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Trinity 2 One Year Series 2017

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Trinity II

Wisdom builds a house, Paul speaks of a house built upon the apostles and prophets, Jesus speaks of a man who invites to a party at his house, there is a bit of an architectural theme or a domicile pattern developing here. I John might be the outlier, but it can probably be worked into this.

Throughout the whole of these readings, however, is an assumption that I am not sure we remember so well in the current day and age. It is all God's house. The Church belongs to him. The message belongs to him – he is the message! The whole world belongs to him. First by his right as creator, second by his right as my redeemer, I belong to him. It wasn't really a question that anyone was asking in Luther's day. This is a post-enlightenment sort of issue. We imagine a world in which there is no God, we don't belong to someone. We just are.

For the youth of this age, this has been a disaster. The chief of police of town in which I worship tells us that the suicide epidemic among youth is devastating. We tell young people they must "be whatever they want to be" and we tell them that they "can do whatever they want." But do we give them a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves? The philosophers have a term for this: Nihilism. Life has no intrinsic meaning which is delivered to it by a Creator/Redeemer. It just is. Because it has no meaning, descent into a drug haze has no moral or existential consequence. It is just another sort of pointless life, often simply one which is the path of least resistance. And do not imagine that the student who excels in school is immune. Often they are frenetically attempting to find meaning in the doing of things, garnering achievements, and racking up approval from adults. They are assuming that life has no intrinsic meaning so they have to create one.

Perhaps the reading we really need to pay attention today is the Psalm in which we hear that the eyes of the Lord are always upon the righteous man. He is near the brokenhearted and restores the person who is crushed. The Creator of this universe who invites us to be wise, cares for his people and his world. It simply has meaning because he has imparted meaning to it with his love and his Son's blood shed for it.

How will we proclaim this today?

Collect of the Day

O Lord, since You never fail to help and govern those whom You nurture in Your steadfast fear and love, work in us a perpetual fear and love of Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I don't know how often we pray for fear and love. Perhaps we should do so more often. As I catalogue my own prayers, I tend to find a lot of asking for other things. I am rather ashamed of that.

The prayer roots this strange request in the perpetual help and governance of God for those whom he nurtures in that steadfast love and fear. We want that fear and love to remain, to be

perpetual, steadfast, enduring. The prayer assumes this is the normal posture for the human being, the healthy place to be. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The prayer is a prayer of faith without using the word. In truth, that is often best. Faith is one of those things best left unsaid in most instances. As soon as you start talking about it you corrupt it. Faith looks to Christ. As soon as we start looking at faith, we have taken our eyes off of Christ and looked at something else, the very definition of unfaith.

This prayer places faith into the relational model which is the best way to discuss faith. God helps us. Like little children we turn to him with our arms raised up to our dear father and ask him for help. That is faith embodied. It is not difficult to see but profoundly deep when one considers it. The child knows his father's strength and his love. I spoke with a man this week who has two sons, five and six years old. He said coming home from work every afternoon is a bit of an adventure. They are lurking near the door with ball or something in hand. They are ready to go and play with dad. He loves this. How could you not love this!?

This prayer asks that we could always be the dependent creation which fears God's almighty power and loves his holy name. I can think of almost no better picture of it than this dad hurriedly slipping off his work shoes and throwing his jacket over the chair in the living room so he can put on a pair of sneakers and grab the basketball to play with his kids. Keep us in the fear and love which has us always hanging on every word you speak, Lord.

Readings

Proverbs 9:1-11

Wisdom has built her house;

she has hewn her seven pillars.

² She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine;

she has also set her table.

³ She has sent out her young women to call

from the highest places in the town,

⁴ "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"

To him who lacks sense she says,

⁵ "Come, eat of my bread

and drink of the wine I have mixed.

⁶ Leave your simple ways, and live,

and walk in the way of insight."

⁷ Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,

and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.

⁸ Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;

reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

⁹ Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;

teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

¹¹ For by me your days will be multiplied,
and years will be added to your life.

¹² *If you are wise, you are wise for yourself;
if you scoff, you alone will bear it.*

Proverbs is likely an instructional text used in Jerusalem before the Exile and the destruction of the Temple and probably afterwards too. This material seems to come from the time of Solomon and is clearly ascribed to him. This is what a young man would have learned as he was moved from the status of a child in the community to the status of an adult, probably in the time somewhere around the age of 30.

Here, Lady Wisdom sets the feast, the simple, the foolish, are beckoned to come in, eat of her larder, her roasted meats, her mixed wines, but not for calories, but for wisdom. This is an invitation. Will we take it? If we take it, do we not first need to admit that we need what she has to offer?

