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Sexagesima (Epiphany 7) One Year Year Series 2017

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Sexagesima Sunday - February 19, 2017

1 Year Series

Collect of the Day

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in You, mercifully grant that by Your power we may be defended against all adversity; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is the strength of all who trust in him. Of course that implies that I am weak. But that is true. I really like the use of the verb trust here, much better than believe for our people, most of whom hold that belief is a weak form of knowledge, but that is just not so. We trust a bridge to hold us up when we walk across. We trust the guy who is coming toward us on a two lane road to stay in his lane. We trust the person who writes us a check. Or we don't trust and demand cash, swerve off the road, refuse to get on the bridge, etc. Most of the time we trust a great deal and we often trust in some of the most important things of our lives.

Power is such a complicated thing in our lives. We are so used to those in power being corrupted by it. It is hard for us to hear of God's power without projecting some of that experience into our image of God. But human politicians, tycoons, and other possessors of power are corrupted by it, but God is not. The preacher will want to keep that in mind. The connection within the collect of power and trust will make it difficult for some people to hear it.

We trust in God that he will use his power for us mercifully. That entails him defending us against all adversity. I wonder what our people consider to be the adversity from which they need to be defended. Do they turn to the problems of this life which afflict all humanity? Do they start with the economic, physical, mental, job-related, or family adversities? Do they think of the more spiritual things, the devil who loathes them, the grave which welcomes them or a loved one into its cold clammy embrace, or the moral turpitude which infects them and leaves them listless and hopeless? People in places where the weather seems haywire, or whose homes have been decimated by tornado or something like that are probably looking for protection from another sort of adversity. Terrorism probably does not grip us to the same extent, but people seeking refuge in the United States may well be speaking of another sort of adversity.

Really it is all these adversities against which God protects and defends us. But as I noted above, I wonder if people are really aware that their greatest danger comes from God himself. The sharpest Law really tells me that God is my greatest enemy. Do they get it that in the cross God was interposing himself between himself and us, for our salvation and rescue? In this sense the traditional Trinitarian conclusion of these prayers is a constant reminder of what God has done. The only way we have understood the Trinity is through the revelation which happens in the act of salvation. I only can differentiate between the persons of the Trinity when I see what they have done in the divine effort to save me.

Readings

Isaiah 55:10-13 *This passage needs the rest of the chapter to be heard in its richness.*

55 *“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;*

*and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.*

² *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

³ *Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.*

⁴ *Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.*

⁵ *Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.*

⁶ *“Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;*

⁷ *let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

⁸ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.*

⁹ *For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

¹¹ *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,*

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹²“For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

This reading appears in the three year lectionary in year A, proper 10. Here are the lightly edited notes from the last time I treated this.

This chapter of Isaiah is iconic and belongs on the frequent re-reading list of every Christian. God's exhortation to the people to come and buy without money and the imagery of the rain returning to God having done its job as the Word of God is famous and the artistry of this passage makes for a complete picture here. Our text comes at the end of this passage and really must be seen as a culmination of that which has gone before, so perhaps a little outline is in order here.

Vss 1-2 The Exhortation - The people are exhorted to come and buy food without cost. The meal, however, is not the calories of a dinner, but the teaching of the prophet/God.

Vss 3-5 The Covenant with David – God will make a new covenant like that made with David. David was a sign and a leader among the nations, now the people will be such a sign and leader. A nation they did not know shall stream to them. (Are you thinking the gentiles who came Christianity too?)

Vss 6-9 The Call to Repent – This is the substance of the teaching. The people are called to forsake their sinful ways and return to the Lord. The promise is that God's ways are not their ways. He does not bear grudges and seek vengeance upon them, but he forgives and restores and blesses. The mercy of God is not the mercy of men which is calculating and self-seeking. This is pure mercy, higher mercy. This is the covenant with David, who sinned egregiously with David; yet, David was always precious to God. It was a covenant of God's grace.

Vss 10-11 The sufficiency of God's Word of Promise – (this is our text) The Word of God is sure. It gets things done, just as the rain which falls to the earth waters and replenishes the creation before it returns to the clouds in the sky. (This is pretty good biology and hydrology here.) We don't need more than this Word for our assurance.

Vss 12-13 The Effects of this Covenant mercifully made with sinful people through this efficacious Word – The exiled people shall return and the whole creation will be changed. The mountains and hills will sing, the trees will clap their hands. The thorns and the briers shall be transformed into the useful cedar and the beautiful myrtle.

