

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – (Proper 11) July 23

Today we probably need to start with a word about fairness. There is an odd streak within the human being that simply wants God to be fair. We want this whole life thing to be fair. We know what fair is when we go to the grocery store. I buy the food, I pay the money and walk out with the food. That's fair. If I go home and discover that the dozen eggs only has eleven in it, I might cry "Unfair!"

Of course, no one knows about fairness quite like an eight year old. There is a world in which counting an entire bag of M and M's to be shared their little brother makes perfect sense. Woe to us if there happens to be an odd number. But do we ever really outgrow that tendency? We expect our boss to be fair with us. We expect that if we get a ticket from the trooper that there is a measure of fairness to the whole affair. Having met one of Idaho's finest on my trip through the Gem State, I can attest that the feeling is present even in those who write pericope studies. If there is a competition for a job opening, we want it to be fairly conducted and might grouse if the manager's nephew gets the spot.

But do we really want God to be fair? Job tried this in the book which bears his name. This fascinating book seems to have been written at two different times. The narrative story is the prose part you find and the beginning and the end. The middle section, the long part with all the poetry we think is somewhat later. What it really looks like is that someone read the original little story and said, "That's not fair for God to do that to poor Job. I wonder what he felt like?" And so they imagined what it was like for Job to be the subject of a bet between God and Satan. How did Job feel about all the things that befell him, and what advice his neighbors might have given him?

Of course we don't really want God to be fair. Fairness is not at all in our best interest. Job finds that out at the end of the book. If God is fair with me, I am in a serious amount of trouble because fair means getting what I should get, what I deserve. I really want God to be gracious, which means that I have to come to a number of situations which don't seem fair to me and look at them differently.

In the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, and again the parable of the Prodigal Son/Forgiving Father, Jesus seems to be dealing the fairness problem that comes up in light of God's mercy and grace. "Why do they get the same thing I got when I worked a lot harder?"

But there is another fairness issue which comes up with people. If God really does not like the sin in the world, if God has all this power, why doesn't he do something about it? It really is not fair that good folks often are stomped on while the rich scoundrels might get away with murder. This question has actually been vexing the people of God for a long time. Habakkuk in the Old Testament wrestled with this. Several other OT authors will ask this difficult question of God. Many people who reject God's witness today do so on the basis of this complaint.

Michael Gillespie in a text entitled “The Theological Roots of Modernity” suggests that Luther, Humanism, late medieval Scholasticism, and others were really an attempt to come to grips with the idea that God has unlimited power and the world is still so messed up. I am not entirely enamored of Gillespie’s thesis, but his casting of the historical narrative has some merit. I just think he is reading Luther too simplistically.

If you want better books about the problem of evil, I recommend Brian Davies “The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil” (2006) or N. T. Wright “Evil and the Justice of God” (2006) (Was 2006 the right year to publish these books?)

Jesus today will address the question in one of the few instances within the NT that wrestles with this topic. He does so in the parable of the Weeds in the Wheat. His answers may not be entirely satisfying, especially to a person who is not in that relationship which we call faith. But Jesus does not give more definitive answers. At this point he almost says, “trust me” and leaves it at this.

I, by the way, think this is one of the great things about our Christian faith. There is not a question which is off limits of that relationship which we call faith. Job and Habakkuk, Jeremiah and others can ask the questions, even accuse God, and not get zapped, not get censured. They might hear a rather stern word from God, but they are always loved. Do we trust God’s love for us enough that we can enter into a hard conversation with him? The Moslem is to submit to the will of Allah. The Hindu imagines a great impersonal wheel whose treads sometimes crush me, but other times do not, rather mechanistically. Buddhism’s goal seems to be an escape from caring about the injustice in the world.

But just because Jesus addresses the issue don’t think that this is easy. This is a tough sermon to write and preach. I like it, and it is a necessary sermon to preach and write, but exercise a little caution here. You may have some folks who will struggle with this because it will tread upon some concepts of God which they have cherished for a long time.