The second paragraph is rough. If you reject the offer, you are a fool, if you accept the offer you are a fool, but at least you are willing to learn. In either event, no one can say that they can be wise without her feast. The scoffer and wicked man who is reproved, or told he needs the feast, will reject the offer. But the wise man will take instruction and be wiser still.

It is not hard to see which one the Proverbialist wants us to be. Which one do you want to be? How do you get an invite to that feast? What if we have an invite already? What does this feast taste like?

If you read on in Proverbs you get the portrayal of Dame Folly, who is likened to a prostitute sitting at the door of her house, beckoning to those who walk by. Those who enter her house soon discover that it is the gateway to hell. She beckons them to taste stolen water and the bread which is sweeter when eaten in secret. It is a powerful psychological understanding of motive. Why do we do these sinful things?

The Christian who reads this hears Jesus offer up a wisdom which will offend our sensibilities. But it is the fool who turns away from God's wisdom which is wiser than the world (I Cor. 1) or God's strength which is stronger than the world's strength. When Jesus says something that makes your head spin, don't be surprised, after all this is God's wisdom.

Sermon Idea: Dining with Lady Wisdom (That the hearer would heed the call of God to flee this wicked generation and pursue the righteousness of God.)

Peter urged the hearers of his day to flee their crooked/perverse generation (Acts 2:40). Those words have gotten much more germane where we live. The state in which I am raising my children has declared that marijuana is legal and acceptable. A pot shop opened up down the street from my house. Its clientele have hardly been the sort of influence I seek for my son and daughter. Some time ago we drove by and it was boarded up, bullet holes in one of the windows.

Just recently the excavator was there, devouring the building and carting it away. This did not end well. The Supreme Court has ended the gay marriage debate by saying it is legal everywhere. But that is not new. Over 40 years ago they legalized abortion and the people of the US have busily conducted our own holocaust of infants which far surpasses the grisly toll of 20th century dictators. The Internet was supposed to freely share information and connect people but the truth is that its largest component is pornography. This list could go on. It might in your sermon, but don't take it too far, we have to save some room for the rest of this story.

The proverbialist today urges us to dine on the feast of wisdom, to walk in the ways of righteousness. In a wicked and perverse generation, that gets harder and yet somehow more discernable. Yes, our culture has approved of many morally wicked things. But that doesn't mean we have to do them. We can separate ourselves from this wicked generation that way. We can feast on the table spread by wisdom.

But Jesus today also speaks of a feast, a feast laid out by divine and not human wisdom. But this is not a moralizing feast, a feast which is measured by the goodness of our deeds, but a feast for sinners. The servants are sent out to compel the unworthy to the feast. Sacramentally read, Jesus is the entre! He offers his meat for the salvation of the world. Our escape from the wicked generation and their grisly end is not found in our moral rectitude, but in his generous and gristle-filled gift of himself.

The moralizing heart which lives in all of us imagines that separation from the world means we disconnect from all the garbage and putrid sin of the world. But look at Jesus, our leader, host, and feast itself. He does not disengage but engages all the more. True holiness is not found in our efforts but his. Yes, this means we do not need to live as the world has deemed acceptable. We can love our spouse, honor our parents, work honestly, and live decent lives. Paul's words about the renewal of our minds and living in a wholly other kingdom of love and forgiveness still apply. We don't need to be like that and thus we separate ourselves from it.

But we are truly separated from the world by the fact of the one whom we consume in faith, Jesus. He has set us apart, but not that we be apart but that we be a part of his mission to redeem and save this benighted world. As he declares, we are in but not of the world. Separated from the world, we are sent back into it to be the light and salt which it so desperately needs. The foolish man who stumbles out of the pot shop down the street from my house does not need my condemnation. His life is already a train wreck and he probably can discern that better than you can. He needs Jesus. He needs the Jesus you have in your life.

The fleshly Christ who will not let us spiritualize him in the Epistle reading today will not let us spiritualize our place in the kingdom either. He still is in the flesh, in the meat of humanity. He is in our meat and means to feed the world.

Psalm 34:12-22

*¹¹ Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*

- ¹² What man is there who desires life
and loves many days, that he may see good?
- ¹³ Keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from speaking deceit.
- ¹⁴ Turn away from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
- ¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous
and his ears toward their cry.
- ¹⁶ The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.
- ¹⁷ When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears
and delivers them out of all their troubles.
- ¹⁸ The LORD is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.
- ¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.
- ²⁰ He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken.
- ²¹ Affliction will slay the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
- ²² The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Ephesians 2:13-22 The first verses of this chapter appear elsewhere in our pericope system and verses 8-9 are regular fare for Sunday School kids to memorize. They really form an important logical element in the letter. What he proclaims in our reading for today is impossible without vss. 1-10, hence I have included them.