The real question is what is meant by the “it” in the second to the last line. “It shall make a name for the Lord.” Is this referring to the whole series of events that leads to the return of the people? Is “it” referring to the Word? Is “it” referring to the covenant? In our prior discussions of this text we rather thought it was the Word, which was the prior “it” in the text. But if so, what is the name that the Word makes? Is that word the incarnate Word we name Jesus? Is that Word the Word which intersects my life in water and bread and wine?

The editors of the pericope system have obviously chosen this to refer to the written word and one could certainly use these readings to preach a sermon on the Bible and God’s Word. You will have to judge the merits of that sermon and how much your folks need to hear that message. My sense is that Lutherans have digested that message well and it will simply be preaching to the choir. I am reading all these in light of the Gospel, however, and as I indicated earlier finding in them a message of God’s kingdom and His work within this world and especially within my life. God is claiming ownership of some very important things here. He and His Word accomplish the feeding and saving, the nurturing and the transforming. Is it our best work to get out of the way of his Word and let it happen?

How does one point the people to the work of that Word as we preach to them?

- 1. It could be eschatological. The hills will rejoice and the forests clap their hands when Jesus returns. Then the blessings will be seen. But does that really engender the hope for which we are aiming today? Does that really satisfy the member of our congregation that is grieving because this parish is struggling, perhaps dying?*
- 2. We could enlarge the scope – could we point to some connection to the thriving church outside of our own walls? Perhaps we started a mission on the outskirts of town. Perhaps the missionary we sponsored a few years ago is engaged in a thriving ministry in Hong Kong or in South America. Remember that 100,000 new Christians are made every day.*
- 3. Are the hills and the mountains, the forests and the rest of creation actually engaged in worship? Are we seeing this today? The silver in the chalice, the flax in the linen, the wood of the pews and the materials that make up the brick can be seen as the elements of God given a chance to participate in worship right here today. We often only see the people our physical eyes can notice and forget that we are worshipping with angels and arch angels and all the saints. The whole creation in this building which is dedicated to God is engaged in worship. Yes, communities ebb and flow. This may be an ebbing moment for this corner of the kingdom we call (Trinity, Peace, St. John, etc) but that does not mean that the kingdom is not here nor that it has somehow died with us.*

We wondered what was the success for which God sent out that Word? What is the mission which it accomplishes? The very next verse seems to be the answer to that: Joy. How often don't we crabably go about the sacred ministry of God's people? How often do we actually celebrate the joy of forgiveness? It is a very joyful thing to do. Do we smile when we pronounce the absolution?

Sermon Idea: We go out in joy (OT – That the Spirit of God would fill the hearer's whole life with joy at his covenantal love given in Christ Jesus.)

This sermon notices that the word of God has an effect on us and Isaiah identifies that effect as joy. Too often we grump about our ministry, forgetting that we have one of the best jobs in the whole world. We get to forgive sins. The police, the judges, the rest of the world really, they have to deal with sin in the only way that they know, they work some approximation of justice, but never really solving the problem. At best they can balance a few scales in this life. The doctors and nurses fight a losing battle against death. The business people try to make enough money to do what? Will they be able to buy that which they need most? Not likely. But we get to forgive sinners. Preachers never lose a parishioner to death, we just transfer them to the Church Triumphant.

All this is to say that God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts. He forgives. It is the amazing covenant he made adulterous, murderous, scheming David. Amazingly, he gives us to do that for him. The preacher will want to have John 20, Matthew 18, and other places at the ready. We are forgivers of sins, that is a really joyful thing to do. It is time to smile!

The preacher will want to describe this covenantal love given to David. Remember, he was a bit of a stinker sometimes. He committed adultery, murdered to cover it up, lied, and along the way broke just about every commandment. David was not beloved because he got his life right. But he was loved by God. That is the gift which Isaiah notes for us today. The fact is, we expect pardon and forgiveness from God, we expect it because he promised it.

Isaiah also speaks of the fact that this is miraculous. The preacher may also want to have the little parable of the seed that grows automatically (Mark 4) at the ready. Isaiah notices that the word falls on the world like rain, causing the seeds to sprout and the food to grow. God's Word, Jesus and Jesus' ambassadors (II Corinthians 4-5), causes things to happen. We don't, the Word does. This takes a huge responsibility off the hearer who is not also created as a conduit of that Word. We too easily take that responsibility to ourselves, imagining that people respond to us and to our program or our skill. It is the Word, not me. That doesn't mean is slouch along as if I have some license to be sloppy about this. I want to do well because I am handling holy things, I want to do well because this is Jesus and I love him. But I don't do well because he is counting on my skills.

