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Trinity 3 One Year Series 2017

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Trinity III One Year Series

What is one to do with this day? The readings are just so powerful. The preacher is in danger of Gospel overload or a paralysis brought on by too many choices. The good thing is that if we are preachers of the One Year Series this will come around again in about 12 months and we can pick up one of the many strands which were not addressed this time. The first task this week will be to pray for discernment. It is not that we will struggle for a sermon to preach, but the problem will be that we have 15 or more sermons to preach after we read these texts. Which is the one our people need to hear right now?

The first Epistle option and both options for the Gospel appear elsewhere in the three year cycle of readings and I have imported materials from those days. The material from Luke 15 is extensive.

Collect of the Day

O God, the protector of all who trust in You, without whom nothing is strong and nothing is holy, multiply Your mercy on us that, with You as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This is one of those prayers that rewards a slow, meticulous reading by the preacher.

We address simply God, no adjectives here, simply God. This is a prayer any human being makes, not only the Christian. We will make this a Christian prayer by the end, but we begin by encompassing the whole of the human race.

God protects those who trust in him – we call on this virtue, reminding him of it, so to speak, because we are about to rely upon it. The preacher needs to remember that the mortality rate among those who trust in God is just as high as it is for those who do not. They die in wars, from sickness, from car accidents, and natural disasters just as much as the general population. So what does this protection look like? We might point to a Christian who was miraculously saved from some threat after prayer or the soldier whose pocket NT stopped the bullet, but for every one of those, there is another example where it did have such a happy result. Ultimately the one who trusts in God trusts that even death's gaping maw is not beyond God's ability to save. We go through the valley of the shadow of death just like the rest of humanity, but our Good Shepherd has gone before and attends us there and will raise us from that pitiless death.

We acknowledge that without God nothing is strong and holy. We have rather made a mess of things, not only ourselves, but everything. We have noted this before, the reason we call the Spirit of God "Holy Spirit" is not an attestation of his nature; although, that would surely be true. We call him "Holy" because he makes things holy. He is the sanctifying Spirit, who takes the wretched sinners that we are and makes us holy. Likewise, time, death, corruption, and decay render all things eventually weak. Great men, towering buildings, adamantine monuments will

all eventually succumb to death, gravity, and corrosion. God won't. He is stronger than all those things, and through resurrection and his presence he renders us strong. Consider the days of the Apostles. If you had been alive in the days of Paul and looked objectively you would have said that Seneca was the wise man, Nero was the strong man, and Paul was a nobody from a backwater town of a mighty empire. But who reads Seneca today outside a few dusty old classicists? Even in those circles he is largely ignored. Nero's golden palace was torn down shortly after his own praetorian guards cut him down. The empire thought it had destroyed this meddling preacher from Tarsus, but God is strong and made him strong. His words are read around the world, not Seneca's. Jesus claims the allegiance and faith of over 2 billion people today. Without God nothing is strong.

We then as God to multiply His mercy on us. God makes us holy and strong, therein lies the content of that mercy. God's attributes are what he does to us. He mercifully renders us holy, he mercifully conquers death our foe. He mercifully protects us. We ask for more of that, but not just to have it, this request has purpose. The next phrase begins with a purpose clause "so that..." but it inserts another qualifier in there. I really think my 9th grade English teacher would not have approved of this style. I know my homiletics professor would not have approved.

So that with you as our ruler and guide... Even having the strength and holiness of God we are yet ready to navigate this live. We still daily and regularly need God. With him as our ruler and guide. There is a fundamental problem with humanity. Take away all the things that make us miserable, and we will find a way to be miserable. It is not only that terrible foes are arrayed against us and would devour us, but we are fundamentally broken as human beings. This idea that freedom is simply to do whatever we want to do is actually rather hellish when you think of what it is that humans want to do. Our "wisher" is really broken. The desires of our heart and our mind are simply twisted and bent. So we need God's firm guiding and governing hand. He must be our ruler. We cannot rule ourselves. This is directly contradictory to much of our culture.

Finally, after all this preparation, we get to the actual petition of this prayer. We as have prayed for God's mercy so that we may pass through the temporal things and not lose the eternal things. Are we asking that we pass through them in a way which will allow us to retain the eternal things? Or are we asking that we simply endure the temporal things? Do we reject those temporal things? Some have but that is not what I think this means. I find that Luther's sense of vocation is helpful here. I think that the passage through the temporal things which does not lose the eternal means we see and use those temporal things as connected to the eternal. The job, the house, the car, the neighbor, the co-worker, etc., are all spiritual/eternal in nature because they are tools and relationships which are imbued with God. My Volkswagen is a tool for serving him and living out my vocation and husband, father, professor, and friend. It is not for me, but for him. Governed by his love and mercy, the things I do with that VW can be eternal because God's love is eternal.

Readings

Micah 7:18-20

¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?

He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.

¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.

You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.

²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and steadfast love to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our fathers
from the days of old.

If you have read the rest of the book of Micah, and I pray you have, you know that this passage is something of a departure from his normal stance. But as Law and Gospel preachers, we are familiar enough with this to know what we have here. The prophet is into his Gospel mode. The text is almost pure Gospel and is stunningly beautiful.