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

How do we illustrate the idea of this chapter? Paul is connecting the baptismal resurrection of vss. 1-10 with the practicalities of vss. 11-22.

- *Athletics? The ball player who is on the team practices, the professional practices a great deal.*
- *The lifeguard who saves the drowning man has given him a new life in a sense. Every day from that point on is different. The person who has a heart transplant or other modern medical miracle might feel the same way. The life we live is wholly a gift.*

We also found seven interesting words to describe our separation:

1. *Separated/cut off (note the circumcision implication)*
2. *Alienated/excluded/strangers*
3. *Having no hope/hopeless*
4. *Without God*
5. *Distant/far off*
6. *No peace/hostility*
7. *Dividing walls of hostility.*

Notice how Paul’s words in our text address all of these. We are made one, united in the flesh of Christ. He becomes our unity/peace. We have access to God in the Spirit. We are no longer far away, but close. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down. Jesus, in his body, on the cross, has killed the hostility. Hostility is dead to me just as Jesus died for me. In its place, resurrected, is shalom/peace.

Luke Timothy Johnson considers this letter to be Paul's capstone letter, the summary of his ministry, written from prison, to encourage all the congregations. A circular letter, it was designed to be read in every congregation, hence it really does not deal with a specific problem.

But Paul does deal with a problem, and it is a problem of universal nature, indeed a problem Christianity continues to face to this very day. The human tendency to create divisions and distinctions is ever present. In the first half of the first century the struggle was located in the relationship between Jew and Gentile. This conflict had plagued much of Paul's ministry. His letters to the Galatians, Romans, Colossians, and others will address this question. The first council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 was summoned to deal with it. Paul was arrested to save him from a mob of Jews in Jerusalem who sought to kill him over this issue. This is a big issue for Paul, the biggest of his whole ministry.

Oddly enough, by the end of the century this manifestation of the issue largely went away. The Jewish Christian community was expelled from the Jewish synagogues shortly after the failed Jewish rebellion of 68-70 AD and shortly after that they were more or less absorbed into the much larger Gentile Christian Church. The last group of actively practicing ancient Jewish Christians who still followed the kosher laws was in Edessa and we last hear of them in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Even though the exact issue has changed its manifestation in our day, the beauty, potency, and love of what Paul has to say here are timeless and appropriate to every age. We have not learned how to do this yet. His argument is based on the first part of the chapter, hence its inclusion above. In the first verse notice how we were dead, helpless, spiritual corpses. Follow the progression of the person through the next nine verses and you will find us by verse ten alive and well, standing up, off life-support, doing the things which God had established for us to do. This gracious action by God is key to understanding the exhortation in the second part of the chapter.

Death has proven to be the ultimate equalizer. No one is excluded from that doorway, and it has rendered the old prejudice and enmity meaningless. The Jews and the Gentiles, equal before death's bitter cup, though once foes, are now of the same household in Christ, having been raised by his resurrection. If you have Russians in your community you might want to remember the story of Boris and Gleb, the passion bearers of Russia. They took this so much to heart that they died rather take up arms against their brother, Vladimir when it came time to fight for the throne of their father. Their willingness to die inspired the Russian people to convert to Christianity and did much to bring a different sort of ethos to the violent Slavic peoples of 1000 years ago. Even if you don't have any Russians in your parish, if they are in your community, this is a story your people should know so they can talk to them. I once sat on a plane by a young man who was named Gleb. Can you imagine attending middle school in Los Angeles with that name? He did and was proud of his name.

Paul speaks to the Jewish and Gentile issues, but where does the divide occur today? So many people do not equate Christians with openness and inclusiveness. Shouldn't they? The parable of

the prodigal son suggests that God forgives everyone outrageously. Is there anyone whom God has not loved in Christ? If there isn't anyone, why do some people not know it?

Paul speaks of a unity that is established by the body and blood of Christ which was broken and shed on a cross. He speaks of a single building which was erected on the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, the Bible. This is really core Lutheran stuff, but why do we struggle with the point that Paul wanted to make? Most of our churches are too white to be honestly representative of our increasingly multi-ethnic society. We do not reach outside our comfortable middle class American roots very well or very often. Why is that? What hope does Paul offer us?