But the preacher cannot lose sight of the theme of this sermon. God has given us a reason for Joy. We get to forgive sins, really do that! Heavenly bells ring when we forgive a sinner. Here

the many party parables of the NT might be helpful. Have you noticed how often Jesus tells parables that involve a party? All of Luke 15's parables end with a party. The king throws a party for the wedding of his son, the man who finds the treasure or the pearl of great price goes in joy. There are more. God seems to like to have a good time and while any excuse for a party is a good thing, God's excuse for a party is when we forgive someone. That Word is never wasted. It always comes back to God having done what he intends for it to do.

Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O LORD of hosts!

² My soul longs, yes, faints

for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home,

and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young,

at your altars, O LORD of hosts,

my King and my God.

⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house,

ever singing your praise! Selah

⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶ As they go through the Valley of Baca

they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷ They go from strength to strength;

each one appears before God in Zion.

⁸ O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;

give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah

⁹ Behold our shield, O God;

look on the face of your anointed!

¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better

than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God

than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;

the LORD bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
¹² O LORD of hosts,
blessed is the one who trusts in you!

II Corinthians 11:19-12:9

¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Luther

2. Paul was little concerned that he personally should be lightly esteemed and the false apostles highly honored, but he could not bear to have the Gospel perish in that way and his Corinthian converts deduced. Therefore he exerts himself to the utmost, at the risk of becoming a fool by his boasting. But he, in his strong spiritual wisdom, glories in a masterly manner, and skillfully puts to shame the boasts of the false apostles.

First he shows them he can glory in the very things wherein they glory, and in even more. At the same time he declares himself a fool for glorying. He might have said: "Foolish, indeed, are they, and boorish creatures, who glory in themselves. They should feel shame to the very depth of their heart. NO true, sane man boasts of what he is. The wicked and the frivolous do that." But the apostle's attack is not quite so severe and harsh. He addresses them civilly and delicately in that he makes himself appear a fool, as if to say: "Look! How becoming self-praise is in myself, although I have grounds for my glorying. But how much more disgraceful for you to boast when perhaps none of your claims are true." So Paul wears the foolscap, that those coarse fools might have a mirror in which to behold their real selves. This is wisely making foolishness ministry to the good of the neighbor and to the honor of the Gospel. To the just, even folly is wisdom, just as all things are pure and holy unto him.

3. Second, Paul deals the false apostles a stout blow when he shows them to be ignorant of the grounds in which a true Christian seeks his glory. For, as he teaches them, a Christian glories in the things whereof other men are ashamed – in the cross and in his sufferings. This is the true art of glorying. To this he refers when he says (Gal. 6:14) "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." But the false apostles are careful to avoid glorying thus; for they flee with alacrity from reproach and affliction, rather seeking a life of ease and honor. They ever would have prominence over their fellows, be superior to and unlike others – certain indication that they lack the right spirit and are not of God. Christ testifies (Jn. 5:44), "How can ye believe, who receive glory on of another, and the glory that cometh from the only God ye seek not?"

4. The main point of this lesson is that in a preacher or a teacher no vice is more injurious and venomous than vainglory. It is true, however, that avarice also is an evil characteristic of false teachers, being found hand in hand with vainglory. For the sake of profit, for the purpose of gain, the false teachers aspire to prominence, to honor and position. With them, nothing but current coin will pass, and what does not pay dividend is unprofitable. Any other vice is more endurable in a preacher than these two, though not is compatible with the goodness, blamelessness and perfection being required in the ministry according to Paul, Titus 1:7. This is not surprising, for the two vices under consideration are essentially and directly opposed to the nature of the ministry. The ministry is ordained to have as its aim the glory of God and its promotion....The World will not endure the Word. For him who in preaching seeks his own

honor; he must preach what pleases the people, what brings honor to himself and magnifies his skill and wisdom.

(The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Ed.: Nicholas J. Lencker. Baker, 2000. Pp. 104-118.)

Sermon Idea: Boasting in Christ (That the hearer would join Paul in boasting in the work of Christ in his/her life.)