The problem, of course, is that we don't get any of the Law in this pericope. The Gospel will be so much sweeter and better if we hear in that context. The preacher will want to do a little reminding/backfill for himself before writing a sermon on this text. But don't get to slavish about that. After all, you are not preaching to Micah's audience, but to the members of St. John's Lutheran or some similarly named gathering of folks. The sins which you proclaim that God is casting into the depths of the sea and trampling underfoot won't be exactly what the folks in ancient Israel did. What you are really after is for your people to see that God is treading their iniquities underfoot, casting their sins into the sea, and restoring the relationship which their sins have ruptured.

So perhaps we need to talk about sin. Elsewhere we have noted that our culture has defined sin into a far too narrow box of moral naughtiness, usually said with a wink and a nod. About the only place one hears the word outside of church is on the dessert menu at a restaurant. The biblical term for sin encompasses much more. Sin offerings, per Leviticus, were mandated to be made at childbirth, recovering from a skin disease, harvest time, after one touched a dead body, even mildew in your house. That last would undoubtedly condemn every shower in the Northwest part of the USA! The Bible seems to mean the whole of rebellious creation when it talks about sin, not just the morally rebellious part of our lives, but also the physically rebellious parts of our lives, our cancer, heart disease, and bad eyesight. The bible seems also to talk about things like exhaustion (harvest time) and pain (childbirth) as occasions to remember when the world is not the way God made it to be. So we remember our sin-full-ness. And that brings us to our need for God's rescue. This is why, after John points out Jesus and declares him to be the Lamb who

takes away the sin of the world, Jesus starts to feed the hungry, heal the sick, forgive the tax collectors and sinners, and even just make enough wine so the wedding festivities could continue. It wasn't all about moral failings and evil thoughts. It was about many things which we did not consider moral; things which we might even just call normal.

The preacher will want to gather these things up and notice that Jesus casts them into the sea of his blood and tramples all these things underfoot as he dries every tear. He tries the tears of shame and regret, surely, but also those of pain, humiliation, loneliness, fear, and much more. It says every tear and I think he means it.

Why? Because he delights in steadfast love. That is the only real reason. He doesn't think we are better or nobler than another sort of folk. He just loves us. Who is like that God? No one but God!

Psalm 103:1-13

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!

² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴ who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵ who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.

¹⁴ *For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.*

¹⁵ *As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

¹⁶ *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.*

¹⁷ *But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,*

¹⁸ *to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.*

¹⁹ *The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.*

I Timothy 1:12-17

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² *To Timothy, my true child in the faith:*

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ *As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. ⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.*

⁸ *Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*

¹² *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to*

believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Verse 15 is the confession of the person who has heard and thoroughly internalized the parables of Luke 15.

I don't believe that Paul's first letter to Timothy was intended only for Timothy's ears, but also for the congregation in Ephesus which he was being sent to serve. It would have been read at his installation. Can you imagine having this read at your installation? What would have that sounded like to you and to the people you serve?

I think that the post-modern church needs to hear and really take to heart the material immediately before this reading in verses 3-7. In our quest for truth in the 20th century we have often made far too many confident assertions of the truth. This has led us to believe that we have it and others do not. The arrogance of that sort of thinking and doing is exceptionally off-putting to people today. They are not usually attracted to such a church; although, I have to admit that a population of such people continues to this day. Will the synod or my congregation thrive by providing ever more specific answers to questions or will we sometime have to admit we don't know?

For the theme of this Sunday, however, we will likely focus on the line which we all know well. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. This is not just Paul speaking with hyperbole, he really means this. And indeed all of us can join Him in this assertion. This is a trustworthy and true saying for every one of us. I know some of your sins but I know all of mine. When I look around me and consider all the folks I know, the biggest sinner I know is always the one who looks back at me from the bathroom mirror. I am the greatest of sinners from a purely existential point of view. I am no mass murderer, but what I find boiling down inside my own heart and head does not exactly encourage me to say that I am any better.

My older brother, not one of the clergy among my siblings, mind you, used to sing a slightly altered version of the old hymn "Chief of Sinners." His version went something like this: "Chief of sinners, though you be, there is no hope for thee." It got to the point in our house that all he had to do was hum it and we all knew what he meant. He was having fun, but it was funny because it struck close to the truth. How I like to change that pronoun to "you" instead of "I"

But Paul's assertion that he is the greatest of sinners will be essential to the Gospel lesson today. Imagine hearing this at an ordination service from the great founder of your community, the pioneering missionary and Apostle. The point seems clear. This is a place for sinners. Paul received mercy and so did we in order that the perfect patience of Jesus might be shown and some may come to believe in him for eternal life. That is the governing motif of our lives. Thus I have to say that Rick Warren is a piker with his 40 days of purpose! It is a whole life of purpose to which we are called. Our whole life is a giant illustration of God's mercy and grace. Paul had indeed been a persecutor of God's people. But that only now served to make God's graciousness and mercy greater and more glorious.

Or I Peter 5:6-11

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Coming at the end of his letter, these words fit into what scholars call paranesis or protrepsis. You might have heard that there is a distinction between these two words, but the ancients did not recognize it, using them interchangeably. They simply refer to the exhortation which moral philosophers and rhetoricians would use at the end of a letter or speech to refer to the change they wanted to see in the hearer. It is appropriate to use these rhetorical terms here because a few lines after these words Peter credits Silvanus with being the one who has crafted the letter. Silvanus, also called Silas, Paul's companion, must have been a very good Greek stylist because this letter is beautiful and follows closely the style guidelines of the time.