First of all, Paul does not say that we need to fix this. Christ has eliminated the hostility, he has become our peace. We do not gin it up. This is the error of so much of the liberal protestant mainstream. We imagine that we build the bridges, that we eliminate the divide, that tear down the walls. Martin Luther King, for all his flaws, at least go this right. This was a work of God. What is more, when Paul wrote, this was an ongoing process of reconciliation. It took time, it did not happen overnight. Paul addresses this because it had been and would be for some time an issue which these people faced. Failure does not mean it is impossible, indeed the best things often require us to fail and try again. But we really dare not simply give up. We must try.

And of course, the reality is that we all have access to the same Father, by the death of the same Son, through the gift of the same Holy Spirit. God really is the unifying force here. When he grabs hold of folks that is a powerfully transformative experience. You might want to remember the story of Robert E. Lee, the famous civil war general who fought to maintain the right to own slaves. I read this in Shelby Foote's three volume narrative history of the Civil War, in the final chapters. In his later days Gen. Lee attended first Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. It was segregated and the black members of the congregation had to commune after the whites did. One day a black man came down from the balcony and presented himself at the altar with the white folks. Silence fell over the assembly until a white haired gentleman got up from his pew and slowly walked down to the front of Church. There Robert E. Lee knelt down beside his fellow Christian, a black man, and there did he commune from the same cup from which that man had drunk a moment before.

This can seem insurmountable and Paul knows it. The temple of Herod had a dividing wall which separated the ethnic Jews from the proselyte believers. A gentile, even one who had been circumcised and was practicing Judaism, was not allowed to cross over that boundary. Archeologists have found signs indicated that the punishment for crossing that wall without being a Jew was death. Paul says Jesus breaks down the wall, he ripped the curtain in two!

Paul apparently lived this radical re-estimation of all humanity. In Acts 18 it appears a Jewish leader in Corinth, Sosthenes, tried to kill him. Yet in I Corinthians, written a few years later, he would call Sosthenes a brother. In Philippians 1 he can look at the fellows who take advantage of his imprisonment and be glad because they preach Christ. In II Corinthians he says that he sees no one in the same way. They are all a new creation in Christ. (II Corinthians 4-5) In the

end of Philippians he enjoins two women to reconcile. He thought others also could live with this new estimation of all humanity.

But we are not ever totally there. We don't live this way and I frankly struggle with this. Paul was not a terribly forgiving sort of fellow prior to his encounter with Jesus on that road to Damascus either. Christ worked this change in him. Christ is our reconciliation as well. We are given a new way to see people. They are all simply the folks for whom Jesus died. That doesn't change no matter what they have done.

Another really good way to run with this text is to riff off of II Samuel 7 in which David wants to build a temple and God tells him that his son will build a temple and God will build David into a "house," a dynasty. While Solomon thought he was the fulfillment of that prophecy when he completed the temple and dwelt securely on the throne of David, Paul is saying that Jesus is the real fulfillment of the II Samuel promise to David. Jesus reigns as king and David's Son and he has built the real and lasting temple to God, the Church, in which the Holy Spirit of God dwells. We are the stones of that church, Jesus is the cornerstone, the prophets and apostles serve as the foundation. This confronts the current understanding of the Church. We like to think that we are the church because we joined the church, we voluntarily associated. But this sermon would tell us that God has made the Church. Jesus is the "mortar" – the love and forgiveness which bind people together- he calls us Church, he calls the church into being. He makes us church.

Sermon Idea: He is our Peace (That the hearer would expect God to work peace through them and in their community.)

Recent events have opened a window of opportunity for a sermon like this. Worshipers in a service in South Carolina have been gunned down by a young racist. Young black men have been gunned down by the police. Riots have broken out in major cities across the US and protests have taken place in others, likely yours. We have all seen the images on television, the Internet, and in our periodicals. The peace we imagined has been proven to be a lie. Race remains a serious issue in the US and that applies to churches too. Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in most peoples' week. Does our parish reflect our community when it comes to color and ethnicity? Why or why not?

But the Gospel comes into our lives here. Peace is not found because we do something, or at least because we create it. Peace comes because Jesus has made it. Christian churches have a long history of being places where barriers have been broken down. The early church broke the barrier between Jewish and Gentile Christians that occupied Paul. They also broke down the barriers between slave and free, rich and poor, and more. It was Christian missionaries who sought out and included within the body of Christ my tree worshipping ancestors in Europe. They were a pretty barbarous lot, but those missionaries did not see my ancestors as an "other" who needed to be exterminated or destroyed, but as a child of God for whom Jesus died. He created a peace where warfare had been.

In the lead up to the Civil War in the United States it was the Christians who took up the abolitionist standard and tied freedom for slaves to their fundamental unity with all mankind in Christ. The Lutherans of the community in which I grew up had suffered terribly at the hands of bushwhackers because they had the temerity in western Missouri to challenge the institution of slavery. (Jesse and Frank James rode with that group and were part of a group which slaughtered 25 men in my home town on Oct. 10, 1864.)

