

Trinity VII

The preacher will call the hearer to trust today. Adam and Eve are portrayed living in perfect harmony in a garden which God had provided to them. He took care of every need they had. But of course, we know that was ruined by the fall and now such harmonious and beautiful peace is much more difficult to come by.

Paul will speak of being enslaved to righteousness. We will have to trust that the master here, our God, is not going to abuse us in that vulnerable relationship. Slaves don't get to determine their treatment. They have no rights. They are completely at the mercy of the one whom they serve. Paul will urge an obedience to righteousness because the alternative, our flesh/sin, is a cruel task master. But we will have to trust him that this obedience to righteousness leads to life.

In the Gospel and Luther's notes on that Gospel, we are called to trust that the Jesus who fed the multitudes is still active and working today, feeding us both spiritually and temporally. Do we really trust that? Luther makes some startling claims at the end of that reading which I encourage you to read and consider.

Collect of the Day

O God, whose never failing providence orders all things both in heaven and earth, we humbly implore You to put away from us all hurtful things and to give us those things that are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I don't know about you, but the way things sometimes seem to be going in this world, this is a difficult prayer to pray. It doesn't look too much like never failing providence to me! cynically I might think it is ever-failing providence.

But that is rather suggesting that I am in some position to be the judge of God. The prayer can only be spoken from a deep sense of humility which acknowledges my creature-ness and that God as the creator of all that is, including me, is not subject to morality and its rules, nor does he owe me any explanation for what he does. Like the character in a novel which the author subjects to a gruesome death, I really cannot take that up with the author of the book.

So what do we do? We pray that God keeps the nasty stuff away from us and lead us to the things which are profitable to us. This is a very interesting choice. Notice the word "profitable." When I was a teenager I played football in high school. My coach thought running up and down hills in full pads was profitable for us. He assured us that it would pay off in the 4th quarter of a game. It did not feel profitably when we were running Missouri's heat and humidity. It felt pretty sadistic to be honest.

Luther, in reflecting on these sorts of questions, says that the person who seeks to find God outside of the cross will find a God who is indistinguishable from the devil. I don't know what God's providence is up to, I have to trust that what he sends my way is in some way profitable to me and to my salvation and to the salvation of others. My only consolation is to turn to him

through the lens of the cross, see that my Lord also suffered and was subject to terrible and unjust things. And somehow, through a mystery which I cannot understand, God worked out salvation that way.

Genesis 2:7-17 (*I have included the passage leading up to our reading.*)

⁴ *These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.*

⁵ *When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—⁷ then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

¹⁰ *A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.*

¹¹ *The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.*

¹³ *The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.*

¹⁵ *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

It is one of those readings in which context means everything. Of course we are reading this with a measure of sadness. We know that happens next. The first parents completely botch this. If you have never read C. S. Lewis’ “Perelandra” you really should. Therein he imagines what would have happened if mankind had never fallen. He sets it on another planet, Venus to be precise, and the earthling protagonist has been sent to keep the temptation from repeating itself. It is a great book, perhaps Lewis’ best.

The preacher is almost in the difficult position of needing to import the Law to this text if you want to preach it. Yes, of course, we see the command to tend the garden, but that was not heard as a command, at least not a burden by our first parents when God spoke it. Yes, there are consequences of disobedience spelled out, but until that actually happens, it just doesn’t have teeth yet.

I think the preacher might do well to preach vocation on this text. God, even in the best and perfect situation, the pre-fall world, gave the man and woman something to do. Work is not only a burden we bear but a blessing received. The care of the world in which we live, the people around us, the animals, even the self, is all part of this divine plan for the creation. Of course this also speaks our vision of heaven. Too often I think our children and some adults are bored at the very idea of floating on a cloud with harp, halo, and wings while we sing in some celestial choir and perpetually attend church. Will there be a garden to tend called heaven? John seems to implicate as much when he speaks of heaven in the final chapters of revelation and seems to see Eden restored to us.

Psalm 33:1-11

Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous!

Praise befits the upright.

² Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!

³ Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

⁴ For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.

⁵ He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

⁷ He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.

⁸ Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!