One way to consider this whole topic is in a very Lutheran way, a discussion of a theology of the cross versus a theology of glory. Luther spoke of the Deus Absconditus or “Hidden God.” This allowed him to say that God had all the power, but we do not get his power revealed to us, rather we get the love revealed in the cross and that is all we can really know of God right now. To speculate of God’s might, his wisdom, knowledge, and other attributes is looking for what we cannot know and may in fact distract us from the necessary revelation he has made in Jesus. The preacher will want to inoculate his hearer from entering into this sort of a discussion/questioning. It is a dead end. We want to point the person who asks “Why?” to the cross, which is God’s final answer to every broken heart in the world. He has entered into the sinful creation, endured its worst, and by uniting himself with all this world’s suffering has somehow rendered it holy. I cannot explain the mechanics of this or the rationale. I am mystified by it and must join the skeptic in wondering what is going on. But I also believe that Jesus’ death

on the cross means he will dry every tear, even the tears that I am weeping in the face of my own personal tragedy.

This really is a discussion of the problem of Evil. Job has an answer, God is God, I am not. Habbakuk wondered why terrible things happened to the people of God. Thomas Aquinas asked if Evil was even a real thing. He said “no.” Evil is like a shadow. The shadow is an absence of light. Evil is an absence of Good. In and of itself, the shadow is not really a thing, but the absence of something real. In his schema only Good is a real thing. This allowed him to say that God only made good because good was the real thing.

Nominalism, the late medieval philosophical/theological movement in which Luther was educated, would say that there are no real forms of things, but there are only the things that are and we give them names. (That is what “nominalism” means.) Luther would rebel against nominalism and return to the “realist” position of Augustine and others, including Aquinas.

Collect of the Day

O God, So rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that, ever mindful of Your final judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with You in perfect joy hereafter; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

So rule and govern our hearts and minds. Is that a frightening statement? I once said that we as a university need to start obeying some rules that we don't make up and I was told that I had just said a very frightening thing. I on the other hand find that being a completely self-determining entity which only follows rules we make up to be a very frightening thing.

But notice, to rule and govern does not mean control. I am ruled by my governor, the president, and the local municipality governs me, but they don't really make robots of me. Does God? When we talk about God ruling and governing our hearts and minds we tend to get rather Orwellian overtones from that, as if God was interested in dictating what I will have for breakfast in the morning. But is that really what we are praying for? Is it not rather the opportunity to be in his kingdom? God has consistently demonstrated that he made humanity to be willing and free partners in his kingdom. He is not going to contradict that primary goal. To be in the kingdom, however, means that we will own his rightful rule and authority in my life.

The Spirit is enjoined to make us mindful of the final judgment. That is a good thing. In truth, the final judgment has already been declared, and is declared in every absolution we pronounce, in every baptism we conduct, in every meal in which we say, “Take and eat, the body of Christ.” For in these “Word” moments, God is pronouncing judgment, a judgment which is a pre-echo of the final judgment which he will pronounce one last time on that last day. So if we are mindful of the final judgment, doesn't that mean being mindful of the innocent verdict we know will be spoken there? How does my life, thinking, feeling, doing, change when I keep in mind that on the

last day I will be declared innocent, indeed I have already been declared innocent? When I am no longer in that dreadful economy of earning a place in heaven, my life becomes very different.

That last day's pronouncement will be the last one because after that we will be in heaven and won't need to hear that Gospel proclaimed any more. It will simply be the root of all we are. The prayer we pray this morning is that we would start to live out the heavenly reality today, that we would start to live in the reality of this final judgment. This judgment of holiness, of being the child of God, of being perfect because Christ has died for us, that starts to take shape in our lives today through the way we live. We no longer have to obey the same drives and urges which once so ruled and governed our lives. As Luther says, we should fear and love God so that...j

Is the Eschaton necessary for the Christian to address the problem of evil? Today Jesus will urge us to consider the End/goal/judgment of all things. Then God will sort things out, harvesting the good, burning up the chaff like a farmer at harvest. The prayer urges us to be mindful of the judgment. Is that also mindful that God does indeed judge the bad guys and the evil ones who seem triumphant today but will not always be so.

Readings

Isaiah 44:6-8 *This reading is the conclusion to a brief oracle of Isaiah, which I have included in its entirety here.*

*“But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!*

*² Thus says the LORD who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:*

*Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.*

*³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;*

*I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.*

*⁴ They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.*

*⁵ This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s,’
another will call on the name of Jacob,
and another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’
and name himself by the name of Israel.”*

*⁶ Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:*

*“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.*

⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and set it before me,
since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

⁸ Fear not, nor be afraid;

have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me?