Peter has written this letter to “exiles” who are undergoing persecution. You could read this concluding paragraph of the letter proper as a summary or even an outline of the arguments and appeals he has made to them.

1. *They should humble themselves under the mighty hand of God. Earlier Peter has argued that the persecution they are facing is a good thing. Already in the opening paragraphs he posits that their suffering is like a refiner's fire.*
2. *This act of humbling takes two forms here and throughout the letter:*
 - a. *Casting anxieties on God – not trying to solve this ourselves but acknowledging that God is the solution.*
 - b. *Trusting that God indeed cares for us. The persecution is not a sign of God's displeasure but his genuine affection and attention.*
3. *Humbling oneself under God's mighty hand, however, has a great benefit. He will in turn exalt you. Out of the refiners fire comes the precious gold (faith) which the master treasures.*
4. *This humility will not be easy. The adversary, a roaring lion seeking prey, is prowling about. He will seek to thwart this humility – playing on your human passions which Peter has repeatedly urged the readers to control.*
5. *Peter repeats two reasons why they should resist the Devil's assaults on their humility.*
 - a. *They are not alone – their fellow Christians are suffering likewise. This is not being singled out on them alone.*
 - b. *The end is in sight. God will surely restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish them. They know this is so because God has promised.*

This is very tightly written and there are sermons that could be preached on any of the points above. Of course, like reading Micah above, it repays the preacher to familiarize himself with the earlier sections of the letter and to look for places which intersect with the lives of his own people. We may not be facing a fiery trial, but the exhortation to honor the emperor might be applied to a heated political climate when the “emperor” does not seem to merit that respect. We should always pray for our leaders, even when we disagree with them. It is instructive to note that Peter is urging them to honor Nero.

The line about the devil being compared to a roaring lion is just so picturesque that one almost cannot avoid it. But I think we often miss the point that Peter sees the leonine devil assaulting us not through persecution as much as through the temptation to pride and to taking matters into our own hands which properly belong to God. For the persecuted Christian this manifests as understanding the persecution as some sort of divine retribution for sins or as divine neglect/weakness. The explanation, however faulty, allows the persecuted person to dictate the terms of how one reacts to the persecution. If God has forgotten me then I need to take care of myself. If God is angry at me, then I may need to do some heroic thing to appease him. Peter enjoins none of that. We are God’s holy nation and his kingdom of priests. He has not forgotten about us nor has he punished us. We are to be about our priestly lives, demonstrating the patient forbearance of Jesus and honoring the very emperor who persecutes us.

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons...”

Now we get to the real meat of this week and the text which one can hardly avoid, the parables of lost sheep and lost coin, and the option, the lost sons.

Lost sheep are a real problem for shepherds. Sheep are not really the stupid animals we have been lead to believe that they are. In fact they are quite intelligent as far as barn yard denizens

go. Their problem is their eyesight is poor. They cannot see very far at all. They can hear well and smell fairly well, but they often cannot see a hazard that is right in front of them. Thus a shepherd constantly has to watch them and when they get in trouble, they often will not be able to see the way out.

The image of the lost coin may have an even larger significance than simply a lost bit of coinage. Remember that in the ancient world there was no paper money nor any checks. If you have liquid, monetary wealth it was in coin, silver, gold, bronze, and copper. The result is that a coin could be a large sum – a man who labored all day was paid in a single coin. At minimum wage, that is \$80-\$100 for a denarius. There were even more valuable coins.

But this may have had even more value to her personally, emotional value. The woman's lost coin was likely part of her dowry, a gift to her from her parents. It functioned as something of an insurance policy for her. If her husband neglected her or mistreated her, it was a cushion which was hers and nobody could take it from her. She probably wore these ten coins as a piece of jewelry around her neck. You can visit the Nelson Art Gallery in Kansas City, MO next time you are driving through and see their fine collection of these beautiful necklaces. This coin may have been a large sum of money and it likely was a gift from her parents. It is no wonder she reacted the way she did when she looked down to check her necklace and noticed one of them missing.

But even more important than the cultural back ground of these parables is the context in which we find them spoken, not the scriptural context but the relational context in which Jesus spoke. Jesus is gathering lots of people around him and not many of them are the right sort of people. They are sinners and tax collectors. He clearly has not read the manual on the proper behavior for Messiahs. The church-going sorts of people complain and grumble about this and to their complaint Jesus utters these parables and most damningly he interprets them.

You really almost have to imagine the scene. At Jesus' feet sit the outcasts, the sinners and tax collectors. These people who know they have completely messed up their lives. They hang on every word that Jesus says. He has welcomed them into his fellowship. For them the really good news is that God is happy to see them. The Jewish culture was really good at telling them that they did not belong. Jesus tells them that God is happy to see them; the heavens rejoice at your presence, the angels are happy, God is happy.

Standing at the edge of the crowd, arms crossed, frowns firmly in place, mutter the scribes and Pharisees. They are clearly unhappy. Jesus tells these parables so both audiences can hear and addresses them to both of these audiences.

