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Quinquagesima (Ephiphany 8) One Year Series 2017

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Quinquagesima Sunday Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 26, 2017

The season of Epiphany draws to a close and the readings are getting us ready for the great paschal feast. We will start with the long days of Lenten fasting, but those are followed with the greater days of Easter joy and feasting.

Today the readings call us to that moment of quiet before something mighty happens. The Gospel records Jesus' prediction of his own death and resurrection, but the disciples don't get it. A blind man, a beggar beside the road, he gets who Jesus is. Samuel misidentifies a new king. Paul speaks of the deep mystery of love, God's love which will be made manifest most clearly in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayers and having set us free from the bonds of our sins deliver us from every evil; through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Readings

I Samuel 16:1-13

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."² And Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.'³ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you."⁴ Samuel did what the LORD commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, "Do you come peaceably?"⁵ And he said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice." And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before him."

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."¹⁰ And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these."¹¹ Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here."¹² And he sent and brought him in. Now he was

ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.”¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.

The transition from the period of the Judges to the monarchy in Israel presents the preacher with numerous homiletical opportunities for the history records our Lord’s interactions with his sinful people in some really interesting ways. Reading back a few chapters is helpful here. The people had wanted a king like their neighbors. Samuel had told them this was a bad idea. The people persisted and God finally relented, pointing Samuel to anoint Saul of the tribe of Benjamin. But Saul did not work out. He offered sacrifices which he was not supposed to sacrifice and did some other things which eventually meant that God withdrew his favor from Saul and his sons. Saul would not found a dynasty, but his reign would die with him and be passed to another whom God chose. Today we get the story of that second choosing, David, who went on to become the greatest of all the kings of Israel.

Several points of interest present themselves here:

- 1. God did not want the people to be ruled by a king, he is pretty clear about that. It was God’s intent that He would be their king.*
- 2. But God relented. That in itself is very interesting. In the face of the people’s rebellion and refusal to listen to his appointed prophet, Samuel, God went along with the request of the people.*
- 3. Saul appears to have had the blessing of God. He was initially quite faithful, humble, and successful.*
- 4. When that changed, God does not say, “I told you so!” and renounce the very idea of a monarchy.*
- 5. Here we read of God telling Samuel to get off his butt and get going on anointing the next king. Stop grieving about the failure of Saul.*
- 6. And what a king he is, David, ancestor of Jesus, writer of psalms, perhaps the most important character in the OT after Moses.*

What I find so interesting here is that David is not merely plan B, but he is even further down on that list of God’s preferences: he is plan C or D! God did not want a king and when he went for a king, he wanted Saul. But this is not entirely a surprise, even Samuel was something of a plan B who as a child was called upon to summon the priest Eli to repentance. And Samuel’s own sons had been a terrible disappointment.

The preacher may want to focus his attention here. First of all God is disappointed and disappointable. Logic would suggest that an almighty being such as God cannot possibly be disappointed. His power cannot fail him. But he is clearly disappointed on at least two occasions in this whole story. That tells us something about God in his dealings with sinners. Things are

not always turning out the way he wanted or commanded his people. But even when disappointed, what does not fail is God's blessing. For though David was not God's first or second choice, what a king he turned out to be! And through this apparent disappointment, God managed to work out the promised blessing which he had made to Adam and Eve in the garden and which he re-iterated to Abraham and the rest of the Patriarchs: a blessing for all mankind, a son, who would crush Satan's head and break the power of death and sin.

Several other points in the narrative here are interesting. God sends Samuel out but under cover of a sacrifice event. He makes the sacrifice, it is no lie that Samuel has come to Bethlehem to make a sacrifice, but that is not really why he is there. He is there to anoint a king. The subterfuge is necessary. What Samuel is about to do is treason, high treason. Saul, if he gets wind of this, will not be happy. In fact, he would be justified in killing Samuel, Jesse, and everyone else involved.

The elders of Bethlehem are terrified when Samuel shows up. Do they suspect what he is there to do? Do they just wonder what the mighty Samuel is up to? Why are they so afraid?

Samuel appears not to be entirely on God's wavelength here. He thinks Eliab the one. But God does not see as Samuel sees. Finally, after what must have been a very uncomfortable parade of sons before the fearsome prophet, they drag little David from the flocks. Samuel jumps up and, at God's urging, commits his act of treason. And then promptly leaves town for his home base in Ramah. Is he afraid of what he has done? We don't actually hear about the sacrifice, but presumably that was done earlier.