We have not long ago completed the annual American exercise in boasting – our mailboxes and email folders were full of annual Christmas letters which told the story of the past year. Perhaps you skipped that because your boasting has migrated to Facebook or another social media. But as I read the letters which I got and sent, and I consider the things on places like Facebook, I am struck at how different Paul’s boasting is than our culture’s boasting.

Paul boasts in his weaknesses and Christ’s deeds despite Paul, and through Paul. The preacher here will want a good grasp of Luther’s Theology of the Cross (which is better said, we are to be Theologians of the Cross.) There are many treatments of this, I am sure you have one already. Dig it out and re-acquaint yourself if you have not recently. The fact is that we so easily slip into being a theologian of glory. Paul is proclaiming himself as a theologian of the cross right now.

*This sermon will want the hearer to do the same, but if we are going to do that, we probably need to give them a little practical advice on how to pull that off. I am not suggesting that shipwreck and receiving 39 lashes is the only route. Persecution is one way that many have powerfully become theologians of the cross. Luther notices that speaking the truth is essential to the theologian of the cross. To boast in Christ involves speaking the truth, even when that will be a difficult road. It was for Luther, it was for Paul, it likely will be for us as well. But remember, Christ is the Way, the **Truth**, and the Life. Boasting in Christ will be truth-telling. The world will hate that and likely seek to do us harm, but that will only be another occasion for us to boast in Christ.*

That truthful boasting in Christ also means giving credit where credit is due. Our language needs to lose the vocabulary of luck and randomness at the same time. You and I have many blessings, all of them from God. The world would have us believe that we are self-made people. The world would have us say it is my house because I paid for it. This is my gourmet food, fine wine, expensive clothes because I have succeeded. I have a right to a vacation because I worked hard. But all this language is forgetting and obscuring one very important fact. I have all these things, even the opportunity to work so hard, because God has blessed and given me. We are first and foremost creatures of God. Our very being depends on his gracious creation. Our continued existence is a result of his gracious redemption of this rebellious creation.

Or Hebrews 4:9-13

⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Luke 8:4-15

⁴ And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵ “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ ¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

PB note: In the Luther quote below, Luther takes a particular interpretational bent with which I disagree. He asserts that the parable is an exhortation to be the right sort of soil. In my opinion, while this is a possible reading of the text, this really places the hearer under the Law and leaves him/her there. We are constantly asking if we are the right soil and, if we are honest, discovering that we are pretty rocky, weedy, and hard dirt. It seems little different than the endless work to which his papal enemies urged the monks of Luther's day. Toward the end of this reading, however, Luther begins to see it otherwise. I have begun with his treatment of the fourth type of soil.

Luther

13. So let's rouse ourselves to diligence and be found among those who belong to the fourth class, also earnestly praying that we may with ready hearts accept and retain God's Word, and bring forth good fruit.

14. Now this little band constitutes the precious saints, not the pope's saints with their hoods and tonsures, who read Masses, fast, wear strange garments, and the like; but those who hear God's Word, whose worst enemies and most violent persecutors are the pope his "saints." They hear the Word and bring forth fruit a hundredfold, that is, bountifully, beyond measuring, or, as Matthew puts it, some bring forth fruit a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty, meaning that some produce more fruit than others. For just as people's callings or offices differ, so also do the fruits. A preacher serves the church to a greater degree than a workman who devotes himself only to his domestic affairs. And yet both are Christians, redeemed from sin and death through Christ and heirs of eternal life. May we be found within this class, despite it being the smallest.

15. However, to this, as Christ says, we must add a good and honest heart, that is, a heart which, in the first place, is not listless but really intent on the Word of God. Such a heart must, above all else, have fidelity, if the devil is not to come and snatch the Word away. Second, the heart must be firm and steadfast, not weak and timid, allowing itself neither to be led astray and become frightened, nor swayed by people's favor or disfavor. For if we do not fear and love God above all else, his Word will not continue long, since it is constantly being assailed. The devil can neither endure nor tolerate it. He is a taskmaster who never lets up, forever and ever driving his servants, never allowing them to be idle, as we see things going on all the time among the papists. Third, the heart must be purged and swept clean so that no thorns remain in it, that is, we must no longer love possessions, money, fame, and pleasures more than God's Word and the life which is to come, nor be more concerned with secular affairs than with God's Word, as Christ says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

16. So, where the heart is circumspect, focused, steadfast, and swept clean, there you find a heart that good and honest, producing good fruit without fail and with patience. To be sure, trial and tribulation, adversity and temptation will not be lacking, as St. Paul says (2 Tim. 3:12): "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." May we be ready to meet such eventuality and, as Christ says, possess our souls in patience, and in the meantime take recourse in prayer. For it never fails, we must confess, that we are, unfortunately, assaulted on all sides, with no letup in sight. And naturally it is quite out of the question for us earthlings ever to be able to turn our backs on the temporal. Nor does the devil rest. He tries in various ways to take the Word away from us and also to burden us with cares, greed, pride, anger, and all manner of mischief. As we know, there have been many good people whom greed, ambition, fornication, and the like have not overcome and deterred from the Word.