*Luke is taking us somewhere and unfortunately our pericope doesn't get us all the way there. Likely for length reasons we are forced to choose between the first and second half of this amazing chapter of Luke. Pay close attention to Jesus's interpretation of the parables: After the parable of the lost sheep he says ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. *Imagine being one of the sinners at Jesus feet when you hear this. Hurray! Heaven rejoices that I am here right now. But imagine also being one of the Pharisees who hears that. They are standing on the edge of the scene angry and scowling. They are not happy. Jesus has just told them that there is joy in heaven. But they have no joy right now. Their lack of joy at God's delight has placed them outside of heaven. He has just told them that they are outside of God's party, forced to look in like some uninvited outcast. This gets even worse after the next parable.* ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Now Jesus says that the angels, the servants of God, are rejoicing, but the Pharisees are not. If you want to be very particular it even gets worse. Who is always before the angels of God? To whom is their face always turned? Has Jesus just told them that they are not only out of step with heaven but they are also not true servants of God? I think so. God is happy and they are not, just who has the problem here?

That the preacher should hear and understand the next parable is essential to preaching these first two. The Lost Son, or parable of the Prodigal as many of us know it ends with the elder brother standing on the outside looking in and refusing to enter the party because he cannot abide that the prodigal has been welcomed back. He looks like the Pharisees and Scribes here. His crabbiness ends up being a form of self-exclusion with terrible consequences. The father pleads with the elder brother to enter the party and celebrate. He has to celebrate, the son was dead and is alive, lost and found. Heaven and its people will simply celebrate when sinners repent and you get the idea the celebration will redouble if the elder brother joins in. Now two lost sons will be received home.

I think we often are pretty hard on judgmental people, and rightly so. They are a problem and the judgmental Christians who hurl insults instead of God's gracious love at homosexuals, evolutionary biology types, abortionists, etc., do immense harm to the preaching of the Gospel. But it is also quite possible to become extremely judgmental about judgmentalism in a bizarre, almost humorous little circle. "I hate judgmental people!" is really a joke, is it not? Jesus does not hate the haters, he does not judge the judges, the parable ends with Jesus pleading with all

Notice the progression in these texts and the parable of the Prodigal which follows them. The relative value of the lost increases with each parable.

Lost Sheep 1/100 lost

Lost Coin 1/10 lost

Prodigal 1/2 lost the more attentive reading reveals that both are lost)

elder brothers who are scowling at him over the heads of the sinners at his feet. He wants them to come and join the party, he really does. They all need and get the same Jesus.

Thus I think it is sheer genius and absolutely critical to its meaning that that this string of parables does not really conclude. The parable of the Lost Sons leaves you hanging. We don't know whether the elder son comes in. The parable ends with Jesus standing there, holding his hand out to these guys, asking them to come and sit down beside these same tax collectors and sinners. In so doing, Jesus is offering to the Pharisees the hospitality they do not deserve just as much as the sinners at his feet do not deserve it.

All of us are saved by grace. It is a scandalous thing to say, but the sweet little old lady who volunteers every day to read with kindergarteners is just as needful of grace as the rapist or murderer who is rotting in a cell somewhere. What is even more scandalous is that God gives it to them both. Are our people really ready to hear this? Don't be so sure. You might want to preach with track shoes on this week in order to make a quick get-away. If you nail this sermon there may well be some folks who are very angry with you. You will have poked them where it hurts.

How will we preach this scandalous Gospel on this day?

- 1. We want our people to hear a message of God's love for the people that God loves – that is all of them. That scandalous love of God can make us pretty uncomfortable, but God still loves.*
- 2. In order for that scandalous love to flow through us we need to be freed from our own need to earn our salvation. The only way we can step out of the ranks of the Pharisees and scribes is first to be a person for whom God has unconditionally given himself in love. When my status before God no longer depends on what I have done, then I am freed to see beyond the sins of others and love with God's amazing love. If I think that God has loved me because I got something right, I am ever enslaved to that rectitude.*
- 3. We really want people to hear that God delights in our repentance and rejoices to forgive our sins. It is not that God wants us to sin, but he is never tired of hearing us come to him for what he loves to give. He delights in forgiving people. This is hard for us. We get tired of someone who says that he or she will do better but never does. We imagine that God must be tired of my repeated confessions. But he is not. He is never tired of forgiving me.*

Sermon Idea: God's Scandalously Joyful Love (That the hearer would believe that God's joy is most fully expressed when his precious children are received into his gracious embrace, no matter their sin.)

This sermon is really for the person who struggles with the mechanism of God's grace, and its scandalous implications. On a congregational level, this sermon is for the country club church who is struggling to reach into the full breadth of its community. As human beings we are natural bean counters. This is reinforced by the world in which we live. We need that sort of attitude to

deal with the folks out in the world. After all, when I buy a shirt at Penney's, I expect change and a proper accounting of the cash.

But such bean counting doesn't work when we turn our attention to God and his ways. He simply rejects the bean counting and score keeping which are so ingrained into our nature. The preacher may want to reference the Isaiah 55 text in which he asserts that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts, indeed they are as much higher as the heavens are above the earth. His ways and thoughts are much better than our ways and thoughts.