Sermon Idea: Fill your horn with oil, and go. (That the disappointed and grieving congregation would hear and believe God's Word of promise to them, rise up, and engage in ministry anew.)

This sermon is really geared for the congregation which is struggling and feeling a little like a failure. Perhaps the new ministry venture has not panned out. Perhaps the latest treasure's report was dire. Perhaps some members have left in conflict. Perhaps.... You can probably fill in something here.

Samuel was grieving for Saul's failure as a king. God, however, does not have much time for such self-pity. He tells old Samuel to get up, fill his horn with oil, and head out. God has plans. Saul's and Samuel's failures will not stand in the way of his blessing. Like water, when you think you have sealed up every crack, usually finds its way into the thing you are trying to keep dry, God's blessing is relentless. If they won't let it happen this way, that way, or another way, he will find a way to make this work.

The preacher will want to proclaim that God's words to Samuel are words to us too. God's kingdom, his love, his blessing, his resurrection, and forgiveness will not long be set back by our failures or the failures of anyone else. When doors close, he opens others.

Now the preacher also wants to be realistic. Samuel's mission was dangerous. The fear was palpable throughout this text. What Samuel was doing was treasonous.

It should also be proclaimed that God regularly does not do what we expect in these sorts of situations. Samuel looked and Eliab and thought he had found the one, but God did not think so. He opted for the least likely, the little sunburned kid who was out tending the sheep.

But that said, God had great blessing in mind. David was filled with the Spirit of God that day and, even though he did not look the part, grew into the greatest king of all until Jesus comes along and God himself takes back up that royal role he had always intended.

The result of this sermon should be that the congregant has a hopeful expectation. Yes, things have not turned out as we planned, but that does not mean God has abandoned us. We don't need to find something good in what has happened, we don't need to see how this is really for the best. God simply tells Samuel to go out and do what he did last time, anoint a king. But this time it really works. God founded this ministry to be a place in which the Gospel was proclaimed and sinners heard the forgiveness which they desperately need. He has not lost sight of that vision. He wants this to succeed.

Or Isaiah 35:3-7

¹*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;*

²*it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.*

³Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ *And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.*

⁹ *No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

¹⁰ *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

This is a great text. It is simply filled with Gospel. After the last two weeks of the Gospel lessons being a little short on good news, this is a welcome relief.

Say to those who have an anxious heart. Isaiah's folks had plenty to be anxious about. The world of David was long gone, and now emperors with strange sounding names were afoot. Tiglath-Pileser and Sennacherib and others would rampage up and down the land of Judah in the days of Isaiah. Weakened by internal rot and cut off from their financial base in the Galilee, the once mighty armies of David had withered to a wholly ineffectual force. They were powerless to stop all this. All they could do was hole up in a few well-fortified cities, but even they all fell to Sennacherib but Jerusalem, and that was saved by an act of God.

You can read the frightening story of Sennacherib's invasion in the very next chapters of Isaiah, 36-37.

Isaiah sees a day when the current order will be stood on its head. Isaiah's audience felt powerless before the super-powers who were fighting for control of Palestine at the time. They had gotten the short end of the stick and God showing up with vengeance would have been welcome because they had a long list of grievances against those occupying powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. But what applies not only to the political fortunes of the nation of Israel, but the whole sinful order of things. For the world itself was subjected to bondage says Paul (Romans 8). In the day of deliverance, according to Isaiah, the blind will see and the deaf will hear. The mute shall sing for joy. There will be water in the desert and the dry hills where the jackals hang out will be marshlands filled with reeds and rushes.

But this upside down vengeance of God applies not only to the political, but also to the physical. God wreaks his vengeance on the blindness, deafness, and physical deformities which keep his

people from walking. God declares war on cancer and ALS and MS and the list of afflictions which weigh his people down and mercilessly oppress us. Of course that runs to the spiritual and emotional as well. The Demons also flee at Jesus word and the darkneses of mental illness and depression are dispersed in his light.

This is much more than universal healthcare coverage. This might even exceed the goals of compassionate conservatism, a thousand points of light, a Great Society, and the New Deal all put together. When the collect above asks God that we might pray according to his will, is this what it means? Is it that our prayers for Aunt Matilda's cancer and grandpa Jack's heart disease are simply too small. We would be happy to if they could just be the little old people who live out their days with a touch of arthritis and a bum knee, weakened by age and with minds filled with memories they would sometimes rather forget. God has something much grander in mind for them than the arresting of a single process in their body which will finally kill them. He has a whole new creation in mind, a body which does not fail, a mind which is healthy, and a spirit which rejoices in God as Savior every moment.