There is no Rock; I know not any.”

Isaiah was writing to a people who had just been conquered in war. In the ancient world, one of the ways that people understood the battles of nations was that they were a reflection of battles between the Gods. It appears from Isaiah that some folks were thinking that Yahweh had been defeated by the gods of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The very next section of Isaiah’s book speaks against any idolatry. We don’t know that folks actually said that or that this was a widely held belief. Some seriously doubt it. But Isaiah addresses it or at least uses it as an excuse to address the whole issue of God and other gods.

He makes the bold and very interesting statement for the ancient world that God is the only God and there is no other god. For the people of his time this was a very different way of thinking. The ancient world was a place filled with many different gods. It would have resembled India far more than anything else we know. Exclusive monotheism was almost unknown. There were some who only worshiped one god, devoted to this or that deity, but only the Jews were in the habit of insisting that there was only one God and the rest were fakes.

A few things in the text perhaps need a little clarification: “his Redeemer” the antecedent of “his” is most likely Israel. Hebrew has some funny things it does with possessive pronouns this way. Even though we think of Israel as a plural or a collective noun, it was treated like a singular.

“Let him declare it?” this is a challenge. If there is another God, let him speak up now.

The gist of this whole passage seems to be in verse 8. The Jews are exhorted to “fear not” because they are God’s witnesses and there is no other rock.

Of course there are a couple of words which a student of the text might want to look at more deeply here. Redeemer is one and Rock is the other.

Redeemer is most interesting. Boaz is Ruth’s redeemer when he marries her. A kinsman could redeem a family member from slavery/bondage. Of course we are most familiar with saying that Jesus redeemed us on the cross. This metaphor is worthy of much study, especially if you are preaching at “Redeemer Lutheran.” Today we are most likely to use this term in conjunction with a coupon and a box of cereal or the like at the grocery store. The word had much more

emotional significance for a biblical era audience when bankruptcy meant being sold into a slavery from which only redemption might rescue the person.

Not many of us are preaching at “Rock” Lutheran Church, but this also is a most worthy word. I find it especially interesting if you contrast it with stone. A stone was an instrument of punishment. Jewish execution was carried out via stoning. A rock was a refuge, a place to stand, a mountain against which the waves of the enemy would break but not overcome. Even Jesus compares his word and teaching to a rock in the last verses of Matthew 7 and in 18 Peter’s confession is a rock upon which the church will be built.

For Rock – see Dt 32, II Sam 22, Psalm 18, Psalm 62, and many other psalms. Within Isaiah consider 26:4, 30:29, 32:2, 33:16, 48:21, and 51:1.

I once used this at an outdoor service to significant effect. There was a large rock behind us in the park and I was able to secure a stone to hold in my hand and compared them. God offers his people that he is a rock, not a stone for them. For the others, Jesus is a stone that causes them to stumble, but for us he is the rock of our salvation.

Psalm 119:57-64

Heth

- ⁵⁷ The LORD is my portion;
I promise to keep your words.
- ⁵⁸ I entreat your favor with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.
- ⁵⁹ When I think on my ways,
I turn my feet to your testimonies;
- ⁶⁰ I hasten and do not delay
to keep your commandments.
- ⁶¹ Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me,
I do not forget your law.
- ⁶² At midnight I rise to praise you,
because of your righteous rules.
- ⁶³ I am a companion of all who fear you,
of those who keep your precepts.
- ⁶⁴ The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love;
teach me your statutes!

Psalm 119 is a playful psalm, which works its way through the Hebrew alphabet. Heth is a letter which is pronounced with a harsh guttural, back in the throat. Imagine someone clearing phlegm from the back of the throat and you are close.

The whole psalm, however, is a serious meditation on the relationship of the psalmist to the law of God. Without the Gospel motivation this looks psychotic. With the Gospel, however, it becomes something really beautiful. Our antinomian age which has defined “law” as always bad needs to spend much more time in this psalm. Luther loved it. He taught his first year at the University of Wittenberg on the Psalms and it was during this time that he began to work out his theology of Grace. After teaching Romans and others, he returned to the psalms and you can read the reportio of his lecture notes in Luther’s Works. A good place to start.