More recently the civil rights movements and many others have taken their Christianity into action to be agents of peace in the world, replacing hatred with brotherhood. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa might yield some illustrations as might the current situation in the Balkans or among the Christians of Palestine. The Lutheran Church in Bethlehem has been the center of some inspiring efforts to bridge the Arab-Israeli divide.

In proclaiming the fact that Jesus is the peace, the preacher should prepare the hearer. Jesus has a scandalous ability to love the people I loathe. The peace he creates is rarely along the lines of anything I would of my human nature want. He creates and does things without asking my permission or approval. I am out of control of this peace and it can get pretty uncomfortable. The truth is he loves everyone, even the homosexuals, the illegal immigrant, the drug users, and whoever else might sit on your congregants' list of "evildoers." Just as the missionaries came to my barbarian ancestors who were burning the Christian villages Jesus may send me to the people I believe are destroying society or overturning something I hold dear. He may tell me to love them.

Or

I John 3:13-18

¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

¹⁹ *By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.*

²¹ *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*

²³ *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.*

Luther

2. John here admonishes the Christian to exercise the virtue of love. Considering the evident rarity of love among men, this admonition is necessary. He particularly warns Christians not to wonder at the world's hatred and desire for their death. Such was the hate of Cain for his brother, of which the apostle has just spoken. The world's hate, it must be admitted, repels love and powerfully obstructs its exercise.

3. Is it not surpassing strange that one can hate those who love him and from whom he has received only kindness? Such wickedness is almost inconceivable, we say. What incentive is there for any to render the world service when in ingratitude it rewards love with hatred? But let us examine ourselves, who are baptized and have received the Gospel, and confess how we requite the supreme love of God in giving us his Son. What a beautiful example of glad gratitude we display! For the shame of it we ought to despise ourselves before God and his angels.

And what shall we say of those who will not endure the preaching of the glorious message of God's grace and blessing, but condemn it as heresy? To whom they who seek to serve, to benefit and save the world by declaring the good news, must be, as Paul says, "as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things (I Cor. 4:13). Indeed, no criminal receives more wretched and ignominious treatment and execution, of which the Pope and his followers are a case in point.

4. While experience has proven this otherwise incredible fact, John vouchsafes the admonition notwithstanding: "marvel not, brethren, if the world hateth you." If we are not to wonder at this, is there anything in the world to incite wonder? I should truly think the hearing of a single sermon on the grace of Christ would suffice to bring the world to receive the Gospel with intense joy and never to forget the divine mercy and blessing. It would be no wonder should the earth suddenly open and engulf mankind because of its ingratitude to God who has given his Son to become man for the purpose of redeeming us condemned mortals from sin and death and restoring us to life and salvation. Is it not a horrible thing that any man should shun and oppose such a Savior and his doctrine even more than he does the devil himself?

(Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. IVb. Ed.: John Lenker. Baker Publ., 2000. pp. 41-56.)

I think this text is well served by extending it a little to verse 24.

Many find preaching John's first letter difficult. He oscillates between these seemingly contradictory statements. We are perfect we are not perfect, we obey His commands but if we don't obey we have an advocate with the Father. He seems to be talking to two different people, could it be a sinner and a saint?

We are more used to the conversation he has with the sinner, but we need to grow into the conversation he is also having with the saint. For as people who have experienced resurrection

power, we are also empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very people that God has called us into being.

Jesus says that his sheep know his voice. We know the voice of our shepherd not by its timbre, tone, or pitch, but by the love. He laid down his life for us. That love then transforms us into people who also lay down our lives for others. That is the way of Christianity. There are lots of ways to lay down one's life, martyrdom is only one of them and a gift which is not given to all. More commonly we are called to lay down our life one dollar, one moment, one act of kindness, one act of service, at a time. It is a long and beautiful laying down of life which stretches over years and scores of years.

John points us to the sharing of our material things. Back to the idea that Peter and John walked into the temple that day and looked at a beggar and unlike so many did not simply walk by. I may not have the ability to heal him, but I can feed him. God's love abides in us and opens our hearts and eyes and minds to be different sorts of people.

This living active love of God is what connects us to the truth. Notice, John does not connect us to the doctrine; although, within this letter John is very concerned with what people believe. But for John, the belief is never separated from the act. If one does not believe that Jesus came in the flesh, then the flesh becomes so much less important. The beggar's hunger is not really shared by the Jesus who was stressed and hungry and came to fig tree looking for fruit or who had compassion on the crowds who were gathered in the wilderness to hear him and he fed them as well. But if you do believe that Jesus came in the flesh, suddenly the beggar's hunger becomes one with the Lord's hunger. They are the same hunger and his hunger is now a holy thing, a holy need, and when I feed that hunger of the beggar, I am also feeding the hunger of my Lord.