Are our prayers simply too small? Does God want to do so much for us that we have a hard time even imagining it?

So we need to come back to the first verses of this reading. God comes with vengeance, with a recompense, a pay back, which belongs to him. He comes to save us, to rescue us. Those two thoughts side by side are really the preacher's task. God comes to deal with sin and sinners, he comes to save us. The old man cannot but be terrified at the thought of God coming to finally deal with sin and sinners. He denies it, he hates it, and he scurries into the darkness hoping to avoid being seen.

But the new man, the redeemed man, the man who rose up from the waters of baptism loves this word that God is coming with vengeance and recompense. He will be freed of the sin which clings so tightly and which encumbers us so much. He hears the "God comes to save us." and rejoices in that promise.

The preacher of this text needs to be aware that both men are sitting before you on Sunday. The old sinners are there, they will hear this and be terrified by its implications. Their fear has to be addressed, not necessarily assuaged, but addressed. That fear will likely be expressed as anger, perhaps anger at you. The coming of God into the present reality is a fearful thing for every human being. I really believe that much of the conflict we see in our churches is really an expression of fear, a fear that is driven out not by argument or resources, but by the perfect love of Jesus.

On the other hand, that congregation also includes the redeemed and regenerate men and women whom God has raised to new life. This expectation of God spurs them to lives of virtue, service, compassion, and love. But we keep talking to them as if they are only the old men and women of the old Adam sitting there, we will stunt that regenerate life. This proclamation unleashes all sorts of things in a person, positive but sometimes wild and uncontrollable things.

The Spirit does blow where he wants to blow. That person too needs to be addressed, his passion for God encouraged and nurtured, her service and gifts held up as a good thing, a Godly thing.

The preacher today has a tough job with this. If I say “take heart, God is coming.” Can I really say that and not include my own self in that? In other words, if someone comes to us in need, can we talk about a future God and not admit that in my own hands and my own lips and in my own life God is working to solve this problem? That is frightening. God does not ask for and work with my excess, he does not take my advice, he takes me, he puts all me to the task. Remember the disciples and the loaves at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus did not ask for what they had left over, but took it all.

Is Isaiah really speaking to a community today who doesn't think that God has any vengeance? Do we have a hard time saying that God hates and fights against cancer or some other disease when we see so many of our friends and loved ones succumbing to it? Do we really think that God does have vengeance against the problems I face? That he might just come and show up on my side and fight for me against some foe?

Psalm 89:18-20

- ¹⁸ For our shield belongs to the LORD,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.
- ¹⁹ Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said:
“I have granted help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
- ²⁰ I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him,
- ²¹ so that my hand shall be established with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
- ²² The enemy shall not outwit him;
the wicked shall not humble him.
- ²³ I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
- ²⁴ My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
- ²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
- ²⁶ He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’
- ²⁷ And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
- ²⁸ My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,

and my covenant will stand firm for him.
²⁹ I will establish his offspring forever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.

Or Psalm 146

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

³ Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

⁴ When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.

Praise the LORD!

I Corinthians 13:1-13 *I backed the reading up a few verses into chapter 12 to give us some context.*

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are

all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Luther

1. Paul's purpose in this chapter is to silence and humble haughty Christians, particularly teachers and preachers. The Gospel gives much knowledge of God and of Christ, and conveys many wonderful gifts, as Paul recounts in Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 12. He tells us some have the gift of speaking, some of teaching, some of Scripture exposition; others of ruling; and so on. With Christians are great riches of spiritual knowledge, great treasures in the way of spiritual gifts. Manifest to all is the meaning of God, Christ, conscience, the present and the future life and similar things. But here are to be found few indeed who make the right use of such gifts and knowledge; who humble themselves to serve others, according to the dictates of love. Each seeks his own honor and advantage, desiring to gain preferment and precedence over others.

4...As a clock or bell has not power to hear its own sound, and does not derive benefit from its stroke, so the preacher who lacks love cannot himself understand anything he says, nor does he thereby improve his standing before God. He has much knowledge, indeed, but because he fails to place it in the service of love, it is the better he were dumb or devoid of eloquence, if he but teach in love and meekness, than to speak as an angel while seeking but his own interests.