Romans 8:18-27

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

I believe this might be one of the texts most suited to this current age. When our prophet of the age is a former vice president who proclaims an environmental apocalypse, we are probably in a generation of folks who are asking a different set of questions than they were when Luther was on the scene, or my own father for that matter.

The preacher today has a chance to say that the salvation which Christ won on the cross is for the whole creation, as it groans. That image of a groaning creation seems ripe with potential for an audience of folks who are concerned about the environment.

Now, it must be said at the same time, that my own experience in Lutheran congregations suggests that we Lutherans often make our living from agricultural and extractive industries. That means many of us are farmers, miners, lumbermen, or other folk whose livelihood is

threatened by the very environmentalism which Al Gore and the Sierra Club espouse. The preacher thus has two opportunities to preach the Gospel here but might need to exercise a little care in how to do it. Truthfully, the preacher who preached too extreme of a position in my former parish would have done great harm and surely closed the ears of many of his hearers to his message. They were largely folks who made their livelihood in the timber industry. Spotted owl was a dirty word for them. At the same time I lived in one of the most beautiful parts of the world and had some ardent environmentalists in my congregation. If I took the position of industry in this, I was also going to do harm and close ears.

So what shall we say? I believe there to be a message of Law and Gospel for both audiences here. Surely we all can lament the trash beside the road, the toxins in the water supply, the degradation of the salmon runs, the loss of species to extinction and the like. The creation does groan, and that groaning is brought on by sin. Whether global warming is a direct result of my gas guzzling ways or if it is indeed a natural cycle, I really don't know and ultimately doesn't make a difference for what I preach. I do know that in much of what I see and hear about the world, I am watching the terrible effects of humanity's Fall into Sin. Is the world messed up because it is simply messed up, or did I make it that way? Who can really answer the question other than God? It seems that he suggests as much in Genesis 3 when he says that Adam will toil and labor against a nature which no longer is cooperative but which sprouts thistles and weeds.

The real joy of this text is that we can preach a message of God's reconciliation with the whole of creation. Jesus did not die on that cross to whisk our souls away to heaven for some sort of spiritual renewal, but he also died for the whole of his creation, a restoration which will take place when the sons of God are revealed on the last day. The passenger pigeon will fly again. There will no longer be a giant island of trash in the Pacific Ocean. These things are important to Jesus too, and the answer to these questions lies not with us as much as it does with God. He may use us, and I think we all can agree that responsible stewardship of the earth is a wise and God-pleasing thing, but we hope in Him, not in us.

If this is a strange or unusual read of the text, that is because American Lutheranism has drunk deeply of the Calvinist well. Calvin was a great admirer of St. Augustine, but he read Augustine rather narrowly, focusing on Augustine's "use" of the created world to "enjoy" only God. The result of this is a tendency inside Calvinism and its daughter traditions (Armenianism, Holiness, Pentecostalism, etc.) to see the creation as something which is not part of the plan of salvation. This is why they struggle to see baptismal water as a means of grace. God would never use water, mere creation, to save us because salvation is essentially an escape from creation. In this view, the created world is so corrupt that it must be destroyed utterly and remade. Our bodies, our sinful flesh, the whole world are the problem.

Luther and the Lutheran movement, however, has a much more positive view of the created world. Luther loved his beer and sausage, he was happily married, he could wish for the intensity of faith which he saw in his dog who watched him eat the sausage. When Zwingli

wanted to suggest that the body of Jesus was limited to heaven at the Ascension, Luther called him an ignorant pig and countered that Jesus had entered the cosmos, united himself with the whole of creation.

Thus Lutherans, when they are true to their confession and Lutheran-ness, have a strong theology of the creation, which often finds its expression sacramentally in Eucharist, Baptism, and the Church. These physical, created things are moments in which God restores creation and unites not only our souls but also our bodies to himself in the incarnate Christ. But our theology of creation is not only found in the sacramental actions and elements, but it permeates the whole of our theology, including our stewardship, evangelism, doctrine of vocation, and much more.