⁹ For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

¹⁰ The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

¹¹ The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.

Romans 6:19-23 (*This reading, somewhat longer, falls on proper 7 in series A of the three year series. Here are the notes from earlier this summer when we discussed it then.*)

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God

as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Good commentary on Romans: “The Story of Romans” by Katherine Grieb published by Westminster/John Knox Press (2002) Grieb looks at the OT narratives that are lying behind the text of Paul’s book and helps us see the argument more clearly.

Another recommendation was the People’s Commentary by CPH.

Luke Johnson’s “Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary” published by Smyth and Helwys, 2013 is another worth checking out. I must admit I have not read this one yet.

If you want another good read for the summer, I recommend Hans Schwartz’s “The Christian Faith” published by Baker Publishing in 2014. Schwartz is a Lutheran theologian from Germany. His introduction on the theology of Luther is particularly clear and his summary of the 5th through 8th chapters of Romans was also very good.

If you go reading about in the commentaries, you are likely to discover that this part of Paul’s letter to the Romans is a diatribe. But be aware that the ancients used that word differently than we do. For us it is a negative thing, in the ancient world it was rhetorical device which involved an imagined conversation with the questioning audience of the speaker/author. Paul starts talking to someone here. He imagines he is talking to someone who is challenging or asking tough questions. It is a rhetorical technique. Commentators love to use words like diatribe. They are indeed helpful, but if you don’t know the term, this one can be misleading.

One of the great things that Martin Luther did for us was he brought the humanities into the study of Scripture. In the medieval tradition commentaries practiced division, each section was divided into smaller and smaller pieces until it was atomized and each word had become isolated from the words nearby. Luther and particularly Melancthon reunited the “argument” of Paul’s

letter. Indeed, his commentaries and those of his peers started out with a summary or restatement of the argument of the letters. Then the comments would explicate that reading of the individual elements of the text.

Our problem here is that we are picking up in the middle of the argument and the preacher needs to know what happened earlier. Paul has been explaining his ministry and message by expounding on the Gospel. In chapter 3 he summarized it with his famous section which begins at verse 21 and concludes at verse 27. Salvation is a gift, apprehended through faith. In chapter 4 he makes a textual argument and illustration of Abraham who was reckoned right before God before he was circumcised. Chapter 5 is the fuller explication of the main point. You heard that last week.

Here in chapter six Paul starts talking to his imaginary interlocutor who is asking questions. Earlier in the chapter the questioner wondered if since God forgives sins, let's sin more and get more forgiveness. Paul's answer is that since we were baptized into Christ, our very nature has changed. We are no longer those old sinner.

Our pericope picks up with his concluding paragraph of that first question. We do not present our bodies for sinful purposes. That is just not who we are since our baptism. We present ourselves to God as people who have been redeemed. Sin no longer has its dominion over us.

In the second paragraph of our text Paul's questioner asks another similar question. Since we are no longer under the law but grace we can sin with impunity. Grace is a license to do whatever we want. "By no means!" thunders Paul. His argument is two-fold. First of all you are a slave of the one you serve. If you serve sin, you are once more a slave to it. If you serve righteousness, and God is righteousness itself, we are his slave. Notice, that absolute freedom is just not one of the options. You are going to serve someone or something.

Serving God is the better service because it leads to life and holiness (sanctification). Serving sin feels like a sort of freedom, we are indeed free from the strictures of righteousness, but it leads to death and damnation. Paul is essentially comparing benefits packages here and noting that the benefits for the slaves of God are much better than the benefits for the slaves of sin.

What is amazing, in Paul's eyes, is that we get to choose our slavery. When we were slaves to sin, we had no option. We were stuck. Baptism has opened up options for us. We can run back to that old slavery, it is true. Baptism is not a constraint, but it is a liberation to serve God. We can turn our back on that service and return to the old service. But we won't like that. Paul is pretty sure. Contrary to the arguments of some parents who want to "wait until they can make their own decision," we should be baptizing infants so they have a choice.