7. We hold, and unquestionably it is true, that it is faith which justifies and cleanses. Rom. 1:17, 10:10; Acts 15:9. But if justifies and purities, love must be present. The Spirit cannot but impart

love together with faith. In fact, where true faith is, the Holy Spirit dwells; and where the Holy Spirit is, there must be love and every excellence. How is it, then, Paul speaks as if faith without love were possible? We reply, this one text cannot be understood as subverting and militating against all those texts which ascribe justification to faith alone. Even the sophists have not attributed justification to love, nor is this possible, for love is an effect, or fruit, of the Spirit, who is received through faith.

Is this passage Law or Gospel?

It is Law – Paul describes a terrible standard for love which I cannot meet. I am not always patient, kind, etc. If I hold myself up to this I cannot but be a failure.

It is Gospel – He fully knows me, loves me despite me. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, he is not arrogant and rude, he did not insist on his own way that Good Friday but submitted to the cruelties of the mob. He loves all truth, believes all things about me, hopes all things for me, endures all things for me.

Until I am clothed in him, crushed by this description of love, this is a terrible passage, but when I am thus crushed, and he becomes the lover, I am restored. This is a marvelous passage for preaching because in one simple word it conveys both Law and Gospel in a single form.

Paul today is speaking of the most excellent way, the way which is the greatest of the three great virtues/gifts of the Spirit, the thing in this life that is a little bit of heaven itself: Love.

I am regularly struck by Paul's word that Love endures. We cannot bring anything else to heaven, not our wealth, not our fame, not our knowledge, nothing. Not even our faith nor our hope go to heaven with us, despite the blessings they are to us. In heaven there will be no need for such things. But of all that we experience on earth, love comes along to heaven. We take our love to heaven. In heaven not only will it belong there, but it will see its fullest flower and beauty there. Heaven will be love.

That means that right here, in the love I show to my fellow human being, perhaps with a gift to some refugee relief fund or with a kind word to a young person or even my spouse, I am experiencing a little bit of heaven right here. That is a remarkable claim to make and one which we too often fail to make. We are in heaven right now, in a sense, in that we can participate in it. We might be more comfortable with that sort of language in the discussion of the Lord's Supper, but Paul really makes the argument that this is also experienced in the Christian community of love.

The real question might be whether we care to think and feel and act this way. Do we ask "How shall I love this person?" when we are in conflict? Or do we ask another question along the lines of "How shall I discipline/get even with/or even tolerate this other person?" The truth be told, I often have to be encouraged and even coerced into some of my acts of love. Even something as

simple as worship can become a burden which I endure instead of a moment in which God tells me he loves me and I love him, in which I dine at his table, a beloved member of his family.

I truly believe that we have allowed church, worship, and our Christianity to be defined by an entire ethos which is sometimes directly contrary to our Scripture and faith. An act of loving a fellow human being is not some virtue to which I need to be exhorted, but it is an inbreaking of heaven into this mundane and otherwise dismal world. I don't need to be exhorted to that, indeed I need it, I want it, I crave it.

Then why is it so hard for me to see this and act on it? Of course, here we might want to remember our frailty and the many dangers and dangerous ones through whom we walk in this life. That is exactly what our foe wants. But I also would see here simply a misbelief. We misbelieve what God has said about our lives. We act as if we need to make church into something which is marketable and then people will come. It may be true that they will come, but is that God building the Church or is that me? Is that God making the prophet or am I telling Jeremiah to lighten up on the first part of his message and emphasize the second so that folks will come.

Paul proclaims a Christian life of service, patience, humility, gentleness, and much more but he does not try to sell this to me. He describes it as something in which God lives and which participates in heaven itself. It is the one thing from this life which transcends death. I can do right here what I will do in heaven, I can love.

Of course the preacher will need to work a little on the definition of love. The world has pretty well got this bollixed up with emotion. In biblical terms, love is much more an action, a word said, a deed done. It is not a thing of the heart, at least that is not what the Bible describes as love. It is a thing of hands, lips, feet, and life.

What is more, Paul describes love not as an act of the will, but an act of God. He gives me a preternatural love in the gift of the Spirit, and this is a love which is given to all whose heads are wet with the water of baptism. It is this love, not something I can gin up that is never rude, anxious, arrogant, or proud. This gifted love is eternal, gentle, kind, and patient. It endures and perseveres through all things.