18. Now, then, this parable also tells us not to be surprised if we see that the Word does not bring forth fruit in every case. For we learn that it is the Lord himself who sets up four divisions of which only one, the smallest group, is truly upright. The other three classes are actually worthless; we must let them go and not become disturbed when we see that there are more

who despise than accept the Word. It is in the nature of the Gospel that wherever it is preached, there three types of unworthy hearers appear, while the fourth is good and upright. And yet the fault lies not with the Word nor with the one who preaches, as the blind papist charge, like the ranting crazies that they are. They think they can defame us and make our gospel all the more offensive by charging us with the offenses the devil has stirred up ever since the gospel first was proclaimed.

24. So, let everyone learn from this parable that it will always be this way with the gospel: some will be converted but there are probably three times more who will take offense. There are, therefore, not only all manner of gross sins and offenses, but also, as the Lord says, a mischief which is punished with such blindness, that these hearers of the gospel, who have eyes to see, but do not see and ears to hear but do not understand, are unable to discern and pass judgment as regards the gospel.

25. Finally, we should note that as the Lord concludes this parable, he cries out loudly, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, Listen to God's Word while you have it; the time may come when you would like to hear it, but it may not be there for you. Therefore, give ear to it diligently while you have it. For he who despises it is overcome by darkness. As the Lord says (Jn. 12:35): "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you." May our dear Lord Jesus grant us his grace so that we may diligently hear his Word, retain it in a pure heart, and bring forth fruit in patience. Amen.

(Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol. 1. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Grand Rapids, Baker Publ., 1996. Pp. 288-293.)

Luke's telling of the parable of the sower is not found in the three year lectionary, however, Matthew's is and is heard on the same Sunday as the OT lesson above. I have included an edited version of those notes for you here.

One of the regular recipients of the notes but unable to attend the Tuesday webinar sent me this question which began our discussion:

"Concerning the parable of the sower, my challenge with this text is making sure I don't use it to make a point that it is not intending to make. Some will use this parable to deny the power of the gospel to create faith in the sinner's heart. The seed does not change rocky etc. soil into good soil. The good soil already exists before the seed is sown. Some, therefore, conclude that God changes hearts first to be receptive to the gospel rather than God using the gospel to change hearts.

My question to your group is, does this parable have anything to say about the power of the gospel?"

Our answer: Yes, it does, but the answer is not what you might expect. The parable does bear witness to the amazing power of the Gospel to change the person and bear amazing fruit. 100

fold fruit is unheard of in agriculture. It is a miraculous yield. That said, the points you raise need to be addressed:

- 1. The nature of God's work in this world is such that he never works irresistibly. To do so would contravene the very nature of his love and the Gospel itself. Irresistible grace is no grace at all. God is sometimes much more interested in our free will than we are. Thus he does not force the soil. The nature of the proclamation of the kingdom is that it can be resisted and frequently is. Jesus himself was not universally accepted in his message.*
- 2. The fact that it does work sometimes is an attestation of the power of the proclaimed/sown word. It always has the potential to work faith. The seed sown on the rocky soil has the same potential/power as the seed on the good soil.*
- 3. The parable is not actually about an exhortation to us to be good soil, but is a sober evaluation of what we should expect as sowers. This will not always bear the fruit we would want or perhaps expect. People are frequently resistant to the good work of the Word. But that does not make the sowing invalid or unimportant.*
- 4. If there is a deed to which Jesus exhorts us, it is to be sowers, profligate with the seed/word. This sower is wasteful by all farming standards. Jesus gives us no indication that he is targeting some soil or another. He is just sowing. It is lousy farming, but seems to be a description of the Kingdom of God.*
- 5. We cannot always tell when the soil is good soil, even when we are the recipients of the word. That mystery seems to belong to God alone. Whenever I try to guess who is likely good soil I am usually wrong. Is the tattooed fellow with piercings rocky soil or good soil? Is the young family who walks into church with nice clothes better soil? It may well be that all of us can be each type of soil in any given week.*