But that paragraph condemns me. I know my heart, I have not acted in Christ's love, not all the time. But the God who dwells in my heart is greater than my heart, and the love he has for me is not bought or sold. It is simply given and by his indwelling I have it. Too often I think that our congregations have held themselves up to an unrealistic expectation. They see Mother Teresa and wonder why they don't love that way. But they then ignore the fact that they do love one another with a halting, sometimes broken, but genuine love which comes from God. That means God is in their hearts, and he is bigger than their hearts and the self-condemnation which they feel. That means that the past is past, and the present is real, and this moment as he presents to me yet another opportunity to love, I am able to love right now with his love, and he sets my mind and heart at ease. I cannot love in the past. I cannot love in the future, only the present. He has forgiven the past and he has filled the present and will remain in my future.

And so we know that God abides in us. Not because we have done it right, but because in this moment we are empowered to do something, even a little loving deed. That is God at work in us. Reach out and hold the hand of the sinner next to you, tell your spouse you love them, give your kids a hug, feed a hungry man, comfort a grieving widow, or pray with a man going into surgery, and know the presence of God in those things. This is not you getting it right, it is God getting it

right. He came into the flesh because these and all the hurts of the world are terribly important to him.

Sermon Idea: Living for Other People (That the Holy Spirit of God would lead the hearer to love the neighbor in deed and in truth.)

John was preaching to a specific problem: the people in this community were trying to make Jesus fit into the worldly understanding and picture of what a God might do. They simply could not buy into the idea that God had really taken on the flesh of humanity, owned it as his own. It was surely a spiritual thing, pure and holy, not a truly fleshly thing, something which involved all the unpleasantness of the flesh, the sorts of things which we don't talk about in polite company.

But John had touched, seen, heard, and experienced this Word and Life in the flesh (see the introduction to this Epistle). He had been in that upper room when Thomas read the scars of Jesus like a blind man reading braille. He had dined with Jesus on the shore of Galilee at breakfast on fish and bread. Jesus did not put on the cloak of humanity only to take it off again. The resurrected Christ was still in the flesh. He had touched it.

John today points us to one of the serious implications of Jesus in the flesh. He has taken suffering to himself. We saw that in Good Friday and we have seen it in other Gospel stories as well. Jesus grows weary, he hungers, he thirsts, he is anxious, and of course he dies. The ancient church father, Gregory of Nazianus, once said that whatever was not taken up by Jesus has not been healed/saved, but that which has been united to God has been healed/saved. Jesus took up our infirmities (Is. 53).

This means for John that we see the infirmities of our neighbors, the weakness and the sickness, the dying and the suffering, as something connected to Christ. It is not just something that we will leave behind when we go to heaven. Jesus is fully human in heaven today. He has taken up humanity. That suffering of our neighbor is connected to Jesus right now. Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that even a cup of cold water given to a little one in his name is given to Jesus.

Herein lies the great motive for the many things that Christians have done throughout the centuries and continue to do today. The preacher will want to talk about some of those things that are happening in this parish. Don't make the mistake of saying this has to be something dramatic and grand. The hand on the shoulder of a hurting person is not a small thing, as Jesus noted the simple cup of cold water. Look to the little acts of kindness that undoubtedly abound in the middle of your congregation even today.

John tells us that those who believe in Jesus name and love, however halting and imperfect that love may be, have someone dwelling in their hearts who is greater than all the self-recrimination we may be feeling for the many times we have failed. That one of course is the Jesus whose name we confess and whose love lives within us. He sets our conscience at ease and he is the one who empowers our love for this moment.

It is easy for us to point to all the times we have failed to love. No life can say it has always loved. Yet John speaks of confidence and the reassurance of the heart. It is the God who has taken up residence in the lives of his people who is greater than even our own sinful nature and justifiable self-condemnation. He knows us, knows us better than we ourselves know us. But he has not stepped away from us in disgust. He has united himself to us in the physicality of the sacrament, pouring his blood and his body into our mouths so that we have become the vessels of a heavenly treasure, a treasure that spills out into our neighbors' lives.

Jesus is in the flesh, you see, the real flesh of humanity. He has united himself with every leper, cancer patient, starving child, and lonely widow. All of them. He has taken up suffering, deep human suffering to himself for he would heal it all. This compassionate Christ has come to us, yes to heal and help us, but also, through us to heal and help those around us. For he has taken that suffering as well.