Paul puts this love into its context. Our human nature likes the jazzy gifts like speaking in tongues. We tend to find these acts of love boring, because we don't see the miracle for what it is. But Paul recognizes that all the other gifts bow before this one, they are all subject to its rule. Prophecy or wisdom, knowledge or power, without love are but empty, even worse, they a distraction from the real point of this life. Even faith and hope are relegated to a second position after love.

This is hard, and Paul admits this. Right now our vision is skewed, darkened, as though we are looking in a poor mirror or through a bad glass, or perhaps in a more modern image, as if our reception was bad, like when the cable is having a problem and the image on our screen simply dissolves into a bunch of randomly colored squares. We can see something but often can hardly

make out what it is. My lust for power, my degradation in sin, the corruption of death, they cling to me and distract me, they obscure my vision. I need God to clear things up for me and I look forward to the day when all this will be crystal clear. Right now it is not, and I must humbly quest for greater clarity, never thinking I have it all to myself, but realize that my "truth" is always filtered through such a lens.

Recently a fellow named Rob Bell wrote a text entitled "Love Wins." He uses the concluding section of this passage to offer up the possibility that God may have love for folks whom we cannot imagine. He desires that all be saved. I have profound points of disagreement with Bell, I think he does not pay attention to the Scripture as he ought, but at the same time, he does make some good points about being too sure about who is getting into heaven and who is not. Heaven belongs to God, he can open those doors for whomever he sees fit. I only know this mystery in part.

Luke 18:31-43

³¹ And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." ³⁴ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

³⁵ As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶ And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. ³⁷ They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." ³⁸ And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ³⁹ And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁰ And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, ⁴¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." ⁴² And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." ⁴³ And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

Luther

12. This the way with God's Word. I preach the forgiveness of sins and absolve you by Christ's command. You hear the Word, you hear that you are released from sin, and yet you do not feel that God and his angels are laughing with you, that they are your friends.

13. Accordingly, when now you are baptized, you still have the same flesh and skin after baptism as before. Do baptism and absolution, then amount to nothing? Oh, no! That's why you should learn to say, God has baptized me, and God has absolved me and released me from my sins through His Word. Therefore, I believe firmly, though I don't see and feel right away that God' is smiling at me and calling me his son, that Christ, my Lord, is called my brother, and that the dear angels are rejoicing with particular happiness over me. This, I say, is what I believe; whether I see or feel it, I don't doubt it. It doesn't matter whether or not the pope believes; I do, because God does not deceive me in his Word.

15. That is the first thing we which we are to learn from today's Gospel, namely to believe God's Word with our whole heart and mind, without doubting...A Christian heart not only hears the Word of God concerning the forgiveness of sins but also firmly believes it, never doubting, even though it does not feel or see it. Such faith and heart God's Word seeks for. When we have firmly believed that and when God besides brings it to the light of day in actual fulfillment, then we shall say, Oh, happy me, that I believed! But the pope, his cardinals, Erasmus, and others, who have not believed, will see, marvel, and say, Who would have thought it? Oh, murder, that we did not believe!

16. This, then is the lesson, that we should not trip over God's Word, even though it sounds extraordinarily incredible, even impossible, but firmly take our stand: God has spoken it; it must happen. One should not ask where it is possible but only be concerned about God having said it.

17. The second part of today's Gospel treats of the blind man. The Evangelism is teaching us the true beggar's art of how we should learn to gambol happily before God, be unashamed, and come near. For whoever is timid lets himself be easily shunted aside and has no use for begging. It happened to me once, as a young student, as on New Year's I was begging. With a friend I came to a house and we sang for a bratwurst. The master of the house stormed out of the door with a shout, saying, Where are you rascals? and brought out two bratwurst. But my friend and I ran pell-mell from the place thinking that he wanted to beat us, until the master of the house called after us to come and get the bratwurst. People don't take to begging. But we have to doff our bashful hats and realize that the Lord God wants to have it so, that we happily and come near. For it is his desire and honor to be generous and it pleases him when people look to him for every good thing. Therefore, we should be as importunate as he himself wishes us to be. For if a man is going to wait until he's worthy for God to give him something, he's never going to ask for anything. Therefore, it's best that we take off our bashful hats, open our mouths pronto, and say, Lord, I am in great straits of body and soul, and I need your help and comfort. Again, I have need of this or that, and for that reason I beseech you graciously to grant it to me.