We might be disheartened to be so out of touch with God's ways, except for the joy factor. The surrounding culture is quick to condemn what it deems "intolerance." But its intolerance of intolerant people is self-defeating and finally will collapse under its own weight. In mean time, however, we are told what terrible people we are. When we realize that we are out of step with him, God smiles, and rejoices at our repentance too. The solution to our salvation is not ours, it is his, and it is scandalous in its simplicity. He simply refuses to keep score. Jesus has completely evened the score in the cross, in fact we have a positive balance which cannot be exhausted. It can be rather disconcerting at times, even frightening for the accountant that lives in all of us, but he manages rather well with this system, and it is the essential ingredient to my own salvation, so I will just have to let him be.

God simply loves to welcome a sinner in his embrace. His love for his people is so deep and wide, high and broad (Ephesians 3) that we are stunned by it, but it is not like we are stunned by something bad, we are amazed at something really, really, really good!

The person who is a bean counter, who thinks God is a bean counter too, often finds that such a dreary, bean-counting faith is without energy. Being a scale-balancing bean counter sucks me dry. On the other hand, grace empowers the Christian life. When we think God is counting beans, we are never entirely certain that we are "in" and so we don't really have much to tell someone about. The uncertainty really kills our witness. I find it very hard to invite a friend. Thus my evangelism is empty and most often simply not done. It is when the bean counting comes to an end, when the score is evened completely by Christ, that suddenly my past stops mattering so much and freed of its burden I can go out those doors and be something else.

So the Christian walks out of this door with eyes wide to see something else in this world, something sweet and good. God's great love for broken folks is still at work. You will want an example of this. Perhaps you have a dramatic one from your own experience, or better, one from the shared experience of the congregation and its members. In a pinch tell the famous stories of John Newton (author of Amazing Grace) or Chuck Colson (former advisor to Nixon and founder of Prison Ministry Fellowship after he was released from the penitentiary.)

The goal really will be that the hearer believes that this is the way that God does things, it is a good way, it is the way of my salvation, and I might just get to see it happen today.

The challenge of this sermon is to end it well. Jesus took this to the parable of the lost sons but we don't get there. How will we finish? How will we make this for the hearer when it is really, even in Jesus own schema, not quite the end of the story?

- a. A story is always the best way to do this. This might be a good moment for one of the stories of people whom the Gospel has changed. This should be a story of grace, someone getting not what they deserve but something much better. A young man who instead of going to jail gets help or something like that.
- b. We might want to talk about the outcast beloved – just whom your people will see this way will vary, but perhaps it is the terrorist, the Moslem, the homosexual, someone whom your people would perhaps consign to the “lost” category and let them see this person through new eyes, the eyes of God's holy and joyful love for them. This will be a moment when put into a difficult situation the whole group realizes that they are all the beloved children of God, brothers in their humanity, the recipients of God's grace.

Another Sermon Idea: Don't ya just hate judgmental people!?! (Gospel lesson – that the hearer would hear God's rebuke of their own judgmental attitude and also Jesus' pleading love that he/she join heaven's celebration of repentance.)

This sermon potentially would be a great way to “hook” people, setting up judgmentalism as a terrible sin which when they are foaming at the mouth about it, we turn the mirror on them and they realize that this has been about them the whole time. The sermon has to be careful to make sure the gospel gets in there. The hook can be so effective that they never actually make it back! This may be best if we simply extend the reading through the sermon to tell the story of the older brother at the end of the prodigal. It is surprising, really surprising that the father reaches out to the older brother. He doesn't slam the door on him like we would expect a Middle Eastern father to do.

This sermon targets the judgmental sort of Christian, and there are plenty of those. You would not believe how many of my students after Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 admitted they thought the New Orleans residents deserved it for their sins. They rather puckered when I told them that Portland had the nation's largest naked bicycle parade and we were built on the flanks of an active volcano. I am sure that more than a few of our parishioners have been clucking their tongues at the various examples of misery around the world which bombard us in the news. California probably deserves those fires for immorality. Are you not surprised that the Middle East is blowing up? They are Moslems, after all.

Jesus rejects such an attitude and its ensuing thoughts today. God does not judge people that way and if we do, we are simply out of step with his kingdom, his servants, and most importantly we are out of step with his joy.

This is hard for us. We seemed to be hardwired, programmed to think that there is something about me that makes me somehow just a little more lovable than the poor sap who is heading to

hell. We would like to think that it is important that I kept at least a few of the rules or got a few things right. Jesus will not allow us to keep that conceit today. God's love has never been for sale. He never gives in response to something I have done, but only in response to my crushing need. It is scandalous grace that has saved me and you. If it is not scandalous, it is not really grace. If God's love is given in response to anything that I have done, it is not grace. If it is not about what I have done, God can and does give it to the scoundrel, the sinner, the Moslem, even the terrorist, the guy who makes my life miserable at work, and the bully in school of whom I am afraid.

What has to go in such a scandalous graciousness is a sort of spiritual pride and judgment which would ever look down the nose at an egregious sinner and despise them. No one is outside the love of God. That is so easy to say but so hard to believe and harder to live.