So how does this preach? We have lots of folks who feel like their lives are out of their control. They are under the influence of "forces" which often govern them, enslave them. Addictions are only the most obvious example and you may not want to use that. A mortgage that forces us to work a job we hate, a bad childhood that we can blame for our poor relational skills, psychoses

that render us unaccountable for our actions, or pain that simply makes us crabby – so cut me some slack!

Unfortunately Paul uses the imagery of slavery here. Since the great abolitionist movement of the mid 19th century, we have had a visceral rejection of slavery woven into our culture. We have embraced liberty and freedom as virtues. One has to remember that at the time of Paul some 25% or more of the population were slaves. It was not a career which one sought, but it was also not something which was always and especially shameful. It is true that many slaves were terribly treated, but others were not. Slavery was not racial, but economic. Bankruptcy could result in you and your family being sold into slavery. Lots of people you saw on the street were slaves.

This makes this a challenge for us as preachers, but I think we would do well just take the bull by the horns and use the term. Call our people slaves. They are slaves of something. Baptism has given them the chance to be slaves of God, a much preferable slavery.

Sermon Idea Slaves to Righteousness (Epistle – That God would remind the hearer of the freedom which he bestowed in Baptism and enable the hearer to act on it.)

We don't like to be called a slave. It is something of a slur, but Paul notices something about us. We are always slaves to something. Some are slaves to their appetites, others are slaves to their fears. Many of our folks are fighting their weight – do they feel enslaved to their own hunger, their eating habits? Some are slaves to their insecurities and other are slaves to their sense of security. There are all sorts of people and forces out there which would enslave us. They would demand we serve them and promise us something in return. It is always fascinating to me just how cheaply we sell ourselves into such slavery. The man who sells himself to the slavery of his physical appetites earns pleasure of a sort, but so many attendant problems as he over-eats and contracts all the diseases and problems attendant upon such a life.

This sermon proclaims that Baptism has liberated us to another sort of slavery, but this slavery is slavery to righteousness. Now a slave is compelled, and this righteousness compels us. We will want to understand that as well as we can. What drives the people whom we see doing the amazing things in our midst? What is their compulsion to volunteer at the local school, foodbank, or other agency where they do so many good things? What is going on there? Paul would see a slave to righteousness.

Paul speaks of Baptism, our Baptism, really doing something to us. It is not just a little rite we do to babies which we promptly forget. It is not just a Christening where a name is given; although, that happens too. Baptism is a complete change of the person. It happened to all of us who were baptized. But the nature of God's great love is that he is not going to force that chance on us. So Paul exhorts and we do too. We can turn back to that old enslavement which lead to death. God will love us no less for it. The promise of Baptism of heaven and eternal life still stands unless we would throw that away. But Paul also speaks of Baptismal change which transforms the life of the hearer. It is not a one time deal, but a daily thing. Did you put back on the shackles of your

slavery yesterday or today already? Baptism today breaks that old yoke today and replaces it with a yoke which Jesus says is easy and light. (Matthew 11:28-30) Baptism offers you this enslavement which leads to sanctification and eternal life.

If you have a copy of John Nordling's "Philemon" commentary in the Concordia Commentary series, he has an excellent section in the introduction on slavery.

Paul is a moral optimist in this section of his letter. He really thinks that we can be obedient to righteousness. Lutherans can be critiques for being moral pessimists who always imagine that we cannot do true good. This is not accurate. Luther's catechism does not talk about us that way. Read the commandments and you will hear in each of them Luther's explanation of what we ought not to do and what it looks like when we keep this commandment. He does this because God's gift of the Holy Spirit is real. It means that we can serve the righteous demands of God. We may not do it perfectly, but that is not what he is addressing yet, he will in chapter 7, but for now, he is talking about an enslavement to a righteous demand.

Mark 8:1-9

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, ²"I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. ³And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." ⁴And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" ⁵And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." ⁶And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. ⁷And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. ⁸And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

Luther

8. The Evangelist points out that this crowd had faithfully stayed there with Jesus for three days already, no doubt eager to hear his sermons. Wouldn't it be nice if these sermons had been recorded? But the Evangelist wished only to record his miracle. If it had been St. John, he would have recorded the sermons as well as the miracle. But St. Matthew and St. Mark are more intent on recording our Lord's miracles and history, not his sermons.