The audience is absolutely critical here and it often gets ignored. The gospels are careful to tell you that great crowds are gathering around Jesus. He scans over the faces he sees: some are eager faces, and others are the cynical, the worldly, the doubting, the merely curious and he knows that when the day of his own trial and crucifixion comes they will all scatter. Some of these will join the persecution of Saul against the new Christian movement. Others will engender the attitude of hatred which resulted in Synagogue prayers in the late first century AD. In Palestine in the 80's if you have attended a Sabbath service it would have begun with a curse on anyone who follows the Nazarene. So he tells this parable. The seed falls on all sorts of soil, some provide a place to grow and flourish, others do not. I believe he is not giving us marching orders as much as he is describing the people who are crowding around him.

Then, the explanation, which might not help all that much, is directed to the disciples themselves, those who will almost all suffer and die for this Christ. By the time Luke records these words, at least one, probably several of those disciples have died. All have suffered.

I have often heard this parable expounded as an exhortation to be good dirt. But what I have not heard is any help on how to be that good dirt. As a gardener, I know that good soil is filled with dead and rotten things. I suppose that is the key. Jesus came to raise dead people, so admit to my spiritual death and get out of the way. Does this connect us to the Epistle reading today? Paul boasts in his weakness.

But I am not convinced that this is what Jesus meant here. He does not have a single “ought, must, or, should” in the entire parable or its explanation. It is a description, not a prescription. He is describing something that happens, not saying that he wants it to happen or that we can change it if we act differently. He is describing this mysterious and strange working of God’s kingdom.

There are a couple of ways to approach this. One could notice that all of us at various times in our lives have really been all four of these sorts of soil. But is there gospel in that or only the introspection that asks “what sort of soil am I today?” do I really believe that I am good soil? Where are one hundred fold fruits?” The end of this is to wonder whether the Spirit of God really dwells in me.

I think the better way to take this is to say that this describes not what I should be but the experience of the Word of God. It is sown, rather carelessly, for it is thrown everywhere, even places no sane farmer would sow seed. This is a profligate sower of seed. That seed, strewn everywhere, now does its job, regardless of the soil upon which it is sown. Sometimes it simply becomes food for the birds. Other places it tries to grow but either gets choked out or burnt out. But in some places it sprouts, takes root, and bears marvelous, even miraculous fruit.

So it is with the ministry of God’s Word in the world today. Sometimes it bears marvelous fruit, other times it does not. Sometimes it gets picked up and sown in places other than where we spread it, as though a bird had taken it. We grieve to see the troubles of the world choke it out of the hearts of a friend. We mourn to see it burnt out by hardship in the life of another friend. But we marvel to see it bear fruit in some mighty strange places.

Jesus explanation helps to explain the content of the parable but not the meaning. What does this mean? Who is this for? I think this parable is for the faithful, for the church goers, for the fruitful. They often struggle to see their churches shrinking or even closing their doors. They struggle to see their own children abandoning the faith they cherish. They struggle when they see once faithful institutions prostitute themselves on the altars of money or worldly glory. It makes sense, but only human sense, to target resources at the audience which you believe will yield the best results. I am all for being smart, but I wonder if sometimes God does not have in mind fruitful soil which doesn’t look that way to our limited human vision.

The parable tells us that Jesus grieves to see the seed not bearing fruit. This parable also tells us that this is not a failure of the seed, the Word of God. It is out doing its good work, miraculously. It is not the case that God’s word has expired like some gallon of milk whose ‘best by’ date has passed. God’s Word still works.

We are called to be sowers of the Word, and the sower is profligate in the parable, he throws the seed everywhere. Yes, some of it is wasted, but surprisingly, some of it bears amazing fruit. Perhaps the question is to ask, “are we wasting any seed today?” If not, we may have a sowing problem. What is more this parable tells them that the good soil is bearing fruit. Sometimes what looks like a barren desert God turns into a fertile field. When Carolingian emperors were sending missionaries to the Saxons and the Frisians in northern Germany, no one thought these wild savages from the east could be tamed. When Albert the Great, King of Wessex, in what is today England captured his Viking enemies in a trap and rather than killing them baptized them and gave them a kingdom to the east of his own, everyone thought he was mad. Yet, it did work. Through those contacts the Vikings of Scandinavia were eventually converted and the Vikings and the Saxons of Germany would become the very heart of Lutheranism.