I would like once more to point out the recurrent Biblical image for the end of the world which Paul uses again here. It is like childbirth. It is dangerous, it is painful, but it is a time of hope and joy as well. The life which awaits us on the other side of the “labor” is a very good thing. As Paul says the current sorrows are not worth comparing to the joys which await us in glory. This too is a really effective image for the hearer.

The last section is also really important for it establishes our humility before God. We don't have all the right prayers, but the Spirit does, and groans for us and through us. Even in our best moments, when we do remember to pray, we are always inadequate of ourselves. But God knows this and gives us his very self so our prayers are full and complete and they are heard and answered. This too is another worthy sermon on this text.

Following on the prayer which has urged us to be mindful of the final judgment, Paul is mindful of the judgment here. But contrary to our expectation he is looking forward to the revelation of glory. Paul is mindful of God's final judgment, and he is not wondering what the judgment will be, he has an expectation of God's righteous judgment. He has received the Spirit, as have we. That mean he expects something good in that judgment.

He looks forward to the redemption of the whole creation, including our bodies, but also the whole thing, which is groaning as it waits for our redemption and adoption as sons of God. .

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 I have included the intervening verses, the brief parable of the mustard seed and more discourse on the purpose and nature of parables before Jesus gets around to explaining the weeds in the wheat.

²⁴ He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ ²⁸ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers,

Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

³¹ He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

³⁴ All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables;

I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

First a word about the middle verses which our pericope system omits. Before the parable of the weeds in the wheat Jesus has told and explained the parable of the sower. Now we get this parable, and an explanation, but there is something between the parable and the explanation. That is not an accident, but deserves our attention as well. We get two very brief parables. The parable of the mustard seed suggests that the kingdom of God should not be judged by outward appearance. Its small size is not a measure of its potential. Likewise the parable of the yeast speaks of something that doesn't look like it should work. Throwing what looks like smelly dust into dough doesn't look like a wise thing on the surface of it, but yeast is essential to our health. Yeast breaks some of the B vitamins down so our bodies can digest and use them. It also makes bread taste better.

Then we get this strange verse which says that the parables are not really given to increase understanding, at least in the original audience, but the readers, the folks who have Matthew's book in hand clearly do get these. It puts the reader into a superior position to the crowds around Jesus. But we also might find here another message about the humility which we heard at

the end of the Romans text. We might not understand this kingdom as well as we would like and Jesus may just want it that way.

Onto the parable which is our text. Jesus seems to address the question of why doesn't God do something about this whole mess we find ourselves in. Why is it that the folks who go to church still sometimes get terrible cancers and die awful and painful deaths? Why is it that sin seems to run rampant through the world and the good seems so feeble sometimes. Why doesn't God do something?

Jesus answer is most interesting. He tells this parable about a farmer whose methods are bizarre. It is as if the farmer just decided to let the weeds grow. He will sort it all out in the end when the harvest time comes. Then justice will be seen, the chaff burned the wheat gathered.

If you know anything about farming you know that this is a disastrous strategy for your garden. The weeds are usually much more aggressive than the crop, they will rob the good plants of nutrients, light, water, and space. You are apt to lose everything this way. A few years ago my neighbor seems to have adopted this as a strategy. He tilled up and planted a huge garden and did not weed it. I don't think he harvested a thing.

Wise interpreters of the parables often look for these little issues. They know that the meat of the parable is often found in the strange things that the characters in the parable do. In the intervening parable of the yeast the woman mixes the yeast into three measures of flour. Robert Capon says that this would have amounted to about 100 pounds of dough! This is a huge batch of bread. The woman who is kneading bread in the parable of the yeast is making a batch of dough so large no human family could possibly eat it. Likewise the sower casts his seed everywhere. If you are a farmer you know how expensive seed is.

Here we see a farmer who decides to let the weeds grow. What does this all mean? Jesus seems to be saying that God's approach to evil is very unorthodox. He is not going to do a partial intervention which makes this broken world a little less broken, at least not that way. He will let the weeds, the evil deeds of our enemy grow beside us. The reasoning is simple, if you pull the weeds you will destroy some of the wheat too. The ancients would have gotten this immediately. There was a nasty little weed that grew in wheat fields that resembled wheat until it headed out and then it showed itself to be fruitless.