18. The monks and beggars in the streets and lanes know this art well. But the people don't like it; they are fed up with such capers and send the beggars shipping with harsh words. But our Lord God holds dear such eager beavers who keep on persistently, reusing to be sent away, as in the case of the blind man, who dearly wanted to have seeing eyes. That is why, when he heard the great commotion, he straightway asked what it was. When he heard that it was because of Jesus, he began to cry, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy upon me." Those that were in the forefront threatened him, shushing him up. But he paid no attention; the more they warned him, the more insistently he cried.

19. Here was a real alms seeker and genuine beggar, the kind our Lord God covets. We should note this example well and also come before our Lord Christ petitioning, O Lord! I am a poor sinner; grant that your kingdom come to me; forgive me my sin; help me. ... Whoever begs like this, unashamedly, is doing right, and our Lord God loves it. For he is not sensitive as people are. Such clamoring makes us tired, disinclined, and turned off. To him, however, it is a great honor that people think of him as tenderhearted, not giving up, but saying, Lord, all glory and worship be thine, all honor and praise. I beg of you, dear Lord, do not look upon me as unworthy but as one who needs your help.

20. Such bold petitioning, which holds on firmly and is not scared off, pleases God well, as we see in the case of the blind man. As soon as he begins to petition, Christ summons him to himself and moves

everyone out of the way. The blind man does not feel ashamed but allows himself to be led to him. Thereupon Jesus asks him directly, "What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?" ...The blind man does not hesitate at all but says, "Lord, that I may receive my sight." And the Lord answers, "Yes, receive your sight." That's praying boldly, yet courteously. We should learn from the blind man so to bring our petitions and our needs to Christ, confidently trusting that he will hear us and grant our petitions.

22. Prayer, therefore, serves to hasten something which otherwise would have been delayed longer. This example teaches us that we should be bold, clamoring beggars who do not grow weary but say, Lord, it is true, I am a poor, unworthy sinner, indeed; but nonetheless I have need of this and that. I have wife and child, and have nothing to feed them; Lord, give us food. I am desperate, and need your comfort, Lord, help me. It is not a question of whether I am a saint; only one thing matters, that I am in need, and that you gladly give what is needful for my body and soul.

23. When you pray in this manner, and firmly, then he will certainly say to you, as to the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you? Receive your sight! Your faith has helped you." To pray and not to believe is to mock God. But faith rests alone on this: That God for the sake of Christ, his Son and our Lord, hears, shields, rescues, and saves. May our dear Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus, help us! Amen.

Sermon Idea: Lord, have mercy! (That the hearer would get in line with the blind, leprous, and beggarly hordes who have sought and received Christ's blessed mercy and help.)

Did the words of the beggar in today's reading sound familiar? In Greek they would be "Kyrie, Eleison!" If you are a user of the liturgy, they are the words you sing at the beginning of the service of the Word when we come to this place. Lord, Have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.

They are familiar to us, probably so familiar that we just sing/say them without a great deal of thought. Many a preacher is making sure that he has the book open to the right Collect when he should be singing them with intention and devotion. These little words are very important.

Today we hear a blind beggar utter them. Luther's words above give interesting insight into these words of the beggar. God loves to hear them. He is not ever worn out by them. And when we sing them here and when our desperate prayers for help mirror this content, God delights. Jesus had much to do. He was on the way to Jerusalem, to trial, death, and resurrection. There was a great deal on his mind, but the prayer of this beggar brought all that to a halt. Lord, have mercy! And all that was pushed to the side, the people were silenced, there was a prayer and Jesus was listening to him and to him alone.

Next week we will begin the long season of Lent and this Sunday is supposed to get us ready for that. One of the hallmarks of the Lententide is prayer. Let this beggar and prayer inspire and inform us. When we pray we lose all pretense to being worthy. Mercy is not what is shown to the strong, the innocent, or the worthy. Mercy is shown to the guilty, the weak, the helpless, the downtrodden.

But that doesn't discourage us, because God has mercy in abundance. We grow weary of the beggars who want our spare change, but never grows weary of these words. We grow weary sometimes of singing them in Church, but God never grows weary of us singing them, even when our minds wander. God wants us in that lineup of beggars, lepers, and other desperate folk who have uttered these words throughout the millennia. He wants us there because he always wants to show that mercy.

The preacher will do well to have an illustration or two of prayer answered, of folks whom God has helped.