Luke 14:15-24

¹⁵ When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶ But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. ¹⁷ And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' ¹⁹ And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' ²⁰ And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' ²² And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' ²³ And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

Luther

1. This Gospel is very deep and contains simply too much for the average young person to absorb all at once. We can't possibly in one hour discuss all the implications. Yet see how simply Christ tells story about a man who invites many people to his banquet only to have the invitees refuse to come. Each invited guest is occupied with something else dearer to him, so that the host must finally send his servant into the streets and invite needy strangers to come in. Even they do not come willingly, and the master of the house has to press them. Finally, the frightful judgment is pronounce upon the invited guests who refused to attend. Since those I invited refuse to come to my banquet so lavishly prepared, I say, Let them never taste of it! It is a fearful judgment, tantamount to his saying, Forget them! Let them rue the day for what they hat forfeited; they will not get to taste any of the good things I prepared for them; they have

excluded themselves and spurned the banquet to which I invited them and are undeserving nor will they ever get a second chance.

2. No one can miss the Lord's point in this parable which he told when one of the guests at the table in a Pharisee's home (where the Lord had healed the man afflicted with leprosy) stated, "Blessed he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." The Lord thereupon responded with this parable of a great banquet, explaining how one is to perceive the kingdom of God.

3. There are two kingdoms, one earthly, the other heavenly, and they must be carefully distinguished. In the earthly, or temporal, kingdom tables are set, and people eat, drink, and sleep, ministering to their physical necessities. And particularly when the host is wealthy and known for being generous and openhanded, people come running eagerly for the banquet goodies, even crashing the party through not invited. But in the kingdom of heaven the banquet and the food are altogether different: Here the master of the house and banquet host is the heavenly Father, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth. He has prepared a truly great banquet, where the food and drink are different from that served in the temporal kingdom; but the guests, though bidden, spurn his invitation. Other guests are then pressed to attend, until his home and table are filled to capacity.

4. Of this the Lord Christ is speaking in this parable of the great banquet. First of all, he extols the great, incomparable goodness and mercy of the heavenly Father, who has prepared a truly great, sumptuous banquet and summons us poor beggars on earth to eat and to drink with him at his table in the kingdom of heaven. He then denounces and reproves the rude, atrocious callousness of those who spurn his graciousness and the sumptuous, delicious meal which would satisfy their hunger forever; but their attachment is to the earthly kingdom, and in the process they forfeit the kingdom of heaven.

5. In a spiritual sense, our dear Lord Jesus Christ is himself the banquet. The heavenly Father is the rich man and host; he has prepared a banquet, permitted his dear Son Jesus Christ to be born in human form of a virgin, and to suffer, be slaughtered, cut to pieces and readied, just as one prepares food. And just as one butchers a hen, puts on a spit, and roasts it, so the heavenly Father allowed his dear Son to be butchered, nailed to the cross, and offered up in fervent love, as the true paschal Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world.

6. However, just as a hen or anything else is not kept on the spit and roasted in order to remain there permanently, but upon being roasted is removed from the spit and placed on the table for the people to eat and be nourished, have their hunger satisfied and become stronger, so Christ, having suffered with terrible pain on the cross, was afterwards removed from the spit of the cross, laid in the tomb, risen from the dead, and so on, in order that the whole world might have this food. For Christ was the world's genuine Bread of Life, for Jews and Gentiles alike.

I remember my father preaching on this text, but it never shows up in the 3 year pericope system. I don't think I have ever treated this outside of classroom studies. The Matthean version of this parable, which is similar, but not quite the same, includes the fellow who showed up without the festal garment. That parable we read in series A toward the end of the liturgical year and it is cast in a very different light.

When preaching on the parables, I often turn to my favorite resource, Robert Capon's "Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment" (Eerdman's, 2002). You may want to pick that up if you do not have a copy. He can be a little flippant once in a while, but he has an amazing way with words and his insights into the parables are sharp.

The parable is occasioned by what sounds like a compliment or at least a pious statement. Blessed is the man or woman who eats bread in the kingdom. That sounds pretty good to me. Why does it occasion this parable by Jesus? Luther, in his postil says that the man is a babbler, but he is writing in the context of the Roman Catholic Corpus Christi celebration. Luther's postil is consumed with arguing against the Papists interpretation of this parable in support of Corpus Christi.