Here we have to take a little excursus. We might be in a position in life in which we have to evaluate someone. Teachers do, in fact most positions involve some sort of judgment of another human being, his or her work and performance. Just think about a bricklayer with an apprentice. But this is not the sort of spiritually judgmental attitude that this sermon addresses. And I think this distinction is necessary. These texts and their message of "don't judge" can become an excuse for sloppy work. Remember the Christian shoe maker is not discerned because he uses crosses for buckles but because he makes the best shoes.

This spiritually judgmental attitude shows up in a deficit of joy and love. Jesus points to the failure of joy on the part of the Pharisees today. Today this is often a sort of institutional covetousness. Do we rejoice every time a person comes to faith, even when they are not a member of this congregation? Do we have individuals whose presence in our own congregation is not really welcome? There are those whose presence in our doors might be a problem for us.

Such attitudes are a serious spiritual problem, which is why the gospel is found today not in the words of Jesus so much as in the actions of Jesus. He could have simply turned his back on the grumbling Pharisees. These guys would eventually kill him. He knew that. It would have been simpler just to ignore them, but he cannot. He has love for the judgmental types as well. He stands with his hands extended to grumpy folks like us today. His invitation is to sit down with the stinkers and sinners over every stripe and rejoice that we are all bathed in the same gracious love of God.

Or

Luke 15:11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I

have found my sheep that was lost.’⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Context, context, context! This parable is only intelligible in light of its context. Jesus has two audiences as he speaks. He has the sinners who are gathered at his feet, the tax collectors, the naughty people. Who would these sinners be today? Since the Victorian era we have almost always categorized some form of sexually immoral person in those ranks. Interestingly, in the medieval period it would have been a proud person.

The other half of the audience are the scribes and teachers of the Law who are on the periphery of this scene, but whose complaint occasions this parable. They are not happy with the scene before them. Jesus is hanging around the wrong sorts of people. Self-respecting rabbis don't talk to these sorts of unclean folk. Jesus is making a mockery of their carefully crafted system which is designed to bring societal pressure to bear on these evil-doers so they can be reformed, brought back into proper religious society. They need to know that they have a problem, properly repent of those problems, and then, after a suitable period of penitential sorrow and having made sufficient satisfaction, they can be readmitted to society. Jesus is subverting all this by teaching and speaking with them. He even eats with them. The religious types are not happy. .



Jesus uncorks a trio of parables in response to this, and I really believe they need to be read in series. First he tells of the lost sheep, 1 out of a 100 which were owned by the shepherd. He diligently searches and returns joyfully with his sheep. He calls his neighbors together for a celebration. It is the interpretation which Jesus gives which is simply devastating. There is more joy in heaven over the one who needs to repent than over the 99 who do not need to. Our good Lutheran sensibilities immediately question whether anyone can not need to repent, but just let Jesus tell this, he will get to that point. Right now, hear and believe that he has told the sinners at his feet that God is happy that they are there; in fact he is happier about them than he is about the self-righteous crabs who are on the periphery of this scene.

Jesus then ratchets things up with a second parable. A woman loses a coin. The way he tells this has many folks thinking about a particular kind of coin. In any event, one needs to remember that there is no paper money in the ancient world. A coin could be of considerable value. It is likely, however, that this was a part of her dowry, a gift from her parents. This was her insurance policy in case something happened to her husband. She would have had it fashioned into a necklace and worn it every day. If you are ever in Kansas City with a little time to kill, consider going to the Nelson Art Gallery. They have a marvelous display of these necklaces which have been found from the ancient Middle East. This would have had more than simple monetary value to her, it would have had emotional and security value for her.

She loses 1 of these 10. She diligently sweeps and searches the house and when she finds it, she also summons neighbors and friends to a party. They open a bottle of wine and celebrate. She has found her lost coin. Again, it is in the interpretation which Jesus gives to the parable that the real barb is found. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one lost sinner who repents. The folks at Jesus feet now know that the angels are happy too. The folks with their arms crossed on the edge of this crowd have just heard that there is joy in God's presence, and their crabbiness means they are not in the presence of God. The servants of God are happy, and I am not, that means I am not a servant of God. This is getting worse for them. Not only are they out of step with God, now they are out of his presence.

Then Jesus tells our parable, the story of a man who has two sons. Notice how the ratio of the lost has gone up. 1 out of 2. Or is it 2 out of 2? Here the good Lutheran's complaint voiced in Jesus' comments – about the 99 who don't need to repent but we know that everyone does need to repent – will be answered.

The first son is a real piece of work. He does what is unthinkable in the ancient world. He is grotesquely disrespectful to his father. In the ancient world and in the Middle East today, one just does not do this. Fathers are kings inside their own homes and their sons must respect them. This is the very fabric of society. The boy asks for his inheritance, he cannot wait for his father to die. The Greek word for his "share of the inheritance" is related to "life" in the same way we speak of a livelihood as being one's income.

The father interestingly gives him what he asks for. This would have been difficult as the father would have had to sell property, perhaps take out a loan, etc. The younger son in this situation was due 1/3 of the estate. The elder got two shares of the estate so he could take care of the mother and other dependents.

The son is prodigal. That means he spends his money with reckless abandon. But the resources do eventually give out. He is reduced to working, and he takes a job no good Jewish boy would want. He must feed pigs and he longs to eat the pig's food. Finally he "comes to his senses" and that is really what the Greek says. He reasons that the hired help at least has enough to eat on his father's estate; he will apologize and ask for a job. He even prepares a speech in which he says that he does not deserve to be called his son any more.