9. This is the first lesson: Our dear Lord Jesus cares so much, and so filled with concern for poor lost souls. For their sakes, he cuts short his devotions – in which he was speaking to his Father – and takes pity on these poor, needy people and preaches to them.

10. Now, since that is the kind of heart Jesus has, when Judgment Day comes, how do you suppose he will deal with lazy pastors who are unfaithful to their office, and who even lead their parishioners astray? Likewise, how will he deal with princes and lords who force their people to commit idolatry and refuse to let them hear the true Word? But especially, what do you think our bishops will say, what sort of an account can they give, they who have held and boasted of their office, saying that God has made them bishops and pastors? They have done nothing except knowingly force people to live in idolatry, refuse to let people have a proper understanding of the Word and worship of God, punish their subjects physically, and deprive them of their property if they refuse to participate in such idolatry.

11. Again, what will fathers and mothers say on Judgment Day if they did not faithfully bring up their children and household to diligently worship in church and study the Word? No doubt he will say, You fathers, mothers, lords, and ladies, you've had so many people serve under you, you should have trained them in the fear of God and diligently kept them growing in the Word. But you failed to do that, letting them grow up in wickedness and without reverence toward God. From whom should I demand an accounting for such unspeakable harm? From none but you parents, lords, and ladies, for I commanded you to see to it that your children and household should grow in knowledge, but you failed to do that. Therefore, on Judgment Day Christ will address bishops, pastors, parents, lords, and ladies, demanding and accounting. Not only does he provide food for the belly, but above all else, he feeds and nourishes the soul through the Word, so that people may know the truth, fear God, live pious lives and be saved. This is the example he has set for us, so that we might follow in his footsteps.

12. This is why there is no higher or greater work we can do on earth than nurturing people with the Word. Oh, how the devil hates such a good work! That is why he attacks it so viciously through sects, tyranny, violence, and persecution. That is also the reason it is such an inherently difficult thing, why it takes so much time and energy to help young people to mature a bit, to accept scriptural principles, and to live in fear and reverence of God. In short, there is no other task so difficult, as to train people to live piously, nor is there a greater service we can render to God.

16. That is the second gift. The greatest gift is that Christ first preaches to and instructs the people in the Word. The fact that he meets their physical needs by filling their stomachs is the lesser gift. For he did not come so that we should fast and pray ourselves to death like a Carthusian monk. The body does indeed have the purpose, not of loafing around, but of working; however, a person should work in such a way that he stays healthy and does not destroy his body in the process. God doesn't want us to abuse and harm our bodies, which is what many people did under the papacy in the monasteries. They spent so much time in prayer, fasting, singing, self-torture, reading, sleeping on stone floors, that as a result they died prematurely; and I, too, did that and so tortured myself, that I still haven't recovered and won't

recover from it as long as I live. God doesn't want us to do such things, because that is deliberately shortening your life.

20. Let's do a little figuring. Divide seven loaves into four thousand shares and see how far that will reach according to our mode of calculation. You'll discover that seven loaves will barely satisfy four or five table groups, i.e. about forty or fifty men. What about all the rest? How will they be satisfied? Now Christ had only seven loaves and few small fish, yet that was enough to satisfy four thousand men, leaving seven large basketfuls of fragments, and that's not counting the women and children, of whom there no doubt were many! With this miraculous deed, our dear Lord Jesus Christ wants to demonstrate that however great the need, he is to this day quite capable of using seven loaves and a few small fish to feed four thousand men.

21. We should burn this lesson into our memories, so that we may learn to believe that, regardless of how poor we may be, if we faithfully and diligently cling to God's promises, our Lord Christ will still provide us with food and nourishment. No one has ever heard of a Christian dying of hunger, as Psalms 25 and 37 also testify. Christians may indeed be persecuted, be thrown into prison, or even be killed, but if they have accepted the first gift and have believed that Word, they also have found something to eat and been nourished.