Does Jesus mean to elaborate on this blessedness or is this parable spoken against this man's statement? Without the non-verbal inflections and context, it is almost impossible to determine. Is the fellow who blurted this out making some assumptions that Jesus needs to address? Did Jesus roll his eyes when this guy said this? Do the crowds and disciples assume that they are in that blessed crowd and does Jesus want to cast that into some doubt? From my reading of this, that seems most likely, but is hardly the only way to take this. Does Jesus simply want to expand the guest list a little beyond their expectation? Does he want to tell them that they are out and others, us Gentiles, are in? Or does he speak this to the folks who are sitting secure in the pews of our churches who look forward to heavenly feasting but don't quite see our own jeopardy nor God's great and expansive invitation?

The parable presents a rather troubling scene. A man has prepared a great feast and invited the folks on his guest list. But the RSVP's are all declinations. One has a new field, another a yoke of oxen, and another is getting married. They all have excuses and the man is left with a fatted calf on the spit and a caterer ready to pour wine and scoop potato salad to hundreds. The tables have all been set up, the linens spread, and the hall decorated. There are no guests.

The man grows angry. His gracious invitation has been rebuffed. Is this like the fellow who asks the girl what she is doing on Saturday night and she declares that she is washing her hair? Are the excuses so lame? Is he insulted by them? The wedding one seems rather legitimate. Or is it that they all give an excuse; that no one is coming to the party? Does he feel rejected by the group? Have you ever thrown a party but no one came? That is really discouraging. How does it make one feel? Remember in the ancient world this may have had a different resonance entirely. Their excuses might have been culturally subtle or not so subtle statements of their relationship to this man. Were they in fact being quite disrespectful, like the son who stands outside his father's party in Luke 15 (the very next chapter?)

He sends his servants into the streets to bring in the people the culture considered undesirable: the poor, crippled, lame, etc., to the feast. The food won't go to waste. It will feed the street people. Even then, there is still room, so the servants are sent out onto the highways and byways to compel people to come. Twist their arms. This food is simply not going to be thrown away! Is he shaming the guests who refused? It will be the occasion of feasting, even if the invited guests are stumbling around some field or examining the hoof of an ox. They cannot stop the party.

In Luther's day, his Catholic opponents coupled this reading with the feast of Corpus Christi and said that anyone who did not come was like the excuse makers in the parable. What is more, the man at the beginning only said that blessed is the man who eats bread in the kingdom. Clearly the wine is optional and this was used to justify the reception of the sacrament in one kind. Luther was not impressed with this interpretation and his postil notes go on for pages about the misinterpretation of the papists.

For Luther, the feast is the preaching of the Gospel, not the Eucharist. He, along with many others, considers that the initial guest list were the Jewish people of Jesus' day who rejected the Gospel. He seems to have in mind Acts 18, where Paul, rejected by the Jews in the Synagogue of Corinth, shook out his garments and declared that their blood was on their own head. He was going to the gentiles. But Luther notices that this happens in two stages. First the man invites the unlikely guests. Luther likens these to the humble Jewish disciples, the men who were not part of the religious elite. The second invitation, the compulsion of those on the highways and in the hedges, is the inclusion of the heathen, the gentiles, in whom Luther numbers himself.

What will we preach? My ramblings above suggest several lines of approach here which could be congruent with this and the other readings. Each of these might be a sermon unto themselves or combined.

- 1. Inclusion – the Ephesians text above is a radical inclusion text. Jesus speaks of the heavenly banquet being offered to all, even the most unlikely of guests. Jesus died for the great unwashed, including us.*
- 2. The integrity of the feast – this is a very physical image. There is food going to waste, the feast is ready, but the guests are not coming. The answer? Make more guests because this is important. The John text above suggests that these things are not to be spiritualized or at least not spiritualized out of their physical realities. The need of the brother is real and somehow connected to the suffering of Christ for us.*
- 3. God's strange, angry compassion – the man in the story gets angry, is hurt by the rejection of those who disdain his feast. This moves him to throw open the doors to all. This strange behavior sounds very divine. The preacher might speak of the heart of God here, whose gracious invitation can be rebuffed, is rebuffed, and yet never is diminished, in fact, it expands.*
- 4. Wisdom – the OT reading and the Gospel have a strong congruence. The ones who decline this feast are fools. But the wise who attend did not get there by their own*

wisdom, indeed, they sometimes had be drug there by the servants. It is not a place for anyone to gloat or feel smug about eating at this feast.

5. *Still there is room... Evangelism. The servants are repeatedly sent out to bring folks, even unlikely folks, into this feast. Has everyone who has been baptized been commissioned as one of these servants to search highways and byways, shaking out the bushes and scouring the hedgerows for another sinner whom we may forgive, another hungry soul? God wants that house filled.*
6. *God loves to throw a party – Robert Capon notices this for me. This parable begins a whole series of party parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. They are all based on a party. Do we preach God's joy?*