Of course when he arrives his father runs to greet him. This also is very significant. Men at the time wore long robes, like a long dress. The only way to run in them is to hitch them up around one's hips. There simply is no elegant way to do this and men in the time were very image conscience. They might walk quickly, but they simply did not debase themselves by running.



Why does he run? It is because the last couple hundred yards of the son's journey home would have taken him through the homes of the servants and workers on the farm. They would have

known what he had done. They might have had their own jobs threatened when the brat ran off with 1/3 of the estate. It would not have taken too much imagination to think that they could make points with the old man by spitting on him, by calling him names, hissing at him, etc. The father pre-empts that. He runs by them, embarrassing himself. When he embraces the boy he starts shouting out commands: Get a ring, shoes, and robe! Kill the fatted calf; we are going to have a party.

At this last command the ears of all would have perked up. We know from excavating the cemeteries of the period that many people were protein deficient. They got meat maybe about once a month. Without any way to refrigerate, they would eat this entire calf that night. This was your shot at protein this month. You really needed to be at this party.



The father has skillfully prevented anyone from scorning, spitting upon, throwing dung at, or otherwise despising this young man. Now, they must also celebrate or they won't get their shot at the prime rib. The father's behavior was most surprising for Jesus' audience. A good Middle Eastern father at the time would have left the young man who had behaved thus sitting on the door step for several days before he even acknowledged his existence. All the while those who sought the father's favor would have made their opinion known of this wastrel, quite often by dumping the chamber pot on him. But this father does the unthinkable, and yet any father who has watched for a son to come home knows that this is not so unthinkable. He loves him, and that love makes fathers do strange things.

The party progresses and the elder brother comes in from the field. He has been working hard in the father's fields. He is surprised to hear a celebration. He inquires and discovers that the joy is for his returned brother. He is livid. How can they throw a party for that brat!

The father then does something just as amazing as his welcome of the younger brother. He goes out to plead with the elder brother. In the ancient world when the father threw a party, the son had to come. Throwing a petulant pout on the porch is simply not allowed. The elder brother is in fact being just as disrespectful as the younger brother had been. (Notice the bit about who needs to repent. The Pharisees on the edges of the scene are being disrespectful like the elder brother.) Again the father loves and reaches out to his wayward son. Interestingly, Luke does not finish this story. There is no zinger at the end. The parable ends with Jesus' hands extended to the crabby Pharisees on the edge of the crowd. "Won't you come and sit down?"

This stunning! I really, really hate judgmental people! Now he is letting even those guys into the Church!? Surely he will make them stop being judgmental before they can be in, won't he? Surely they have to change their ways before he lets them at the table, doesn't he? Doesn't he?

I asked earlier who belonged in the crowd of sinners at Jesus' feet. Who are the people who are simply outside the pale for us? For a lot of Christians it remains the very same sexual ethics which was true for their parents. Perhaps the exact sexual sin has morphed from divorce or adultery into homosexuality or something else, but it is still in that general realm. For lots of folks outside the church, on the other hand, it is the very behavior of the churchly people. It is their intolerance and judgmentalism. But hating judgmental people is rather self-defeating, don't you think?

Law and Gospel Analysis *I find this a useful exercise – so I include it here.*

Law: I have a God problem. I know I sound like a caricature of those guys who stand up in AA meetings, but really I do. I simply cannot control myself or my life and I know that it is somehow really out of plumb with God. I may seem to be roughly on track with the rest of the world, but I have a serious God problem.

Gospel: God knows my problem and he has turned away his wrath which I deserved and instead acted for my comfort and salvation. He has sent Jesus, his only and precious Son. He has died for the sins of the world and paid their price. The problem has been born by himself, perfectly, justly, but more importantly, lovingly and graciously.

Law: Yeah, but I have such a hard time with this. My sins they haunt me, they won't let me go. I remember them. When I just start to think I am past them, I say something stupid and they all come rushing back at me. My mind is flooded with memories of the thoughtless, mean, and foolish things I have said and done. Why can't I be rid of them?

Gospel: You can be rid of them. God sees you and the rest of the this world in a totally different way now that Jesus has come, done his work, and taken up our humanity. He has pledged his Spirit and his help for you. You cannot do this, it is true, that is why even this God will do with you and for you. You will be his partner in this, he will not force you, you may even lend a hand once in a while because he loves that, but the final product is always in his hands. He will give you his eyes to see yourself differently.

Law: There are some seriously messed up people in this world. It is easy enough to say that God loves everyone and think about the teeming masses of India or China or something like that, but it gets really tough when you start talking about that guy at work who really annoys me, the neighbor whose motorcycle starts up at 5:30 in the morning, or the other guy whose house looks like dump and is driving everyone's house values down. It can even be harder when it is my brother-in-law or the woman who snared your daughter into a lesbian relationship. There are some people who are really hard to love.

