewish/Gentile conflict had largely subsided inside Christianity. It does work. This is an exciting place to be and serve! You ought to be a part of this, you might catch Jesus vision today and find in some crusty old man, some tattooed young woman, some homeless guy the very faith which Jesus marveled at in the Centurion.

2. It's enough to make me mad! (Epistle – that the Holy Spirit would enkindle a holy passion for the truth and God's people.)

This sermon kicks off a series on Paul's letter to the Galatians and we want to remember that this was an issue of passionate concern. We won't get really deeply into the actual meat of the letter's argument today. That will come in the ensuing weeks as we delve deeply into this letter. Today we simply want to assert that this issue was really, really important to Paul and to us.

How shall we approach the preaching of Paul's passion? We will want to think about this. Passion or zeal can be both negative and positive. We have seen some passionate patriots do terrible things in the name of that passionate patriotism. At the same time, we also see passionate Christians who do amazing things. Look at the passionate care offered by Christians who are feeding the hungry or smuggling bibles into North Korea.

The presidential candidates who are stirring up our electorate this year are often using the language of passion which may not be helpful to us. But the abuse of the language by some does not negate its proper use; indeed, such abuse might demand we use the words properly.

To do that we will need to outline it. You will need to define/describe Grace. I did so under the notes, but to reiterate here it is really a matter of Grace. We will have to explain that briefly but don't get bogged down there. God's love is just not for sale. You cannot buy him with good deeds or proper belief. His love is always a gift, to make it into a bargain, even a phenomenal sale, is to fundamentally change the nature of what God has done. God does not sell us anything. He gives.

We want to focus today on the global picture of where this matter fits into our theology and most importantly into our life, because our life will dictate our theology eventually. We may want to look at some of the unconditional relationships we have, as flawed as they are. We love our family members, we hope, despite their flaws. No one knows my faults as well as my wife. Yet she loves me. I have not earned that, but she gives it.

For us as Lutherans, this is a challenge. We are really good at correcting other errors. But are we as good at seeing God's grace showing up in strange places? We often like our grace safe and sanitized, constrained by denominational and other strictures. But God's giving is utterly beyond my control. He might even give it to a Baptist!

We might be very good at pointing out our own legalism, but how do we point to the gracious action of God in our midst. He still comes and feeds us on the body and blood of Christ even when we are terrible Christians. He doesn't promise to be with us when we are nice, he just promises his presence, regardless of the fact that we have forgotten to pray to him for days and even weeks on end. He never stopped thinking about and loving us.

How will we freshly present Grace briefly to our people? How will we speak of the freedom which Grace provides us without eliciting another yawn from our folks? You might want to use a negative example. A Sabbath elevator in Israel? Waiting for the elevator can be a form of suffering under the law. It is a trivial example in one sense, but it might work. A story will be essential. A developmentally challenged young man once said: "The grace of God is the heart of God with people in it." The love of a developmentally challenged person can be profoundly gracious. Tell a story of your experience of Grace – Paul will tell his own story of conversion and his challenge to Peter in a few verses later.

The preacher will want to sanctify a holy wrath. For some within the parish, this will be an alien concept. Anger is not in and of itself a sin, but what we do in anger often is a sin. That bit of nuance is tough and some see anger as inherently wrong. But this wreaks all sorts of problems in our lives. People who avoid anger often suffer for that. But this is not a psychology sermon and this is not the main point. It does need some mention, however. You should expect some to have the idea in their heads that anger is always wrong.

What we really want to focus on is that this revelation of God's grace to us is important, so important that Paul and we would get angry about it, we would fight for it. Here the Lutheran preacher has the perfect example in Dr. Luther himself. Read his preface to Galatians or Romans if nothing else. Read his own words describing what it meant for him to discover grace in his preface to his collected works toward the end of his life. In fact, you can read just about anything by him. The Smalcald Articles are a great example of the priority he put on the doctrine of Grace, even if he was sick when he wrote them and was therefore a little crotchety. You might want to read Luther's words on baptism here and why we baptize an infant. It is all about God's gracious love – not our assent or acceptance.

Paul's letter suggests that this was at the very center of his faith. He dealt with all sorts of problems in his ministry, some of them are written down in his letters, but only this one is so passionate. Why? It is surely because of the subject matter here. They are attacking him, but more importantly the opponents, the Judaizers are attacking the very heart of the gospel. If God's love is for sale, it is no longer God's love, but something else.

This has real implications for all of us, implications which mesh with the other readings today, coincidentally. God loves the Romans just as much as he loves us. God loves the drug addict, the homosexual, the Sunday morning golfer, and the wife beater just as much as he loves us. God's gracious love means that we don't see anyone like we used to. Paul says this in so many words in II Corinthians 5:16ff. He sees no one this way anymore. How can we? Do we see the centurion or do we join Jesus in seeing the man of great faith. Do we see only the other, when Jesus sees a child? Do we act on what we see or on what Jesus sees? Paul admits he used to view everyone from an old creation sort of view, but does so no longer, and he proved that with a life passionately lived in the gracious love of Christ. His passion for this grace of God empowered his life of missionary service to Christ. This old way may need to be explained and contrasted. The old way of viewing folks is through the lens of competition and it often comes across as judgment. That same passionate view of the world for which Jesus died empowers his Christian people today as well, including you, including your hearer.

Paul's letter to the Galatians frees us from the old ways of thinking which are bound to the ways of the world – and it will free us to a new way of life.