But what is Jesus really saying here? He seems to be saying that he is aware of the issues we face but that his answer to our question is "Wait. I will deal with this I will sort things out in the end, but for now you must trust me that I have the best interest of everyone in mind. For now, you must wait."

There are several things to observe here. A good preacher could make some interesting points on the whole Simul Justus et Peccator thing. We are all a little weedy at times. None of us can lay claim to that fruitful wheat all the time. That in itself makes this good news. If Jesus came and

pulled up the weeds, if he got rid of the bad people, where would that leave me exactly? What if he acted on one of my not so good days? So God in his mercy waits.

Another route to run with this explores the whole issue of God's concern for the gentle shoot which is faith. If God comes into this and reveals his power, the whole notion of faith is jeopardized. Not only does it smack of proof if suddenly all the nasty people in the world start dying, but faith itself is predicated upon God's love, not his judgment. If God starts muddying the water with acts of raw power, the love stands to be overwhelmed. That also is some powerful good news.

Yet a third option for this seems apparent to me. If God comes and destroys all the bad folks, it rather leaves little room for the repentance and faith for which the church is established. It is almost necessary that the bad and the good operate side by side. The good wheat in this scenario is oddly given the job of converting the weeds into wheat. It doesn't work in biology and in truth one should not push the parable too far, but that is just the point. The parable is arguing that God sees a need to leave the rats in the world. One obvious reason they are here and we are here is that God loves them through us. Some of them will come to faith and be saved. At least that is the way it worked for me.

We wondered what the benefit is for the people of our parishes who believe the message of this parable. How will they be better off if they listen, read, mark, inwardly digest. Each of these could in fact be a sermon in itself.

- 1. It empowers us: we don't need to solve the problems. God will finally solve the problem, but that doesn't mean we sit idly by. We look for God's solution, expect it, but we are called to be in this. We can be part of the kingdom, confident that God will make this happen in his time, perhaps in his final judgment.*
- 2. We are less fearful: The reaping is not a matter of something we are unsure of. All the texts today really want to take away that uncertainty. We are in the wheat category by virtue of our baptism.*
- 3. We expect garbage in our world, even in our own lives: The weeds are real, they have been sown, there is evil in the world. It interferes and makes life difficult. Evil is part of this world. It is not a sign that God has abandoned us or that we are no longer his children, but it simply is something that God will have to deal with in that judgment and we ought not take that away from him and try to claim it. .*
- 4. We expect justice: we don't have to settle for injustice. We may have a longer time frame than the world is comfortable with, but we expect justice. We delight when we see it here, but we are not discouraged when it is slow in coming. God's justice does come.*
- 5. We expect to shine like the sun. Today evil obscures the light which God has created in us through Baptism. It is true, but when he scrapes all the garbage away in that judgment, he will reveal the beautiful thing he is doing in us right now.*

Law and Gospel

1. The world has a way of biting us hard. Isaiah's people had been defeated in war. Paul saw the groaning of creation. The world can be really weedy sometimes. Death afflicts us all. Getting old is not for sissies. Sometimes the best we can hope for is that a man with a very sharp knife will put us to sleep and cut the problem out and let us live a little longer. God assures us today that this is not the way he wanted things and it is not the way he will leave things. His plan for salvation addresses all the problems, including our physical problems.
2. When I grow in my relationship with Jesus my sin radar gets sharper and sharper. Things I used to live with now seem much worse to me. I find that I am no longer able to ignore some things. I want to fix them. But God does not lay on me a burden to great for me, but he takes the heaviest burdens to himself. I may be part of his solution, but I am not responsible for his solutions. He keeps that for himself. My service to him can always be a joy.
3. From my limited human perspective, God is moving very slowly, too slowly sometimes. I wish that he would get on with things and deal with evil decisively. I want a superman to come on the scene and rescue the folks in peril, I want the evil doers rounded up, I don't want to see the pictures of tsunami victims, flood victims, tornado victims, famine victims and all the other hollow-eyed and destitute folks who have paraded across my TV. I want God to do something about the cancer which has afflicted my friend. God's tells us, however, that this is not always so God. We trust Him. He knows all, he loves all, and he is working for our good and the good of all. Death shall not keep us. He will hold us in the palm of his hand.
4. Sometimes it is just too much for me and all I can do is weep. When my child does not get better, when my spouse dies, when my heart is broken by betrayal, or when something else terrible happens, I am not able to carry all this. Then God is my rock and my salvation, a very present help in times of trouble. We can lift up our eyes to the hills and see that he who watches over us does not slumber or sleep. He has filled our ears and our hearts with his promise. I cannot go on, but he can carry me.