Today where is the kingdom bearing fruit. I spoke a few years ago with a Lutheran pastor in India who performed over 600 baptisms in the last several years. The Church in China and Africa and other places grows rapidly. But what about here? Is America hard, thorny or stony ground? Is there no fertile places left in our fair land? I don't know that I would point to places like Willow Creek or Saddleback. Perhaps that is just my petty jealousy speaking, but I find that these sorts of places mostly are about attracting Christians from other churches. They don't seem to really reach into the growing masses of unbelievers within the community. I do see bright lights under the bridges of Portland as Christians are feeding the hungry because Jesus has called them to do so. It is not building an institution like the churches in which I was nurtured, but I see Jesus the sower at work. What fruit it will bear, I cannot tell yet. Is there anywhere that the Word is even being spread in our community, or are we just preaching to ourselves? Jesus knew that it was not a difficult thing to gather great throngs. Heal a few lame, blind and leprous folks and the crowds will come. But have you gotten their hearts yet? This parable also seems to be addressed to the very human idea that the success of the Church can be measured numerically. God's kingdom works in mysterious ways which we cannot think that we control or can manipulate.

Sermon idea: The Parable of the Sower - It's God's Church – not yours! (That the Spirit of God would remove the burden of congregational success from the hearts of the hearer and thereby free him/her to more joyful and energetic service.)

The parables of Jesus frequently give us occasion to talk about the rest that Jesus offers us. If you used the Hebrews passage above, you might want to work that into this sermon as well. There he speaks of the Sabbath rest that is granted to us. It is not exactly what this parable has in mind, but connected. Here we want to tap into a great problem that people have today. They are exhausted. In Jesus' day they were hungry a lot, so he spoke about his salvation through a food metaphor. But today they are exhausted. We likely need to develop the rest metaphor more in our preaching and this is one day which lets us do that.

The sermon will focus the attention of the hearer upon the rest from taking responsibility that belongs to God and not to us. No one likes to be part of something that is not working and that

Christians strive to make the Gospel meaningful and winsome is a very good thing. But if they take to themselves the responsibility for making this kingdom of God work in this place, they are close to an arrogance and hubris which is really destructive. This sermon wants to relieve of them of that burden – giving them rest.

The fact of the matter is that in the North American context very few congregations are really growing, and those that do have to admit that most of the growth is actually simply collecting the estranged members of other congregations. The growing numbers of people who do not want religion in their lives in North America is stubbornly resistant to the evangelization efforts of Christianity. It is not this way in other places around the world, but it is true in much of North America. Faced with declining membership in our parish, we can easily feel that this is our failure. We may have sometimes made it hard to hear the Word of God, but it is the Word of God that makes Christians, not me. The seed sown bears the fruit, not the sower.

The sower and the Word of God today are busy, working hard, but notice that the seed does not always bear fruit. There is no guarantee that the congregation which sows well, which has good seed, which does everything right will see the growth which we look for. That is not promised to us. The sower simply sows, the seed does its job, and sometimes it works really well but other times it does not. The congregation which focuses on the fruitfulness of the Word and loses sight of the actual sowing mandate will find itself tied up in knots about the things which properly belong to God. Be a sower, let God carry that conversion and fruit bearing burden. It just doesn't belong to us.

But the preacher also has hope to proclaim. The sowing is always done in hope. Occasionally the seed bears fruit. Folks who do this tell us that primitive grains at the time of Jesus probably bore 9-11 times their sown volume. Thus, if you put out a bushel of wheat, you could expect 9-11 bushels at harvest. Jesus is talking about a miraculous harvest here, far beyond any reasonable expectation. Now, being a realist about success is not defeatism either. The congregational treasurer has a responsibility to be a realist about the resources of the parish. He is fulfilling his vocation when he tells us not to count on the offerings of a hundred new members next year as we construct the budget. That said, however, when we begin a new program or simply take the Word out the door today into this community as we live in it, we do so in hope. That hope is an expectation that God is at work through this word. Here bring in the OT reading. It is always a matter of hope, but it is a hope in the miracle working God, not my music program, not my prowess as a preacher, not my assimilation or new member welcoming efforts. It is always God, my miracle working God, who works the growth in any of His congregations.