22. So then, today's Gospel lesson is intended to teach us to recognize our dear Lord Jesus Christ as a gracious Lord and Father, who is anxious to help us both physically and spiritually. For that lesson we should thank God today, and we should pray that he would continue to provide us with his spiritual and physical blessings through Christ. Amen.

(Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker 1996. 327-334.)

I find for myself that context is critical here. This passage is best read as the conclusion of a series of passages. A quick Biblegateway search of the word "bread" in Mark is instructive. It of course shows up in the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6, but then again shows up in Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman in between these two feedings. This is then contrasted with the leaven/bread of the Pharisees and scribes. I think Mark is doing something with bread here akin to John's great discourse on bread in John 6. Jesus is the bread of life. But don't run into the sacrament just yet. Remember Luther's words about that iconic passage in John. It is not about the Lord's Supper, but rather the Lord's Supper is about John 6. That means that the attestation that Jesus is the Bread of Life is bigger than the Supper – the Supper is embodying that truth.

Mark's take on this is a little different than John's. With Matthew who follows the same pattern, the reader is given to consider the super-abundance of Jesus. Luther picks up on that above. The Syro-Phoenician woman begs for crumbs which fall from the master's table. On both sides of that dramatic prayer, Mark depicts Jesus taking a seemingly inadequate amount of food and

turning it into a super-abundance from which they collect baskets full of crumbs. Jesus has a crummy ministry!

The point seems to be that there is plenty to go around. The Christian never needs to be stingy with Jesus, but the sower can sow profligately as he does in Mark 4. (When you consider that bread comes from the sown seed as well, this theme gets to be even richer in the book of Mark.) There is even enough crumbs for the demonic unnamed girl in the story of the pagan woman begging a crumb from Jesus' table.

Sermon Idea “And they were satisfied” (That the Holy Spirit would engender and strengthen within the hearer the sturdy trust in Jesus that he provides abundant provisions of body and soul.)

The Law in this sermon will be hedging one's bets. The Gospel will be Jesus repeatedly calling his disciples and us to a firm trust in his gracious promises. Even though, they and we are not very good “trusters,” Jesus keeps calling and building that faithful trust as he is doing today in this sermon.

You might want to look up a hedge fund and see how they work. If I understand them properly, and they are complex, the hedge fund is a way for large investors to cover their bases. If some large investment fails them, they have invested in the very opposite thing which will prosper if their main investment has failed. That is why it is a hedge fund.

We hedge our bets like this all the time. We don't really believe that Jesus will keep his promises so we protect ourselves. There is nothing wrong with saving for retirement, but there comes a point where we trust our 401K and IRAs more than we do our Lord. That should be easy enough for a preacher to develop. That is hedging in a sense. The poor man who has no retirement savings is sometimes forced to trust more than the rich man. Jesus said it was hard for the rich man to enter the kingdom for this reason.

More pertinent will be the hedging we like to do spiritually in our relationships with others. Here it can be even starker. The forgiveness which is conditionally offered is really hedging the promise of Jesus. I don't think that he will really be able to work a change in the stinker's life so I am going to protect myself from the expected re-lapse. The proclamation of Christ's kingdom which is only for the folks like us lest we be contaminated by their poor theology or by their culturally alien nature is not trusting the promises of Christ to make the two one (Eph. 2).

Here we have Jesus who has declared that he is the very bread of life. In the ancient world bread was not only a staple of the diet, it was the gateway for all food. They had no silverware. Indeed, they would have thought our forks and spoons were disgusting. Anything that went out of a mouth was unclean and filthy in their eyes. Repeatedly inserting a fork or a spoon into one's mouth only to take it out and reinsert with another bit of food would have seemed gross to them. They would have said that they had a much more sanitary way to eating. They tore off small pieces of bread and used that to hold the bite sized portion of savory foods and then ate the bread and the meat/vegetables together. When Jesus says he is the bread of life, it was not just carbs he was talking about, but the whole diet, all the food.

Mark is telling us that we will never run out. we don't need to hedge the bet. Jesus calls us to that sturdy and vibrant faith which sees that all things, both temporal and spiritual, are in his hands. As Luther notes above, he preached and he fed them.