Sermon Themes:

1. Jesus gives us rest – he carries the heaviest burdens for us. (OT and Gospel Lesson – That the Spirit of God would lift the burden of justice from the shoulders of the hearer – both in the need to balance the scales ourselves and the need to demonstrate or see that God is fair/just.)

The preacher who undertakes this text will need to maintain a pretty profound sense of humility. We cannot let the audience think that we have all the answers. Indeed, we are just as mystified by the problem of evil as they are. We do know one thing, though, as a preacher of the Gospel: God loves his creation. That is our message.

Once God has aroused within us our conscience and our sense of right and wrong, living in this broken world can get downright painful for Christians. It can also be overwhelming and discouraging. The poor Christian sees so many needs but can only meet a few of them and even then not very well. We cannot deal with death, nor with many of the world's problems. We can hold the hand of a dying man, offer a drink of water to the thirsty, but we cannot change some things. When we turn to God and despair, he reminds us that fixing this whole world is his job. There is no other god, not even you; there is only the God and Savior of the world. In his time, in his way he will effect the salvation and the justice which the world needs and we crave. He delights that we want it, but will not lay that whole burden on our shoulders. It is too heavy. This is a job for Jesus.

This is compounded for the Christian who pays attention to his Bible. God has spoken of a kingdom of peace (Zech. 9 from just two weeks ago). Waiting for a promise can be difficult, especially when you don't seem to be making any progress. For many it has lead them to doubt the promise or even the goodness of God.

The preacher will want to develop one or both of two possible Law avenues here. We can either think that we are supposed to make things right and see ourselves as a failure because the world is not changing, or we can turn to God and question his basic goodness and justice because he is not using his power to make things right. The good preacher will know his folks well enough to know which way this should go.

The Gospel in both instances is nuanced and may not be entirely satisfying to us. God clearly tells the person who is bearing the burden of this world that He is the solution to the problem. There is no other rock, said Isaiah. The solution is to found in God sending forth the angelic harvesters and sorting out the wheat from the weeds. Not me. But this then entails a waiting on our part. We detailed some reasons why this is a good answer, but it does not make the waiting any easier.

We really want to push the person who is asking about the goodness of God toward the cross. God's answer to the brokenness of the world is that he has entered it in Jesus, he has born its brokenness in the most profound way, a terrible injustice perpetrated on the world's only innocent man. And in subjecting himself to this world's suffering he has offered the answer to this world's suffering. Herein he has and will dry every tear.

The second question about the basic goodness of God is a little tougher and the answer is not going to convince the skeptic or the unbeliever. Only the believer will take comfort

from this sort of an answer. God simply says, “Trust me on this one.” The hostile skeptic will find that to be frightening and impossible to do. Such a person cannot be argued into trusting God. Do not try to do that. They must be loved into trusting God.

In difficult times we all think we want answers, but in truth, what we need is comfort. The answers won't really give us comfort. Why something happens doesn't comfort me, but that Jesus weeps with me, promises his presence in my sorrow, and holds me in his arms; that comforts me.

2. The whole creation groans, waiting for our revelation as the Sons of God. (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would open the eyes of faith for the hearer to see the connection between sin and the problems of the world and then to rejoice in the promise of Christ's reconciliation with all of creation.)

This is not an unfamiliar theme for us. We have discussed it before, because this runs throughout the Scriptures. It is a theme, however, which is not frequently treated either as a sermon or theological topic. The spirit of the current age, however, rather forces the topic upon us and this is a great text to address it. As this material is based upon the comments about the Epistle, please make sure you read them too!

The Law development here is really two step. First the person needs to connect the physical issues all of us face to the spiritual brokenness which we all feel. They are all part of the same broken world and picture. The world gives us permission to speak of spiritual brokenness but normally wants to see that as a psychological problem. Religion, however, is allowed to talk about that because science struggles with it. The other brokenness, however, many want to put off limits to the Christian discussion. Such a person re-defines the physical brokenness for us and quite often Christianity has quietly gone along with this, not realizing the implications for our theology of grace.