Gospel: God used to think that way about you too. But he loves you, and he gives you and me that same sort of love. There is no sin, no hurt, no atrocity about which we cannot

simply say, “Jesus died for that.” It doesn’t mean it does not hurt, it doesn’t mean that I am tough, but it means I don’t have to get even or carry a load of hate in my heart anymore. I can start to see even the loathsome folks as people. They get hungry, they are afraid; they are just as prone to cancer and heart attacks and arthritis as the rest of us. Their kids get picked on sometimes in school and their parents die like ours do. Seeing them this way is simply a much happier way to live, I get fewer ulcers and my face has fewer frown lines. The people I loathe are all just people for whom Jesus died too.

Law: Wait a minute here. This sounds subversive and dangerous. You mean that there are no standards and no rules? God loves all so we can just do whatever we want? Don’t we have to enforce some structures here? Don’t we have to reign in the more destructive elements in our society? Would you empty the prisons and forgive even the bank executives?

Gospel: Yes, it is subversive, but not like imagined above. The radical love of even the enemy would transform the mighty Roman Empire with a few hundred years of Jesus’ death on a cross. But Christianity did not let out all the prisoners or stop the wheels of justice. Real love also acknowledges that real evil exists, we will still protect the weak and the helpless, we will discipline our children, and tell the wrongdoer that he has done wrong. But we will not hate them for it. In fact, we will come to the moment of conflict with a strange and hopeful joy. For we know the power of forgiveness and God’s love to transform sinners. After all, we were a sinner, still are, but now that we have drawn from the well of salvation, we just cannot hate that way anymore.

Sermon Idea: Ambassadors of God’s Reconciliation (That the Spirit of God would empower the hearer to see the world through the eyes of Christ’s new creation.)

This is really an action sermon, a sermon which, if the hearer really believes and takes this to heart and life, will enable them to live a totally different sort of life. We enjoin them to the radical sort of forgiveness which Paul is practicing in the Epistle lesson today and which Jesus describes in the Gospel lesson. But don’t forget the OT reading, Isaiah there describes the beauty of being the person on the receiving end of this. That picture is critical to motivation here.

I envision this sermon really being a “how to forgive your brother” sort of sermon. You would do well to use the imagery of the prodigal and the situation of Paul here. Both stories are rich enough that you don’t need much more illustration but you will want to have handy some contemporizations of this motif.

Forgiveness is something we don’t really teach people today. We talk about it, but we don’t really do it. First we have to say that forgiveness does mean that something wrong has been done. There is a right and a wrong, moral relativism destroys forgiveness by taking away any need.

Secondly, forgiveness always involves saying no to a number of things. I won't get even, nor will I bear a grudge. Vengeance solves nothing and grudge bearing is quite self-destructive. I won't be tough about this either, and insist that I am above the pain. That does work sometimes, when the wound is slight, but when it is right to the heart such a method fails us. Nor will I try to understand what the other has done. I think this is the most common solution we try for sin. If I were in that man's shoes, I might have done the same thing. But that does not take away the hurt or the sting. That does not make it right, only is the honest admission that I could do the same. Such humility is good, but it is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness is saying that this hurt, this sin, this problem, is something that Jesus died for. I won't get even, Jesus has evened the score. I won't bear a grudge, why carry something that he has borne? I won't be tough, he has died. I don't have to understand it. Evil is often banal, I will instead forgive it.

Jesus has died for this, and that means I will see it differently. I may not be able to forget it, at least not for a very long time, but I will pledge to "remember it red" covered in the blood of Christ.

In order for this to really work, we also have to hold up for folks the real blessing that this is. Forgiveness does not merely paper over the problem, but it solves it. Forgiveness allows broken relationship to be restored. Forgiveness is a powerful way to make our congregation and our families, and all our relationships stronger. Forgiveness is simply sweet. Here is where the Isaiah text seems to come in for me.

Forgiveness is always a risk. It is not a guarantee of the restoration of relationship. It may even be perceived by the person who is forgiving as a form of vulnerability. The person who forgives will be eschewing the guarantees which are born of "getting even" and the satisfaction of at least nursing a long cold grudge against the person. Rather it almost must run the risk of being hurt again. It doesn't mean that I need to be stupid about it and put myself in harm's way, but it also means that I am not going to set up some fortress in which I cannot ever be hurt again. That is not life.

Forgiveness is the absolute abandonment of all hope for a better past. It is the beginning of today, with today.

Another Sermon Idea: Won't you come in? (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to cast off all judgmentalism and offer the sinner Christ's forgiving love.)

This sermon will use the parable to preach some of what Paul says in the Epistle reading. The powerful story of the Parable of the Prodigal and Elder Brothers is so familiar that the preacher may well want simply to tell it slowly, but the theology of the parable is really also found in the Epistle reading. The older brother sees his younger brother through the flesh, the old way of seeing things. But Paul enjoins us, as Jesus enjoined the Pharisees and scribes to see the tax collectors and sinners through a new paradigm, a paradigm which has tremendous transformative power for our fellowship as a congregation.

The sermon will recast the vision of what sort of relationship God has created in this place through the gifts of his sacramental body and blood. Remember, Paul sees this new vision based on the death and resurrection of Christ. (the reading prior to the text today) Because Christ has died for all, all have died. This “therefore” leads to the new way of seeing all people in Christ.

We could use the Sosthenes incident to illustrate that Paul is not kidding here. He really means just what Jesus is talking about. Paul was nearly killed by Sosthenes in Acts 18. In I Corinthians 1 he calls him a brother.

Is this sermon potentially too long?