In this worldly scenario death is normal. Sickness is just a part of life which we need to manage. Hard work is a virtue. Tornadoes, fires, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes are simply natural events. The mildew in your shower may reflect how often you clean, but it is not the sign of something fundamentally wrong with the world. This text would disabuse of these notions. The creation, the whole creation, groans. The earthquake and tornado, the flood and the pestilence, the diseases and the rest of the things, many of which we are so used to we don't even notice anymore, they are all part of that groaning. And that groaning started with the rebellion of humanity against the creator. It was not like this as God made the world. This is the second law development. The reason the world is messed up has everything to do with the humanity to which God gave the charge of stewardship of this world.

The Gospel is that God called his creation very good, he loved and loves it still. The sending of Christ into the physical world means that his physical death reconciles and

redeems the whole physical world to himself. Of course that means us, but it also means the whole of creation.

Personally that means that death is not the last word of my life. Jesus has reconciled himself to my body in the cross and resurrection. That means death itself is undone. But the physical effects of Christ's work are not limited to my personal body and the bodies of all Christians, but seem to extend to the whole of God's beloved creation. Death is undone. The woolly mammoth's the early Native American seem to have driven to extinction, the moa which the New Zealanders hunted to extinction, the dodo which the whalers slaughtered to oblivion, they are not all gone. God made them, loved them, has never forgotten them, and will apparently one day restore them and the rest of this groaning creation. We eagerly anticipate that day. What will it be like to run with a saber-tooth tiger? I don't know, but I won't be afraid.

3. There is no other Rock (Old Testament - That the hearer would fear, love, and trust in God above all things.)

This sermon works off of the image in the Old Testament lesson. See the notes there. A Rock is a frequent theme to describe God, you might want to use a word search feature on Biblegateway or another concordance tool to help you see that a little more clearly. We will want to compare rock to stone. A stone is almost always an image for the law. People were stoned for committing a capital offense. Jesus himself was a stone over which people might stumble. But a rock is refuge, strength, and shelter.

We will proclaim that God is a rock. You might just describe and compare the characteristics of a rock and God. Foundations are frequently dug down to rock for a reason. We use phrases like "rock solid." Better, you might tell the story of God's rocklike constancy in the life of a person.

The gospel of course, is that Jesus is the rock of our Salvation. The work which God has done on our behalf is not shakable. It endures through time and is not weathered by the vagaries of fashion, popular opinion, or culture. Like some alp which has seen empires and kingdoms rise and fall on its flanks, it still stands there. The day may well come when these American flags in the sanctuaries of our churches are anachronistic, representing a country which never exists. This gospel will still stand.

But more than being there for our children's children's children, this Rock is here for us today. We shelter within its steadfast might. We are spared the floods of sin, the ravages of the evil one, and the brutal degradations of time. We are given eternal and deathless life by this Jesus.

4. The Righteousness of God Revealed in the Cosmos (That the Spirit of God would give the hearer to eagerly anticipate God's revelation of his salvation in the whole of creation.)

This sermon would notice that God has big plans. We often think he is just concerned about the small stuff, even me. But in fact God is interested in redeeming his whole creation. Just as it fell into corruption and destruction with Adam and Eve's sin, it will also be redeemed along with us and one day we will get to see that.

We spend a great deal of time worrying these days about global warming, environmental degradation, and the lack of land fill space. These are all real things and they are a concern, but this sermon proclaims that this is a concern to God as well and he has put it on his "to do" list. He is not waiting for us to solve these problems.

Unlike the environmental movement's solution to this problem, we proclaim that this solution is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Therein comes a real love of the world God made.

The world uses fear to move us, but that is such a lousy motivator. Jesus died for his creation because he loved the whole thing. This sermon does not encourage us to stand idly by and let the world degrade. Rather, this sermon proclaims God's love for the whole world and that love which now dwells in us.

Jesus did not take up the environmental cause, he jumped into the broken world, bore its hurt and rose again from death to save it. Our call may be to bear witness against those who do terrible things, but it also is certainly the call to treat the whole world as something for which Jesus died.